



## CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS

# Service and Advocacy

By MONSIGNOR ROBERT VITILLO

*Pope Francis' instruction — “make noise.”*

**W**hen Pope Francis met with a group of young Argentines during the 2013 World Youth Day observance in Rio de Janeiro, he shared with them an expected outcome from their encounter — that they would “make noise” (he used an Argentinian colloquialism, *hacer lio*).

Then he offered some guidelines on how to do it, and he told the group to be prepared for potential reactions from more staid members of society and of the church.

“But I want you to make yourselves heard in your dioceses,” he said, “I want the noise to go out, I want the Church to go out onto the streets, I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable ... May the bishops and priests forgive me if some of you create a bit of confusion afterwards. That’s my advice. Thanks for whatever you can do.”<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion, both the actions and the strategies the pope proposed to his young Argentinian compatriots could serve as an apt description for the advocacy work of Caritas Internationalis and any number of Catholic-inspired social ministry efforts — including those undertaken by the Catholic Health Association of the United States and its member organizations.

We need to “make noise,” or, in accord with the literal Latin translation of the root words for advocacy, to “call out” the structural causes of inequity, marginalization, exploitation of poor and other suffering people in our own countries and throughout the world.

### CARITAS

Caritas Internationalis is a unique organization with links to the grassroots and to the highest corridors of power and policy setting. This global confederation comprises 164 national Catholic Church-inspired organizations working in humanitarian emergencies, international development, social and health services. Its mission is to promote human development and social justice for men and women, regardless of creed, race or ethnicity, to realize a world where the fruits of the earth are shared by the whole human family. This mission is based on values, including compassion, solidarity, fraternity, partnership, preferential option for the poor, charity and justice.

Caritas member organizations enjoy locally based and long-term presence in most countries of the world. Inspired by Christian faith and gospel values, Caritas works with poor, vulnerable and excluded people, regardless of race or religion. Its great strength is the diversity of its membership, which ranges from small groups of volunteers to some of the world’s largest humanitarian and development organizations. Through the worldwide outreach of the Catholic Church, we are able to bring together local knowledge at the





Illustration by Roy Scott



## **Caritas seeks a world where the voices of the poor are heard and acted upon.**

grassroots level with the combined expertise and resources of a global network.

In total, Caritas members engage more than 1 million staff and volunteers, drawn from many different walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and religions.

The confederation's General Secretariat is headquartered in Vatican City; there, it coordinates the confederation's response to major humanitarian emergencies, promotes capacity-building among its members and other Catholic Church-inspired organizations, and advocates for a better world based on justice and compassion.

The organization also maintains delegations in New York and Geneva; these assure representation of the Caritas confederation at the United Nations and with other inter-governmental and multilateral institutions.

Seven regional structures are important components of the confederation: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, North America, and Oceania.

Caritas not only provides services — it “makes noise,” not *for*, but *with*, those seeking a fair share in the world's resources and opportunities. Here is how our organization describes its advocacy efforts:

“Caritas seeks a world where the voices of the poor are heard and acted upon. This is a world where women and men in the poorest and most disadvantaged communities are able to influence the systems, decisions and resources that affect them. They can then live under governments, institutions and global structures that are just and accountable.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A LONG-STANDING CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Jesus of Nazareth introduced advocacy, especially for and with the most vulnerable members of society, as an essential component of his “road map” for putting into practice the Good News he had come to proclaim. To confirm his intentions, one need only recall his Sermon on the Mount during which he envisioned that those who hunger and

thirst for justice would be satisfied, that peacemakers would be granted the status “children of God,” that persecuted people would inherit God's kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

St. Paul addressed all his other letters to the Christian communities where he had preached and converted their members to faith in Jesus. However, in a later missive that he wrote while awaiting trial in Rome, he departed from this practice by sending a special appeal to Philemon, one of his individual converts. It concerned one of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, a runaway whom Paul met in Rome and baptized as a Christian. Knowing that, most likely, he soon would face martyrdom, Paul asked Philemon to take Onesimus back, but this time “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord. So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me. And if he has done you any injustice or owes you anything, charge it to me.”<sup>4</sup>

