

Caritas for Africa, Caritas Africa for Caritas Internationalis
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Today, I would like to address three topics in support of *Caritas Africa*:

1. Practicing listening.
2. Interpreting the signs of the times.
3. Appreciating Catholic social teaching.

1. How can *Caritas Africa* practice listening?

Let's meditate, together, on the mission of *Caritas* in Africa and the contribution of *Caritas Africa* to *Caritas Internationalis*. *Caritas Africa* needs to learn and practice *listening*. Let's look at three paths of listening. They are different from each other, and they need to go together. If one of these three paths is missing, we run the risk of not grasping the mission and, indeed, the mystery of *Caritas* in Africa.

Listening to reality

First, we are to listen to *reality*, to the African people. Pope Francis keeps insisting that “realities are more important than ideas” (EG 231-233). Listening to reality is the only valid starting point of any project of social service, of any “witness of charity by the ecclesial community [...] with a view to integral human development, social justice and peace” (Statutes). *Laudato si'* calls you to listen to the cry of the poor and the earth in Africa, marked by a very flawed and unfair model of development,¹ and by inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and by the many ongoing wars. Listening is already part of *Caritas*'s heritage and style: “Listening centre – Centre d'écoute” is what many *Caritas* outposts are called. Listening to local people is a strength to cherish and embrace, along with using social analysis to probe the causes, and the social teaching of the Church to reflect more deeply. That's why *Caritas* reports are often so clear and useful.

Listening to the Word

Second, listening to reality leads back to listening to the Word. This is what we learn from *Fratelli tutti*: its first chapter invites us to see and listen to the sins and shadows of our world, that shatter the dream of fraternity. The second chapter turns to the Word of God; it invites us to listen to a great parable that shows us the Good Samaritan as an enlightening and inspiring icon. It highlights “the basic decision we need to make to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan” (FT 67).

Listening to the Christian community

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 53.

Finally, the third path for *Caritas*, which is a “pastoral body” of the Church, is listening to the Christian community. Today this requires getting more in tune with a Church that wants to be more and more synodal, capable of “walking together ... in the acceptance of all differences, in the appreciation of all ministries and in the recognition of all charisms.”² The path of synodality looks to all bishops – both individually at the diocesan level and collectively in their episcopal conferences – to promote and protect a unity that must never be reduced to uniformity, but calls everyone, each according to their gifts and calling, to walk together in listening and evangelization and service.

If *Caritas Africa* feels that it is not listened to, the temptation is to shout, or to go it alone. But this would be to abandon the ambitious title, “*Caritas* for Africa, *Caritas Africa* for *Caritas Internationalis*.” To stay the course, it is absolutely necessary for everyone in *Caritas Africa* to develop and practice an extraordinary, highly pronounced ability to *listen*. Listening, after all, is a fundamental dimension of the style that Pope Francis wants the whole Church to adopt. Yet if it feels little listened-to by others, the temptation of *Caritas Africa* is to say, “If they don’t do it for us, why should we do it for them?” But in fact, we can’t helpfully walk together with them, unless we learn and practice *listening* honestly and fully to one another.

2. Interpreting the Signs of the Times³

“Signs of the times” is probably the most memorable expression that comes from Vatican II, often repeated and also quite a bit misunderstood. The idea is very central to its teaching. Strikingly, however, the Council mentions the expression only three times in *Gaudium et Spes*, and four times in all the other documents. Perhaps “signs of the times” was so obvious to the Council Fathers and their theologians that they did not feel compelled to explain it or spell it out in detail. Some sixty years later, we are rediscovering the importance of “signs of the times”.

In 1971, Pope Paul VI succinctly sums up how we in the Church are to proceed:

It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all [others] of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed”.⁴

In one beautiful sentence we have the role of the laity and local Churches in responding to the suffering of God’s people, the world’s many injustices, the sinful social structures. This is an organic, dynamic, pilgrim understanding of Christian communities, their members and their leaders,

² General Secretariat of the Synod, “*Enlarge the Space of your Tent*” Working Document for the Continental Stage, 24 October 2022, § 91.

