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Pope Francis speaks to participants in the general assembly of Caritas Internationalis at the V

Pope Francis speaks to participants in the general assembly of Caritas Internationalis at the Vatican May 11, 2023. Caritas Internationalis is the umbrella organization for 162 official Catholic charities working in more than 200 countries. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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The Catholic Church's charitable mission must share the Gospel message of unity, justice and peace or risk becoming "merely a semblance of goodness," Pope Francis

said.

Meeting with delegates to the general assembly of Caritas Internationalis May 11, the pope underscored the dual nature of the church's charitable arm as a service of charity and a Catholic institution dedicated to pastoral care.

The work of Caritas is "not just a matter of initiating projects and strategies that prove successful and effective, but also of engaging in an ongoing process of missionary conversion," he said.

If charity loses its connection to the Gospel, the pope said, "it would be easy to comply with worldly ways of thinking that would divert us to pragmatic activism or self-interest that wound" the body of the church.

Caritas Internationalis is the umbrella organization for 162 official Catholic charities operating in 200 countries and territories around the world. Its general assembly, attended by some 400 delegates representing national and local Caritas organizations, was scheduled to take place May 11-16 in Rome to elect a new president, secretary-general, executive board and fill other leadership positions.

In November 2022, Pope Francis issued a decree suspending the secretary-general and other top officers of Carita, citing "deficiencies" in management and procedures "seriously prejudicing team spirit and staff morale." Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle was also removed as Caritas president but remained in the organization to assist the temporary administrator appointed to oversee the transition.

In his address to Caritas delegates May 11, Pope Francis explained that what distinguishes Caritas from other aid organizations is its "ecclesial vocation," which offers charity in communion with the Holy See and in line with the Catholic Church teaching.

From its conception, he said, Caritas was meant to mediate "between the universal and particular churches" and support "the involvement of the entire people of God in the work of charity."

"Take care to train competent lay persons capable of bringing the church's message to political and social life," he told the delegates.

"The challenge of a mature and conscious laity is as timely as ever, since their presence reaches all those spheres that directly touch the lives of the poor," the

pope said. "They can express with creative freedom the church's maternal heart and concern for social justice thanks to their involvement in the challenging work of unjust social structures and promoting the happiness of the human person."

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Pope Francis stressed the centrality of charity in Christian life, explaining that while "faith and hope are 'provisional gifts' linked to our lives as pilgrims and wayfarers on this earth, charity, by contrast, is a 'definitive gift,' a pledge and a foretaste of the end of time."

"Even the most extraordinary actions, even the most heroic acts of generosity, like giving away all one's possessions to help the starving, if done without charity, are of no avail," he said, referencing St. Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians.

Pope Francis also encouraged the delegates to remain united and learn to value their differences.

"Your confederation embraces many different identities. Experience your diversity as a treasure, pluralism as a resource," he said. "Compete in showing esteem for one another, and allow conflicts to lead, not to division, but to encounter and growth."