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Why should Europe care more about family?

Ahead of Christmas and the Holy Family Feast, Caritas Europa would like to raise attention to some of our advocacy positions promoted in the past year that are based in the value of the family unit.¹

Family reunification fosters resilience of migrant communities

Ahmed, a 17-year old Afghani boy, wants to bring his mother to Belgium. After he dealt with a lot of administration in Belgium in order to lodge his request, his mum had to travel from her home village to Kabul to obtain identity documents and passports. Expensive, dangerous to travel, bureaucratic and difficult to notarize documents or even apply for family reunification, lengthy procedures and numerous other obstacles are preventing individuals from reuniting with family members in Europe. Integration and language tests as well as age limits further complicate the process, resulting in the separation of families and loved ones for long periods of time, sometimes indefinitely despite the EU recognized right to family reunification.

Many Caritas Europa member organisations are active in receiving and advising third country nationals applying to have their spouses or children unite with them in Europe. Caritas operators explain the intricacies and eligibility rules of the application process, supporting newly arriving family members in the administrative steps, helping to lay the foundation to meet the imposed integration requirements, and to welcome them into the Caritas family and parish community.

Convinced that the right to migrate and reunite with family members is a fundamental right,² Caritas Europa advocates that every effort must be made to ensure that families are able to access legal channels to migrate and be likewise reunited as quickly as possible with separated family members. Caritas Europa contributed as well to shaping the Guidelines set by the European Commission on Family Reunification and in highlighting the contributions that families make to the newcomers and to the receiving society, clearly evident by the strengthened resilience of families following a reunification with their loved ones.

Family farming contributes to ending hunger and fostering relationships

Family is at the core of food security and fundamental when talking about food as a human right, whether in the North or the South. Today, family farming is the predominant form of agriculture both in developed and developing countries, with more than 70% of food produced in the world. From a sociological perspective, family farming is associated with family values, such as solidarity, continuity and commitment. In economic terms, family farming is identified with specific entrepreneurial skills, business ownership and management, choice and risk behaviour, resilience and individual achievement. Family farming is often more than a professional occupation because

¹ "The family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another" (Evangelii Gaudium 66).

² "The right to emigrate as a family in search of a better life" (Familiaris Consortio 46).

it reflects a lifestyle based on beliefs and traditions about living and work; it grants the safeguard to differentiation of food products, to traditions and cultures.³

2014 marked the International Year of Family Farming, which has been celebrated globally. Caritas Milan published a very effective booklet, called “Good Managers Eat at Home”, referring to dinner as a key moment for family life, for building up relations, educating children, sharing, and growing in a healthy way.

While Caritas Europa’s efforts in regard to family farming deal largely with development issues overseas, it is also the most common operational farming model in Europe and is of great importance for ensuring smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Caritas Switzerland, for instance, contributes to the socio-economic and environmental sustainability of rural areas by supporting family farming efforts through the recruitment of [volunteers](#). These volunteers are pivotal in helping to do the farming tasks, without which, many family farmers would otherwise be unable to manage.

In terms of food security and food production, Caritas advocates that EU institutions defend the right of small-scale farmers to produce their own food, including the saving of local biodiversity and traditional knowledge. Caritas encourage policy makers to face the challenge of hunger by also taking into account the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of agriculture, of which family is a well-established caretaker. Caritas urges that special attention also be given to women farmers, who produce a high majority of food in the South, in addition to completing the many other tasks.

Family support is stronger than the economic crisis

In Europe alone there are more than 20 million children at risk of poverty. This number is growing as a direct result of the economic crisis. Many of the services on which these families and children are depending are experiencing significant cutbacks. This trend is not sustainable or acceptable as it has serious consequences for millions of families and children across Europe.

“Before the crisis, our life was ordinary... My wife and I were able to respond without much difficulty to our family’s needs and obligations. We were economically able to cover both the day-to-day living costs and the social obligations. The economic crisis influenced us in a destructive way. The direct consequence was the loss of jobs, for both my wife and I. Suddenly, at the age of 47, we found ourselves without any financial resources. The situation became very difficult. My family actually survives thanks to the financial help of our parents, who are pensioners (Greece).” (Testimony of Caritas service user).

Despite the challenges that emerge with the economic and financial crises, it has also provided a space for families to unite together. The crisis has shown the critical importance of families as primary caregivers and actors of social protection.⁴

Caritas Italy, among others, notes that pensioners play a role in contributing to the incomes of their families, including young people who have lost their jobs. Caritas Spain highlights that a series of changes to social welfare benefits means that in many households a grandparent’s pension income is supporting a whole family, although cuts to pensions and to entitlements means that this lifeline is also under increasing strain in many families. Demands on the services of Caritas Portugal have increased greatly in recent years. There was almost a doubling in the number of families supported by Caritas in one year alone.

³ Familiaris Consortio 10.

⁴ Familiaris Consortio 46.

In response to this need, Caritas Italy designs and implements multidimensional programmes, addressing various needs, promoting an empowerment approach: the goal being to help meet basic needs and to promote the regaining of autonomy. In general, families are accompanied by a local service that is not limited to material aid, but that also aims to keep hope alive and to recover the energy required for individuals to regain self-sufficiency and further contribute to the wider human family.

To support these efforts, Caritas Europa works to alleviate child and family poverty in Europe and to address social justice issues that negatively affect the family unit. Convinced that the relevance of families must be better underpinned by providing, in particular, support for raising children, for making family life and career compatible and for supporting family dependents. Caritas Europe calls on the European Commission to encourage and promote the implementation and monitoring of the Social Investment Package by Member States, through a strengthened process established under the Europe 2020 Strategy. The Commission should further work with Member States with high levels of child poverty to ensure an adequate minimum income for families and to help Member States access structural funds to promote a greater integration of family aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty and the transmission of disadvantage across generations. Caritas Europa wants the “investing in Children recommendation of the European commission to be fully taken into account by the Member States in shaping policies to fight child and family poverty.

Christmas is an important time for reflecting on the significance of the Holy Family and to remind policy makers to act with urgency:

- To enable migrant families to enjoy the right to migrate and to family reunification without unnecessary and complicated obstacles;
- To foster family farming and rural food production to contribute towards ending hunger by 2025;
- To adopt a child-specific, multi-dimensional, rights-based approach to preventing and tackling child poverty based on the standards and principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- To recall the significance of the human family unit at the core of our individual and community life.