³ This section is based on *Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis* by Michael Czerny and Christian Barone, chapter 3, “Criteria for Discernment: Reading the ‘Signs of the Times’”, Orbis Books, 2022.

⁴ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971, § 4; cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, § 10: “The council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time.”

taking hold of the challenges of their times and living their faith in how they respond. This is Christ needing us to bring him into the world in order to be incarnate and risen where he is most needed.

Let there be “Walking together” ...

“Walking together” is a very rich and simple image. Thinking about the mission and mystery of *Caritas Africa*, it comes almost spontaneously to understand “walking together” in the sense of “accompanying.” It is in accompanying that *Caritas* makes its contribution to the building of a synodal Church, once again along three lines.

... by taking care

The first way, almost obvious when thinking about what *Caritas* normally does especially at the local and parish level, is “taking care” of those who ask to be heard and seek support. “Taking care” plays out concretely in the four verbs that Pope Francis uses to describe appropriate responses to the needs of migrants and refugees: to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate.⁵ These four phases apply to supporting all the poor and marginalized who yearn to develop their capacities and become progressively more autonomous. Thanks to the Federation, *Caritas* generously, quickly and effectively coordinates responses to emergencies that occur in every corner of the globe. *Caritas* is the maternal face and fatherly hands of a caring Church drawing close to those most in need.

... by advocating

A second form of support is *Caritas* active in advocacy, in socio-political and socio-cultural engagement. Thus, the public can recognize the demands of the poorest, giving rise to better policies to protect and promote their human and civic dignity. Paternalism is what threatens this form of accompaniment. The poor need a sounding board, not someone speaking for them and thereby silencing their own voices. Let’s be inspired by the World Meetings of Popular Movements, which I have personally followed since their inception, and in particular by the way Pope Francis recognizes Popular Movements and their members as interlocutors and bearers of an original point of view that is capable of formulating proposals for reforming society. The Holy Father underlines their constructive role in the public space.⁶

... by encountering the poor

Thirdly, *Caritas* accompanies the Church community to encounter the poor. No Christian person or community, whatever their role, can purport to witness to charity without encountering the poor. This pastoral role uniquely reveals an otherwise unknown face of the Lord. “That is why,” Pope Francis explains,

⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, “*Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees*,” Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 14 January 2018.

⁶ Cf. M. Czerny and P. Foglizzo, “The Strength of the Excluded: World Meeting of Popular Movements at the Vatican”, *Thinking Faith* (January 2015), and “La force des exclus – La rencontre mondiale des mouvements populaires au Vatican”, *En question* (mars 2015).

I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (EG 198).

... by being companions on the road

Besides accompaniment, there is another meaning of “walking together” that challenges *Caritas* in Africa today and tomorrow: it is being fellow-travellers or “companions on the road”. This involves practicing listening, not only with those in need who knock on our doors, but more generally with many who make up our complex societies and their numerous peripheries; and with institutions and organizations, Christian and public and private, that are committed to protect the poorest and promote justice, fairness and sustainability. Doing things in a synodal way means building alliances with common goals, sharing resources and laying competition aside. Indeed, it means choosing and preferring actions carried out together over those that we carry out alone, even when this requires straining to dialogue and undergoing conflict and risking looking like losers.

Synodality

“Synod” and “synodality” are nouns, but really *the* verb for the Church is “to synod”. It is how the Church exists and moves through time to bring the good news to wherever God's people most need to hear it. If Vatican II mentions “signs of the times” only seven times, we can be even more amazed that the Council teaches so much about “synod” and “synodality” and does not use the words even once. This is the Holy Spirit at work!

After the Council (1962-65), Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops “to keep alive the positive spirit engendered by the conciliar experience”⁷. Forty-five years later, in October 2009, I participated in the 2nd Synod for Africa. By then, a synod had become a pretty formal meeting of Bishops producing propositions for the Pope to use in an Apostolic Exhortation. With Pope Francis, the synod has more and more become a process based on listening and sharing, discerning and proposing, making a substantial contribution to the life of the Church.

