

Report of the President of Caritas Europa

Caritas and the church are undergoing a fundamental redevelopment in the shadow of normality. While the (by now) familiar face of Pope Francis has found a place in everyday life among many believers and non-believers alike, upon closer scrutiny “his” church is changing smoothly. Old and new walls are falling, revealing the people behind institutions and administrations who do their work. The rightly pilloried grievances and abuses are moved to the background before the actual task of the church.

The popular figure of Pope Francis is breaking through the artificial sonic barrier between church and the world, good and bad, right and wrong, to give priority and meaning to life. He reprimands the court set up as sick and leprous. He sees God everywhere at work and recognises history and reality as a whole as the place where to search for meaning and seek salvation. The periphery is closer to him than the centre and everyone understands: this man is continuing the legacy of Jesus of Nazareth.

What Pope Benedict had envisaged and inspired, is coming to life through example and courage in Pope Francis. The energy and missionary zeal that drive him have not really reached all local churches and institutions yet. “His” permission is often still awaited to give the starting shot for local or institutional changes. The change that is now possible still seems to be palpable in international, European and national structures too. The danger of a proprietary court of Caritas on the abstract levels of coordinating associations and structures, which do not have any direct contact with the poor, cannot be overlooked.

A great deal of work was carried out last year precisely against this danger disclosed by Pope Francis in order to shape Caritas Europa more fluently and smoothly for a Caritas in Europe. Caritas in Europe must develop further as a living movement and must not be yet another institution among other institutions. Also Caritas in Europe should aim at fulfilling the commitment of every Caritas.

The regional conference did not bring together structures and institutions, but people. These people are not primarily presidents, directors or general secretaries, but people with a face and history. A year before the election at Caritas Internationalis, Caritas Europa is ringing in the election year 2015 when it will choose its future representatives in the different committees of Caritas in Europe.

Shaping interaction in Caritas in a creative and effective manner

Since the last regional conference in Brussels, the groundwork for the coming two years has been laid. The thematic work in the last two years could be concluded with good and concrete results. The outcome report provides insight into the work carried

out, in which more than 80 co-workers from different European Caritas organisations took an active part. Together with internal and external experts, the secretariat in Brussels managed to compile publications that provide an overview of the accumulated knowledge in Caritas. The positions of Caritas become visible behind this knowledge, which is based on experience and encounters, statistical surveys and socio-ethical reflection, if they are passed on in the form of recommendations to the different decision-makers.

The target-oriented work in the workgroups and the altered cooperation methodology have proven their mettle and have paid off. The objectives set last year for the coming two years are taking shape and form. I am grateful to the members of Caritas Europa and their posted co-workers for their input!

Thinking ahead about -- and helping develop – Europe

The upcoming elections to the European Parliament are under the sign of greater co-determination by all citizens. The parliament wants to solidify its influence with respect to heads of state and of government. The complex European construction oscillates between direct and indirect democracy; their efficiency and undeniable added value for social, political and above all economic progress may not be played off against a greater say. Where the populace is directly involved, the actual mood and spirit of people and citizens come to the fore. The Swiss vote on the so-called mass immigration must be taken seriously beyond the boundaries of the confederation as an expression of the fear on the part of the so-called locals that they are no longer in charge of the situation. The answer of Caritas Switzerland “Are they foreign? I am glad they are here. They belong in Switzerland,” is in the right direction. Europe needs people from the “outside” in order to be able to get its work done. Where inside and outside mix and where co-determination and utilisation begin is an open question, which also affects Caritas, if it pays wages, if it is exposed to (internal) competition and employs non-Catholics.

The crisis in and about Ukraine has made it clear that Europe has not yet come to rest on the geopolitical front. Borders continue to prevail when it comes to the identity of people. Neither secularism nor religion could strengthen cross-border understanding so as to push nationalisms and economic interests to the background.

Endeavouring for a better world

The subject of our regional conference ties in with the observation that the economy contributes more to fight poverty than the states and the welfare associations. The latter live from redistribution and require earnings and taxes. The enormous and complex redistribution system in many European countries has come up against the limits of growth and sustainability. The critical question then arises as to whether the economy could not become a meaningful ally of Caritas. The economic activity itself is merely the common and organised expression for work and cooperation by people to survive. The economy, which, detached from its goals and the common weal, produces in a wild and exploitive fashion, serves no one in the end. In the immediate timeframe, it contributes to the enrichment of individuals at the expense of many. The real economy, however, remains the most tried and test method for creating

added value and bringing it into sensible circulation. This balance is upset by people and systems which, without work and commitment, live from the turnover of others, and thus at their costs. Fair trade and fair work are guarantees for a fair and socially balanced society. “Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless....” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 53)

Pope Francis does not shy from putting the economy in its place. Caritas should not shy from reaching out to the economy and trying new forms of cooperation, whereby as many people as possible would be integrated in the process of employment and the economy in a fair and participatory manner. At the end of the regional conference, we will hopefully see whether new paths lead to the productive economy segment for Caritas too.

Appreciation and recognition

The board of Caritas Europa has met six times since the last regional conference to broach the following issues: Needs of member organisations, European elections, family, basic income, regional conference, priorities for the two-year plan, membership dues, Caritas Development Fund, management standards, capacity building, Caritas campaign against hunger, humanitarian crisis mechanisms, Syrian refugees in Bulgaria and Europe, Caritas Internationalis, governance and management in Caritas Europa, elections in Caritas Europa, reserve policy – all accompanied by theological reflection and prayer, where Andrij Waskowycz, Helen O’Brien, Jana Lampe, Emmanuil Patashev, Mario Junglas, Patrick De Bucquois, Ferruccio Ferrante, Gaston Vandecandelaere, and Marian Subocz could bring their skills to bear. The sessions were prepared and documented by our General Secretary Jorge Nuño Mayer and his team. I would like to thank each and every one of you for your work and commitment. It is precisely at such times, when I was very busy with my tasks as vicar general, that I was able to count on both the board and the general secretariat for their respective responsibilities. The work was consequently a pleasure and has hopefully also produced good results.