



## **Report of the President**

The first words of this report need to be ‘thank you’. As a family, we express great concern for persons in need in many ways. On all levels I feel a great solidarity, first and foremost among ourselves, together with people who suffer, who are excluded, all over the world, and also with those we rely on for funds and support. We are like a beautiful web reaching out in beneficial love in all directions. At the heart of this web is what we read in the gospel, a message we make concrete, especially for those who need affection and love. Pope Francis calls us the ‘concrete arm of the Church’, this means that we are asked to bring the love of Christ to the people. And truly, as part of our core values, we make it clear that every person is at the centre of our attention and effort: ‘Caritas Europa believes that we are part of one human family, all made in the image of God. Each person should be able to develop his or her own life as fully as possible’ (Strategic framework of Caritas Europa Network 2020).

We know we are not alone in this endeavour. We are part of Caritas Internationalis, with its different regions, and with each of our own European Member Organisations. A Caritas worker or volunteer never stands alone, but with a worldwide family, present with the same spirit and love. This Regional Conference is an expression of the same common concern about how to be able to reach people who are suffering, often caused by war or social injustice, and unjust economical and financial systems. The first elements indicated in our guiding principles are solidarity, fraternity and graciousness. We all understand from our own experience that no real service can be rendered in the case where we only think of ourselves first. We feel the responsibility for every human person, it weighs on our shoulders as so many people find themselves in impossible situations. However, there is the important element of our faith. We are a Catholic organisation, this means that we are never alone in our effort to alleviate the suffering of the whole world. The cross of Christ as well as his way of dealing with the sick and the marginalized is always in front of us to tell us that we do not operate in our own name but as his witnesses.

This invites me to make a reflection: looking at the signs of the times, for example in this period of increased refugee flow, we need to learn to approach this situation not only in a structural and operational manner, but in a contemplative way (E. G. 264). Pope Francis insists that it is not meetings and pastoral plans that are solutions to problems, they are rather activities which should start from a serious meditation that enters into the basic level of our human experience. Beginning with the reflection on the humanity of God who came to us through Christ. With this spirit it will be possible to reach out to the complexity of our world. “It means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter” (E.G. 188). This makes it clear that we will never be caring only for the person close-by, and that we will always be connected, with the bigger family of Caritas, worldwide. This opens our own local or national organisation to the needs of people spread over the whole world. Finally, “we work for the Kingdom bringing to life the social teaching of the universal Church, inspired by the Scriptures and the tradition of the Catholic Church” (Serving out of love, p. 14).

From these basic reflections we can go on to the life of Caritas Europa. One crucial point is communication. Not only does the spirit of Caritas have to be sent out constantly through our communication channels, but the connections between the different regions and member organisations are important to create a common spirit. Information and sharing through

newsletters and other means of communication is essential. It gives us the possibility to be present in a qualified manner in organisations, institutions and governments. It is of the utmost importance that we know what happens in the world, in our family, and why. Therefore, a big word of thanks to all the staff and volunteers in the different countries that keep us informed of the real life of the confederation. Through them we are able to read the signs of the times and we come to know how answers can be provided from a local and international perspective. For example, the members of the Caritas Europa Pool of Theologians need this information in order to construct a mental framework for our work.

Over the last several years we have had fortifying experiences at the European level. The Regional Conference in Lourdes in 2016 gave us a strong feeling of being one united region. On the level of Caritas Internationalis, during the meetings in Rome, it was made clear that we form a region that contributes meaningfully to the whole. The secretariat in Brussels is very much aware of the importance of supporting the work of the confederation. At the regional meeting in Tbilisi we had a thorough look at the reality in Eastern Europe. This was also where we saw the beginning of the mainstreaming of youth engagement in Caritas Europa. Now we are looking into the possibility of integrating youth representatives into the core structures of our confederation. The participation of youth within the organisation will open up our network to more creativity and sensitivity towards young people suffering due to war and injustice. When looking into the causes of poverty and marginalisation, attention is constantly given to the position of women in today's society in order to look for ways to overcome injustice and exclusion. Putting the rights of every person at the centre of our work, it will continue to be of the greatest importance to fight against every type of exclusion, be it of women, young people or the elderly, with a special concern for migrants and refugees.

