



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II FOR UN YEAR OF VOLUNTEER WORK

Dear Volunteers!

1. At the end of the year, that the United Nations dedicated to Volunteer work, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation for your constant dedication, in every part of the world, in going to meet those who live in poverty. Whether you work individually or gathered together in special associations, you represent for children, the elderly, the sick, people in difficulty, refugees and the persecuted a ray of hope that pierces the darkness of solitude and encourages them to overcome the temptations of violence and egotism.

What makes a volunteer dedicate his/her life to others? First of all, the innate movement of the heart that inspires every human being to help his fellow man. It is a law of existence. A volunteer experiences a joy that goes far beyond what he has done when he succeeds in giving himself freely to others.

For this reason, volunteer work is a special factor that contributes to humanization. Thanks to the many forms of solidarity and of service that they promote and make concrete, volunteer workers make society more attentive to the dignity of the human person and his/her many expectations. Through their activity, volunteers come to realize that, only if one loves and gives himself to others, does the human creature reach perfect fulfillment.

2. Christ, the Son of God made man, communicates to us the profound reason for this universal human experience. Revealing the face of God who is love (cf. I Jn 4,8), He reveals to the human person that love is the supreme law of his being. In his earthly life Jesus made the divine tenderness visible, emptying "himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2,7) and "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5,1). Sharing our earthly life unto death, he has taught us "to walk in charity".

Following in his footsteps in these two millennia, the Church has not ceased witnessing to this

love, leaving an exemplary record thanks to the saints who left their mark on history. Among the more recent ones, I am thinking of St Maximilian Kolbe, who sacrificed himself to save the father of a family, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who consecrated herself to the poorest of the poor.

Through love of God and love of the brethren, Christianity releases all of its liberating and salvific power. Charity represents the most eloquent form of evangelization because, responding to corporal needs, it reveals to men God's provident and fatherly love, concerned for each one. It is not a matter of satisfying only the material needs of our neighbour like hunger, thirst, lack of housing, medical care, but to lead him to a personal experience of the charity of God. Through volunteer work, the Christian becomes a witness of this divine charity; he proclaims it and makes it tangible with courageous and prophetic contributions.

3. It is not enough to help whoever is in material difficulty; it is necessary at the same time to respond to his thirst for values and personal spiritual solutions. The kind of help we offer is important, but more important than the kind of help offered is the heart of the one who gives it. Whether dealing with microprojects or great initiatives, in any event, volunteer work is called to be a school of life, especially for young people, contributing to educate them in a culture of solidarity and outreach, open to the free gift of self.

How many volunteers through courageous commitment to their neighbour come to discover the faith! Christ, who asks to be served in the poor, speaks to the heart of the one who places himself at their service. He makes them experience the joy of disinterested love, that is the fountain of true happiness.

I warmly hope that the *International Year of Volunteers*, the occasion for organizing many initiatives and events, may help society to promote the many forms of volunteer work that are the sign of growth in social awareness. Often, volunteers fill gaps and anticipate the presence of public institutions that must give due recognition to the works born of their courageous initiative and foster them without losing the originating spirit.

4. Dear Brothers and Sisters, who make up this "army" of peace spread over the face of the earth, you are a sign of hope for our times. Wherever situations of hardship and suffering appear, make bear fruit the hidden resources of dedication, goodness and heroism in the heart of the human person.

Making myself the spokesman for the poor everywhere, I want to say "thank you" for your steadfast dedication. Continue your journey with courage; do not let difficulties ever stop you. May Christ, the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10,30-37), be the sublime model to be imitated by every volunteer.

Imitate Mary, who going "in haste" to assist her cousin Elizabeth, became a messenger of joy and

salvation (cf. Lk 1,39-45). May she teach you her humble and concrete charity and obtain from the Lord the grace for you to recognize him in the poor and suffering.

With these wishes, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, and all whom you meet every day in the course of your service to the human person.

From the Vatican, 5 December 2001.

JOHN PAUL II

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