Following Vatican II's teaching about the Church in *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis affirms that “it is precisely the path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.”⁸ At the same time, he argues that synodality “offers us the most adequate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.” In ministry to the members of the Church, those of us who are ordained are called to responsibility and service so all members can walk together in contemporary history and embrace the challenges identified as “signs of the times”.

⁷ Paul VI, *Motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* officially instituted the Synod of Bishops on 15 September 1965.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Address at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops*, 17.10. 2015.

Pope Francis traces the image of a Church as “an inverted pyramid” in which “the top is located beneath the base”⁹. The uppermost part of the now-inverted pyramid is the most numerous layer; it comprises the entire People of God, in harmony with the College of Bishops who make up the next layer underneath. And among them, as a bishop among bishops, we find the Successor of Peter at the lowermost point of the pyramid. Such an image is certainly different from the one I learned in catechism!

The shared responsibility of the entire People of God for the mission of the Church also requires much more consultation. This is not “lay parliamentarianism”, since the authority of the College of Bishops does not depend on a majority vote. Rather, the laity’s co-responsibility and participation represent indispensable charisms – meant to build up the body, care for unity, bring the Gospel to every corner of reality. These are charisms and graces which the Spirit endows the body of the Church with.

Comment ça va?

When I lived in Africa 2002-2010 and worked on HIV/AIDS, I learned a terrible bit of dialogue. To the very usual question, *Comment ça va – How are things?* came back the loaded response, *Déjà mieux que l’année qui vient – Surely better than next year*. To dismiss this as chatty pessimism would be a mistake. For as soon as you start to unpack the response, you find yourself entangled in the heaviest reflections on injustice and exploitation, slavery, and colonialism. Old history and today’s social structures continue to generate the gloomy answer, *Déjà mieux que l’année qui vient*. How can Africans emerge and how can others help? For me this little dialogue sheds light on *Caritas* and its mission; do you hear it in a similar fashion?

3. Appreciating Catholic social teaching

Let’s turn to Catholic social teaching to guide your work.

Integral Human Development ...

Déjà mieux que l’année qui vient is not resignation. It is an indignant, complex, coherent and repeated challenge. To it, ***the right*** answer is in the name of the Vatican department I’m responsible for, “integral human development”. The heart of the matter, the core message, is the ***human***, the person, in society, the people developing. “Every human being has the right to life, to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life.”¹⁰

To appreciate authentic development (not cheap or fake forms of it), we need to recognize that (1) development first means, not having and consuming more, focusing on oneself, but making a sincere gift of oneself¹¹; and (2) that development applies, not just to the excluded or marginalized, but to each and every one on the planet, now and in future.¹² These two closely-related points are well worth meditating on.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, § 11.

¹¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965. “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” § 24 with reference to Luke 17:33.

¹² Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967. “...developing the whole man and every man ...” § 14.

The right to human development cannot be subject to any calculation of profit, nor to any claim of social utility, which tries to justify leaving the weaker or less productive behind (*FT* 108), nor to an excessive emphasis on individual freedom which ends up triggering conflict and violence (*FT* 111). Rather, our understanding of this great right must always maintain the dignity of each person within the great social “we”. *Ubuntu* is the necessary condition, *sumus ergo sum*. *Ubuntu* means being siblings and treating each other as siblings.

Solidarity with all our siblings

Solidarity is another principle of Catholic social teaching – Pope Francis explains it as the call to *fraternité universelle*, to be siblings all.

Becoming and then being true siblings is the capacity to feel close to others to the point of suffering with them, com-passion, which means having the other person’s troubles wholly at heart. Countering the “throwaway culture” is also a form of social solidarity: it demonstrates a moral conscience that cares about our common home and our human future (*FT* 117).

Since effective solidarity always leads to a struggle against poverty and its diverse causes, various forms of ideology inevitably rise up against it, for example, domination based on physical strength, which leads to laws and customs favouring men over women, the rule of money or pleasure, the rule of selfishness. However, putting ourselves at the service of others protects us from ideological distortions, since serving our neighbour means serving real, concrete persons, not flimsy ideas (*FT* 115).

