

Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet you on the occasion of your 21st General Assembly. I thank Cardinal Tagle for the words he addressed to me and I offer a cordial greeting to all of you, to the great Caritas family and to those in your respective countries committed to the service of charity.

Coming from every part of the world, in these days you have experienced a significant moment in the life of the Confederation, aimed not only at fulfilling statutory duties, but also at strengthening the bonds of mutual communion in adherence to the Successor of Peter, by reason of the special bond that exists between your organization and the Apostolic See. Saint John Paul II wished to confer canonical public legal personality to Caritas Internationalis, calling you to share the Church's very mission in the service of charity.

Today I would like to pause briefly to reflect with you on three key words: charity, integral development and communion.

Considering the mission that Caritas is called to carry out in the Church, it is important to always turn to reflect together on the significance of the very word charity. Charity is not a barren service nor a simple offering to be made in order to ease our conscience. What we must never forget is that charity has its origin and its essence in God himself (cf. 1 Jn 4:8); charity is God our Father's embrace of every person, particularly of the least and the suffering, those who occupy a preferential place in his heart. Were we to regard charity as a performance, the Church would become a humanitarian agency and charitable service one of its "logistical departments". But the Church is none of this; she is something different and much greater: she is, in Christ, the sign and instrument of God's love for humanity and for all of creation, our common home.

The second phrase is integral development. At stake in charitable service is the concept of mankind, which cannot be reduced to a single aspect but involves the entire human being as a child of God, created in his image. The poor are first and foremost persons, and their faces conceal the face of Christ himself. They are his flesh, signs of his crucified body, and we have the duty to reach out to them even in the uttermost peripheries and in history's subterrain with the sensitivity and the tenderness of the Mother Church. We must aim at promoting the whole man and every man so they may be authors and protagonists of their own progress (cf. Saint Paul VI, Encyclical *Populorum progressio*, 34). The service of charity must, therefore, choose the logic of integral development as an antidote to the culture of rejection and of indifference. And in addressing you, who are Caritas, I would like to emphasize that "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 200). You know this well: "the great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith" (ibid.). Thus, as the example of men and women Saints of charity also teaches us, "our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care" (ibid.).

The third word is communion, which is central in the Church, and defines her essence. Ecclesial communion springs from the encounter with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who, through the proclamation of the Church, touches men and women and creates communion with himself and

with the Father and the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Jn 1:3). It is communion in Christ and in the Church that enlivens, accompanies, supports the service of charity both in the communities themselves and in emergency situations throughout the world. In this way, the diakonia of charity becomes a visible instrument of communion in the Church (cf. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 4). For this reason, as a Confederation you are accompanied by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which I thank for the work it regularly carries out and, in particular, for its support of the ecclesial mission of Caritas Internationalis. I said that you are accompanied: you are not 'under'.

Taking up once again these three fundamental aspects for living out – in Caritas, or rather, charity – integral development and communion, I would like to exhort you to live these in a manner of poverty, gratuitousness and humility.

One cannot experience charity without having interpersonal relationships with the poor: living with the poor and for the poor. The poor are not numbers but persons. Because by living with the poor we learn to practise charity with the spirit of poverty; we learn that charity is sharing. In reality, not only is charity that fails to reach the pocket a false charity, but charity that does not involve the heart, soul and our entire being is a concept of charity not yet fulfilled.

It is important to always be careful not to succumb to the temptation to live a hypocritical or deceitful charity, a charity identified as almsgiving, as donation, or as a 'soothing pill' for our troubled consciences. This is why we must avoid equating charity work to philanthropic efficiency or to effective planning or to excessive and scintillating organization.

As charity is one of the most desirable of the virtues to which man can aspire so as to be able to imitate God, it is scandalous to see charity workers who transform it into business: they speak a great deal about charity but live in luxury or extravagance, or they organize Forums on charity while futilely wasting so much money. It is very painful to note that some charity workers are transformed into functionaries and bureaucrats.

This is why I would like to emphasize that charity is not an idea nor a pious sentiment, but is the experiential encounter with Christ; it is the wish to live with the heart of God who does not ask us to have generic love, affection, solidarity, etc., toward the poor, but to encounter him in them (cf. Mt 25:31-46), with the manner of poverty.

Dear friends, I thank you, on behalf of the entire Church, for what you are doing with and for so many brothers and sisters who are struggling, who are left at the margins, who are abused by the forms of slavery of our time, and I encourage you to go forth! May all of you, in communion with the ecclesial communities to which you belong and of which you are an expression, continue to joyfully offer your contribution so that it may cultivate in the world the Kingdom of God, Kingdom of justice, of love and of peace. May the Gospel always nourish you and enlighten you, and may the Church's teaching and pastoral care guide you.

May the Lord bless you and Our Lady protect you. And, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.