



**Annual Report 2015**  
**Report from the President**

## Introduction

Just a year ago, I was elected as President of Caritas Europa and since then, I have been going through a learning process in Caritas Europa and Caritas Internationalis. Unfortunately, I have not had the chance to dedicate as much time as I would like to this role. The reason is that I also have to attend my duties as bishop of Ghent, a big diocese in Belgium. I try to do as much as possible in this job, but I am fully aware that I should do more. Before being a bishop in Ghent I was for twenty years in the international board of the Salesians of don Bosco, meeting with many situations of poverty and especially youth situations of delinquency and lack of opportunities to study or to receive formation. Before that I spent about 20 years in South-Korea as a missionary, working with young workers and students.



During this year in office, I have had the opportunity to meet many people and to present Caritas and its work. I had many contacts with Church officials and organisations, as well as with civil authorities and used these opportunities to call on them to pay more attention to the poor and to the refugees and the migrants that are coming to our countries. I am extremely grateful to the staff of the secretariat in Brussels for the very professional work they are doing, engaging in many ways in the fight for justice, human rights and peace.

While attending the meetings of the Executive Board (ExBo), I have had the opportunity to notice that there is a common concern across the network to care for the common good of each of the national offices across our network. This is possible thanks to the basic interest of all ExBo members to look for the best way of being at the service of the poor, giving answer to the cry of the poor. This is possible through guiding the Secretariat and Steering Groups in the fields of advocacy, humanitarian aid and strengthening the network. The ExBo assumed immediately its statutory role with strong energy and cohesion and with spirit of service. It discussed and took many decisions during this year that helped the Secretariat to deal with the concerns and situations that many member organisations have in relation with advocacy and humanitarian challenges like the refugee crisis, concerns with the financial support to our work, the solidarity within our network and the relationship with Caritas Internationalis. The regular statutory decisions about work plans, budgets and reports were duly followed. The ExBo led with enthusiasm the strategic planning process that will result in the approval of a revised Strategic Framework 2020. Last but not least, the ExBo also worked on the preparation of this special Regional Conference in Lourdes with so many grassroots people participating. As President, I meet very regularly with the Secretary General and communicate with him almost daily by phone or e-mail.

Without entering in detail in the guiding principles of our Strategic Framework 2020, I would like to highlight its main headlines: the centrality of the person; solidarity, fraternity and gratuitousness; peace and development; religious freedom and cultural diversity; cooperation and solidarity; professionalism and heartfelt concern; and, finally, ecological stewardship. Our work on the latter is strongly inspired in and led by the encyclical *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis. This text is of great importance and we not only study it but also try to implement it and talk about it to as many people as possible. In collaboration with Caritas Internationalis, we want to become “one human family, caring for creation”.

## An icon

The image of the Good Samaritan (Lc. 10, 25-37) hangs on the wall of the meditation room in the office of the Secretariat in Brussels. This story is the answer that Jesus gives to the question “who is my neighbour?”

The relevance of the parable of the Good Samaritan has become especially eloquent in the last months. This is why I want to highlight the meaning of this story. There are five persons involved in it: Jesus, the Samaritan traveller, the wounded person on the side of the road, the innkeeper and Luke, the evangelist. Each of them has a particular role in it. The Samaritan was moved and touched by the sight of the wounded person. And he acted immediately, giving first aid to the man. Then he took him to the inn - we would now say to the medical service, to the hospital - and he came back the next morning to make sure medical care was given, and he paid for it. In this way, he provided a structural service to this situation of need. Then we have Luke, the evangelist. The communication of this event has become very important. The whole world knows now that the answer to a concrete need is first of all empathy, then engaging professional people, assure continuous service and finance, and finally communication for the broader public.

This is what we are doing at Caritas Europa. This is our vision, not subdued to the law or to the fear of touching a stranger or to facing situations that we don't know – not like the priest or the Levite – but in a very concrete manner, being close and welcoming to anyone who needs our attention and our help. In psalm 12.6, Yahweh himself says that “He stands up” to alleviate the suffering of the poor outcasts (anawim). The gospel invites us to be present in this prophetic way where we are called to serve. We do this because every person is child of God and therefore deserves our respect. Pope Francis says it this way: “Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of subsidiarity” (Laudato si' 157). This brings our service at the centre of the Church of today.

## Caritas and the Church

Caritas is an autonomous organisation, with strong links to the universal and the local Church. We are recognised as “an authentic expression of the Catholic Church's diaconia, that is, service” (Strategic Framework 2020 p.2) and the Statutes of Caritas Internationalis offer a canonical framework for its regions, one of them being Europa. We have been called “the arm of love and solidarity of the Catholic Church”. Therefore we have regular contact with Church offices, such as Cor Unum in Rome, Comece in Brussels, CCEE in St Gallen, Justice and Peace Europe, and CIDSE. We also refer often to the papal documents which deal with social justice or charity such as Caritas in Veritate and Deus Caritas est of Pope Benedict XVI, and Evangelii Gaudium and Laudato si' of pope Francis. We follow closely the various interventions of Pope Francis at significant moments, such as his speeches in the European Parliament and to the UN and the American Parliament.