During recent years, we have experienced a large flow of migrants, and we have been deeply shaken- by the images of the events taking place on the Mediterranean Sea, and not less by the lack of openness - or shall I call it the selfishness – of our European countries. How can we give a respectful place on earth to people who are driven away by poverty, war and violence, social injustice and the like? If we consider the indifference we meet with on several fronts, if we look at the short-sightedness of our political systems, if we see that money governs the world, then we know the great need to call for all populations to create a home for every person and make this world a place where all are equal. A big word of thanks goes to all those members who have given themselves totally to the welcoming of migrants and people on the move.

One tragic and painful event has shaken us all deeply in 2019. The Central African Republic (CAR) had to cope with an accusation for child abuse in the ranks of Caritas. As Caritas, our core mission is to support people in the most vulnerable situations. The Caritas confederation at all levels is determined to take any necessary steps to further strengthen its [safeguarding and protection procedures and systems](#). This will require commitment and dedication of everyone, and spiritual conversion.

I have seen great commitment from Caritas Europa in aiming at supporting our members as much as possible in ensuring that we are an absolutely safe confederation for everyone, but most importantly for children, young people and vulnerable adults. However, it has become clear that we need to progress further as well at the individual and confederation level, and it is essential to keep this as a priority for the years ahead.

Looking back at our failures is important, but so is celebrating our successes. Turning now to some concrete achievements of our network over the last few years:

- We saw a wonderful book published on the occasion of 25 years of work of Caritas Europa. With thanks to the tireless work of many people, it made its way into many collaborating offices and official organisations.
- After a very intense period of work Jorge Nuño-Mayer has left the office. We are happy to learn that he has a fine job in the German Church structures. Thank you, Jorge, for the work you have done and for your leadership. You were present at every event and made the voice of Caritas heard in meetings and events all over Europe and beyond.
- This leads me to welcome our new secretary general, Maria Nyman. In no time at all, she has entered into the heart of Caritas. We have come to know Maria as a generous, kind and determined leader. We are sure Caritas Europa is in good hands.
- I am not going to give all the names of people who have come into the office in Brussels and went away again. But to just to say of them that I always heard they left the office with a heavy heart, as the spirit of collaboration and brotherhood and sisterhood has always made it into a very pleasant working place.
- On the international level we have a new Secretary General. We thank Michel Roy for the way he conducted the confederation in not always easy times. We can certainly build on the contacts he made with Church authorities as well as with civil authorities. Aloysius John has taken up the job with great courage and dedication. He had to start his job after the General Assembly in Rome in 2019 and shortly after he was confronted with huge safeguarding challenges.
- A final word of thanks goes to our vice-president. A new assignment was given to him within Secours Catholique – Caritas France, which will bring him to Jerusalem, as Director of the ‘Maison d’Abraham’. Thank you, Bernard, for your skilful presence among us, always ready to share and look for the best solution. Also, on the international level your contribution was very much appreciated.
- And of course, welcome and thanks to Natalia Peiro for accepting the role of vice-president for the coming years. In one breath I want to include, in this word of appreciation, the Executive Board members. Some are leaving the Executive Board, others already have. Thank you to all of you. I have always appreciated your prompt collaboration, good spirit and friendship.
- And for myself, I am glad to offer the mission of President to the one you will elect to the position. I am aware of the time limitations I faced with my work with Caritas due to the vast diocese of Ghent of which I had the fundamental care. But I can certainly say that I enjoyed working with every one of you. I have always felt friendship with each one of you. Thank you for that.

To conclude I want to draw your attention to the icon we have in our prayer room in the secretariat in Brussels. It represents the Good Samaritan who assists a wounded man. The figure of the Samaritan has a crown around his head indicating that he is the Good shepherd, Christ himself who pours oil onto the wound of the man. The gentle facial expression of the Lord contrasts with the pain-stricken face of the young man. Christ bows down in full respect of the person he is serving, and the healing oil is poured out of a golden receptacle indicating the

heavenly gift the pagan Samaritan is offering. How can we not think of the priest and the Levite who passed by this scene, ignoring the suffering man, as they went about their duties. They had no time to spare. Our prayer room invites every visitor to pause for a while to understand the deep meaning of the service Caritas is rendering to the many homeless, suffering and forgotten people all over the world. It is my wish that this image may ever be at the foundations of our efforts to assist all people in need. This is why it is also essential that the prayer room fulfils the role of providing us constant inspiration based on the Scriptures.



+ Luc Van Looy

