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The Christian Duty to Give Hope

Meeting on the Works of Mercy today in Europe

Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, September 15-18, 2016

Mercy means not running away from pain, injustice, and the many forms of suffering of our time, but turning them into opportunities of hope and salvation through Christian love. In any work of mercy, it is the human person, in his or her dignity and integrity, the starting point and the end of the action of the Church. But also in the practice of mercy, an occasional gesture - that is often the result of unstable emotion and leads to delegate others in a de-responsibilizing attitude - is not enough. Every Christian faithful and the entire Christian community, indeed the whole of humanity, are called to make works of mercy! To put this into practice we have to be able also to educate, share, and witness: these are some ideas that the participants in the CCEE Meeting of Sarajevo have elaborated in their four working days (September 15-18).

By continuing a process which had been set out along with several European Catholic organizations (**Caritas Europe, COMECE, Commission Justice and Peace Europe, FEAMC, ICMC, ICCPPC, FEBA, and UNIAPAC**), the CCEE Commission *Caritas in Veritate* in collaboration with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina promoted a meeting for the protagonists of the Works of Mercy in Europe. It was also the occasion for reflecting on the urgency and the topical character of Mercy in Europe today and the different forms of commitment of the Church.

Several moments of reflection and testimony have shown that the human person is at the heart of the action of the Church. It is not an anonymous individual, but the person, within the limits of his or her creatural being - always in need of relations (and not only human ones) and of experiencing the love of God - the object of the attention of the Church when she feeds people through the Food Bank, when she visits the prisons, when she receives the migrants or refugees, when she visits the sick and takes care of them, when she buries the dead, when she defends fair jobs, or she brings to the world of politics the rich heritage of her social doctrine. The numerous activities put in place by these Church bodies highlight a

The Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) encompasses the current 33 European Bishops' Conferences, represented by their Presidents, the Archbishops of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.), the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo and the Apostolic Administrator of Estonia. The current President is Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary; the Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa, and Mgr Angelo Massafra, Archbishop of Scutari-Pult (Albania). The General Secretary is Mgr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland). www.ccee.eu

sense of gratitude and strong hope for the creative boldness and innovative capacity in tackling the various forms of poverty. Through the Works of Mercy, the Catholic Church in Europe is aware that she is educating to the meaning of human suffering, which recognizes and appreciates the value of each individual life and opposes the culture of discard. At the same time, participants have identified certain phenomena that challenge the Church and the whole society in Europe.

In a time of great challenges, it is ever more urgent to restore hope to Europe. This is possible through a presence that lives an evangelized Christian love that is not reduced to mere sentimentality. At the same time, participants repeatedly noted that the privatization of faith in secularized countries has often led to a rift between spiritual and corporal works of mercy, because the latter, perceived as a public expression of one's faith, are not always well received by secular institutions. Not unfrequently, in fact, the legal and administrative apparatus put in place by governments in Europe, while appreciating the immense service that the various Church organizations make to society, seems to reduce Christian commitment to mere philanthropy, thus depriving it of its religious reference. Multiplication, diversity, and the weight of such a legal and administrative apparatus make it difficult to manage solidarity today. In time, all these elements have led to a separation between the "act" born of faith and the Christian proclamation: sometimes you get the impression that you can do good only at the cost of sacrificing the proclamation of Jesus' Word. If the Church clearly condemns any charitable activity which is subject to and motivated by mere proselytism, on the other hand she insists that the Christian faithful cannot separate the works from their own faith, as the very person of Jesus Christ is their very source and support.

In his message to participants, Pope Francis recalled the need to "contribute to the rebirth of Europe" and dream of "a new European humanism" while encouraging the "representatives of the bishops in Europe, to involve more and more your communities and the different social actors who carry out activities in the field of charity and social aid in the commitment to proclaim the Gospel to those who have lost – due to various causes - the direction of their lives." Only in this way the Church can "be a process-generating mother, a fertile mother, because she respects life and offers real hope."

In Sarajevo, the leaders of Church organizations have also recalled how, in the face of various forms of material and spiritual 'poverty', it is necessary not only to respond to the urgency dictated by suffering, by providing a service or a presence that can alleviate the pain of the moment, but rather to work together with the person in trouble, engaging the whole community, and communicating around these forms of poverty. The numerous testimonials shared in these days have shown how the works of mercy are interconnected. Their wish is therefore that the different ecclesial bodies can continue to support each other and develop new forms of collaboration. In fact, it is absolutely necessary that, wherever an ecclesial body is involved, the entire Christian community feels challenged. A proper communication must then promote an awareness that impacts the whole humankind. In fact, in the face of human suffering there is no religious or political barrier: "everyone should feel co-responsible for the well-being of the others," said the participants.

Finally, in Sarajevo, emblematic city of our time because of the intense suffering endured and the still open wounds caused by a conflict that lasted years and by agreements - such as Dayton - which are favouring a policy based on inertia and discrimination on ethnic grounds, the mercy of the Church is made visible by numerous works, such as the School for Europe - one of the six works of mercy visited by the participants – which had been opened during the conflict, to testify that the war was not necessary, nor the ethnic separation inevitable, but that peaceful coexistence was and is still always possible.

Joining the Holy Father who will attend the Prayer Meeting for Peace, on September 20 in Assisi, we prayed for Peace, a clear sign of divine Mercy, especially in Ukraine and in the countries of the Middle East.