The ExBo also dedicated one session to contribute with their Caritas experience to my participation at the Synod on the Family in Rome. I keep contact with national bishops' conferences a few times a year and ask appointed bishops to be in contact with their local caritas offices. When necessary, I take up contact with the presidents of the bishops' conferences to settle problems or to ask their attention for particular issues.

## Caritas and civil authorities

On particular occasions, the President directs his messages to international and national civil authorities. Most often, to call their attention to situations about rights and poverty. Through our publications, we try to reach as many organisations and governments as possible. In a brochure-poster dealing typically with poverty or migrant situations, Caritas Europa has given support to the work of so many volunteers. The Belgian bishops' conference has also produced a brochure about this topic (Living together, October 2015). Personally, I have called the attention of many civil authorities to the encyclical *Laudato si'*, as it is a very important document, implementing the strategy of Caritas Internationalis: "One human family caring for creation".

## About war and the refugee crisis

War has become a global reality since new social media call upon young people to join in the fight against the establishment. We pool efforts with many other organisations to counter situations of social decline and lack of social cohesion. Pope Francis refers to them as "an inequitable distribution and consumption of energy and other services, social breakdown, increased violence and a rise of new forms of social aggression, drugs trafficking, growing drug use by young people, and loss of identity" (L.S. 46).

Some countries are forgotten, I think of the refugee crisis in Ukraine. Other countries force their people to leave. In some of them, Christians are harassed until they leave. A number of European countries are open to accept refugees while others are closing their borders. In numerous meetings of the leaders of the European Union, Member States have had difficulties in reaching an agreement. EU countries seem to grow further away from each other and the European unity seems to be weakening. The attention of the different countries involved do not show a true international interest, local interests seem to have priority. The intention of Caritas – be it Caritas Internationalis, Caritas Europa or the national Caritas - is to remind all authorities of the equality of each human person, independently of his or her origin. When will we be able to say about Europe what Pope Francis says about the church: "The Church is not a customs office, it is a fatherly home where there is room for everyone with his or her troublesome life"? (A.L. 310).

The refugee crisis has taken up much of our attention. Caritas has been able to continuously be in contact with the national offices, also in the countries at war. We will continue to work on the different levels: insisting with authorities and the public opinion that our Christian spirit welcomes everybody; assisting local organisations, parishes, NGOs and volunteer services in their work of preparing worthy homes as well as educational possibilities for children and parents; informing people about the situation in the war ridden countries; looking for funds to come to the aid of the caritas workers there. Our concern is triple: peace and development in the countries and regions of origin, the serene integration in European communities, as well as the way of a healthy return to their country when that will be possible. Constantly we insisted upon the right of the refugees, saying that migration is not a crime, that they have the right to stay and receive human support, medical service and education. Dialogue and true action with regard to refugee camps and borders have been on our daily schedule. It is hard to see and understand that there are no limits to money transfers from country to country, while people are not able to cross the boarders in search of a basic need.

## Concerns of the President

- The identity of Caritas. We are moved by the people and we want to witness in a prophetic way to the worth of each person. The image of the Good Samaritan is constantly on our mind.
- Assisting the weaker units of Caritas in certain countries, and creating links between them and stronger ones. Inside our Caritas family the sense of mutual solidarity can be a sign to others.
- Partnership with people and communities, we want to network with many people and organisations who share our spirit.
- The growing poverty in our own countries, due to the economic and financial crisis, but also to the politics of modernisation and internationalisation of industrial projects.
- The way our media communicate about local situations, as well as world problems. The selection of information influences much on the mentality of the people, a much more ethical and respectful communication would benefit all. Not only do our media not give attention to the Christian roots of our people, political and profit oriented news items overrule the more educative issues.
- Service to others (diaconia) in a Christian sense results from the unity with Christ, basically expressed in the Eucharist, as there Jesus gave us the example of service washing the feet of the disciples. In this year of mercy, we may focus more on the spiritual works of mercy, as they are typical for Christians because they call for a continuous and educational engagement. They read: Console the suffering and the lonely; educate the ignorant; warn the sinners; give good advice; support patiently troublesome people; forgive offences and pray for the living and the dead.
- Justice, peace, development and a transparent witness of the Love of Christ for all.

I am very happy to see that in all countries Caritas plays an important role, a leading role, in the service to the poor and the needy. This makes me happy and actually also proud of belonging to Caritas Europa.



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Caritas Europa, the network of Caritas organisations in Europe, has a heartfelt commitment to analyse and fight poverty and social exclusion; and to promote true integral human development, social justice and sustainable social systems in Europe and throughout the world.

Caritas Europa, le réseau des organisations Caritas en Europe, a, au fond du cœur, l'engagement d'analyser et de lutter contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale et de promouvoir un développement humain vrai et intégral, la justice sociale et des systèmes sociaux durables en Europe et à travers le monde.

Mit Zuwendung des Herzens, engagiert sich Caritas Europa, das Netzwerk der Caritas Organisationen in Europa, für die Analyse und Bekämpfung von Armut und sozialer Ausgrenzung und für die Förderung einer wahren und ganzheitlichen, menschlichen Entwicklung sowie sozialer Gerechtigkeit und nachhaltiger Sozialsysteme in Europa und auf der ganzen Welt.