## **The Jesuits in Paraguay and Brazil undertook a selfless and complex advocacy campaign to defend the dignity and the integrity of the Guaraní indigenous people who were being forced into servitude.**

St. Lawrence was martyred by the third-century Roman emperor, Valerian. Tradition has it that, as a deacon, Lawrence was given responsibility for administering treasuries of the early church. Valerian's soldiers summoned Lawrence with an instruction to bring the church's finances with him. Lawrence, in turn, called the poor of Rome, whom he was serving, distributed the church's resources among them and invited them to join him in his hearing before the Roman tribunal. When asked to hand over the Catholic resources, Lawrence pointed to those who accompanied him and responded that the poor were, indeed, the church's treasure.<sup>5</sup>

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, the Jesuits in Paraguay and Brazil undertook a selfless and complex advocacy campaign to defend the dignity and the integrity of the Guaraní indigenous people who were being forced into servitude by



Spanish and Portuguese colonists taking huge tracts of land for their respective Crowns.

The Jesuits learned the ways of the indigenous, respected them, baptized those who wished to become Christians and initially convinced the European royalty to allow the Jesuits to organize the indigenous into “reductions” of land plots. Thriving communities were established and undertook successful agriculture. Gradually, however, the colonists’ greed prevailed, rumors were spread about the Jesuits and the command came from Europe to disband the reductions. Jesuits fought to preserve the dignity of the natives, but the “Royals” put pressure on Pope Clement XIV to suppress the Jesuit order, which occurred in 1747.<sup>6</sup>

In both the 1970s and 1990s, Catholic Charities USA, which was one of the founding members of Caritas Internationalis, entered into a process of deep theological reflection as well as of strategic planning and recognized that both charitable service and advocacy for justice form its essential mandate:

Believing in the presence of God in our midst, we proclaim the sanctity of human life and dignity of the person by sharing in the mission of Jesus given to the Church. To this end, Catholic Charities works with individuals, families, and communities to help them meet their needs, address their issues, eliminate oppression, and build a just and compassionate society.<sup>7</sup>

The global Caritas confederation was not spared from tense discussions regarding justice and charity, advocacy and service. During my 30 years of service to this organization, I have felt as though I were caught in the crossfire between the defenders of charity and the promoters of justice. So many times I have heard those dedicated to reversing the structural injustices in our

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world accuse those involved in disaster relief of perpetuating a dependency syndrome. On the other hand, the humanitarian responders level the countercharge that justice advocates are willing to allow millions of people to starve while they dream of revising the world order.

I believe that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI helped to calm, if not end once and for all, the debates when he wrote:

On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion.<sup>8</sup>

#### FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

How does Caritas develop its advocacy strategies? First of all, it listens to “the cries of the poor” and “reads the signs of the times.” Every four years, it gathers in Rome for a General Assembly of representatives from all the member organizations. Here is what the delegates wrote as part of the final message during the last such convening in May 2011:

... We gather at a time when the “cries of the poor” are deafening. We stand in solidarity with those affected by natural disasters and civil conflicts, especially in Japan, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Colombia, North Africa-Middle East and other parts of the world. We seek protection for refugees, forced and involuntary migrants, and victims of human trafficking. We express compassion with those who face rejection or discrimination because of their ethnic or racial origins, their religion, or socio-economic status. We are especially concerned with the plight of women and young girls who are deprived of education, health care, decent wages and working conditions and other basic necessities of life. We are keenly aware that countless people have been further impoverished by the global economic crisis and the widening gap between the rich and the

poor. These cries oblige us “to awaken consciences to the drama of human misery and to the demands of social justice made by the Gospel and the Church.”<sup>9</sup>

At each Caritas General Assembly, a strategic framework is delineated for confederation activities. The framework for the 2011-2015 Caritas mandate included the following strategic, advocacy-related objectives:<sup>10</sup>

**Promoting integral human development** — Eradicate extreme poverty. Implement development and charitable services so that women and men in the poorest and most disadvantaged communities have equal access to essential services such as clean water, education and health care and the resources they need to live sustainably, with dignity.