Educating and forming the young in solidarity, from their earliest years, helps them to understand these truly liberating ways of living in community, in society, in history.

The common good

Solidarity brings us to the common good. Pope Francis often combines his positive teaching about the common good with his severe critique of the economy. Sometimes one thinks the economy is just one problem among other threats to the common good that need attention. But it is more radical to understand the common good in relation to the universal destination of goods or, in the words of St John Paul II, the social mortgage on private property.

Our world is badly structured, and the economy perversely dominates it. Promoting genuine respect for the common good, genuine commitment to share the gifts that are meant for everyone, is not easy. Unfortunately, some people get left out, it is claimed, ‘to keep the economy competitive’. Unfortunately, some people pay (much) more and gain (much) less, and others actually get thrown away, discarded. Such terrible imbalances and inequities have become normal, typical. For example, when the traditional inhabitants of a territory resist a so-called development that is actually a death sentence for their way of life and their culture, they are painted as obstacles to progress. The so-called ‘common good’ turns out not to be as good and as progressive as is claimed.

Therefore, the Holy Father says, instead of blaming and discarding the people, “it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress” (LS 194) and taking the side of those who are left out.

The preferential option for the poor

Which brings us to the preferential option for the poor and the heart of our faith: the Incarnation, the Son of God become one of us. God, who is everything and has everything, reveals his face, his very self, by taking on our human flesh with all its fragility and frailty, making a preferential option for us sinners. Somehow imitating this disconcerting logic, the Incarnation means to make oneself poor so that others may live. Vatican II opted for the poor in this radically historical, real, spiritual and theological sense.

Nowadays, many of God’s people find themselves blocked from developing, heavily burdened, deprived of dignity and hope. How can we, the Church, share the good news of “life, life to the full” (cf John 10:10) with so many people who live miserably? Having opted preferentially for them since Vatican II, the Church is also opting for its own change and renewal, its own transformation, its own revolution, and *Caritas* is one of the ways of doing so in Africa.

Care for our common home

Finally, we care for our common home. “Development” is development if – and only if – it means **both** “human,” which includes everyone alive now plus future generations, **and** “caring for our common home”. Since there’s only one common home, only one planet, then we can’t just keep on expanding, advancing, speeding faster; and since there’s only one human family created by God, we’re all siblings and urgently need to treat each other as such.

Pope Francis says so clearly: “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS 49). This, I hope you all affirm wholeheartedly, is the approach of our Church, and our *Caritas*, in Africa.

The Church needs to change, or continually convert, so that her principal mission of evangelization really and truly contributes to integral ecology. How? By learning to accompany the God's people as they learn to care for our common home. If the people do survive and prosper, which means the environment repairs itself and flourishes, then the Church really continues being there among them, not leading, not holding back, but accompanying.

The Amazon Synod proposes the creation of “special ministries for the care of our common home and the promotion of integral ecology at the parish level and in each Church jurisdiction. Their functions [would/will] include, among others, the care of the territory and of the waters, as well as the promotion of the encyclical *Laudato si'* ... at all levels and structures of the Church” (§ 82). This is a great example of the Church called exactly where Christ urgently wants to be incarnate, as the Spirit tells us in the signs of the times.

Conclusion

Let me end with Pope Francis speaking in South Sudan. His invitation applies to every corner of Africa and so to *Caritas Africa*:

The abundant resources with which God has blessed this land should not be restricted to a few, but recognized as the legacy of all, and plans for economic recovery should coincide with proposals for an equitable distribution of wealth... The time has come to stop being carried along by the tainted waters of hatred, tribalism, regionalism and ethnic differences. Brothers and sisters, it is time to sail together towards the future! Together. We must not forget this word: together.¹³

Sailing towards the future together, reading the signs of the times, practicing listening and synodality, seeing everyone as a sibling, fostering the integral development of all. This adds up to *Caritas* for Africa and *Caritas Africa* contributing to *Caritas Internationalis*.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Address to Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps*, Juba, 3.02.2023.