**Advocacy for a better world** — Transform unjust systems and structures. Increasing power and influence so that women and men in the poorest and most disadvantaged communities are able to influence the systems, decisions and resources that affect them and live under governments, institutions and global structures that are just and accountable.

Each year during the quadrennial mandate, the confederation prepares plans of action at global, regional and national levels. In accord with the principle of subsidiarity, these plans are formulated with due respect for regional and national concerns and with cultural sensitivity. During the past four years, here are some ways that the Caritas Strategic Framework has been put into action in the area of advocacy:

**Millennium Development Goals** — The world may fall short of the target set by the Millennium Development Goals — cutting poverty by half by 2015. But, Caritas is campaigning to see the promise to the poor be maintained through renewed commitment from governments and inter-governmental organizations to the aims of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Strategies.

**HAART for Children** — This Caritas campaign urges governments and pharmaceuti-

cal firms to develop and provide affordable and accessible, child-friendly medicines and diagnostic tools for HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. The HAART campaign — which stands for Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy — also lobbies for simple, efficient and inexpensive diagnostic methods to be developed that are suitable for poorer countries to use in their efforts to prevent the spread of these infections.<sup>11</sup>

**Right To Food Campaign** — In December 2013, Caritas launched its “One Human Family: Food for All Campaign.” This advocacy includes the following actions:

- Raise awareness about hunger crises
  - Present good practices of how Caritas organizations help people become self-sufficient in producing food
  - Call on governments of the world to guarantee the right of food for all those living in their territory
  - Aim to end systemic hunger by 2025.
- In a message of support for this campaign, Pope Francis said, “We are in front of a global scandal of one billion — one billion people who still suffer from hunger today. We cannot look the other way and pretend this does not exist.”<sup>12</sup>

## REPRESENTATION AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Given its global reach, Caritas Internationalis has been accorded “nongovernmental organization — general status” relations with the United Nations. This designation entitles the organization to follow most sessions at the UN and to submit both written and oral testimony on the issues being discussed there. It also is possible for Caritas to organize specially focused “side events” on issues of priority importance for Caritas and the people it serves. Caritas takes full advantage of such privileges and has engaged in the following activities during recent years:

- Sponsored side events on the right to development, the key role of the family in today’s society, the right to health for children living with or affected by HIV, the need to maintain focused attention on the plight of refugees and displaced persons in such humanitarian crises as can be found in the Central African Republic, Syria and Iraq
- Serves on the core group of the UNAIDS



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Global Plan to end new HIV infections among children by 2015

- Convened key Catholic Church leaders and health service staff to scale up engagement in HIV treatment services throughout the world

- Provided consultation to the World Health Organization (WHO) on the needs of Ebola-affected countries and served on a WHO working group to revise the policy of safe and dignified burials in order to allow family members and religious leaders to participate in these funeral rites — albeit from a safe distance

- Worked closely with the International Organization for Migration to highlight the needs for health care among migrants

- Worked with the International Labor Organization to advocate for the inclusion of “decent work” within the post-2015 Sustainable Development Strategies

Abiding by Pope Francis’ instruction to “make noise,” Caritas Internationalis continues its strong advocacy efforts, since, again in the words of the pope, “our civilization has become confused and, instead of building up creation so that people can be happier ... it treats creation in such a way as to establish ... a ‘throwaway’ culture.”

Thus we raise our voices and our deeds as “institutional witnesses of the church’s love.”<sup>13</sup>

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### NOTES

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