



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL "COR UNUM"**

*Friday, 18 April 1997*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I am pleased to welcome you during the 22nd plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum". In particular, I greet your President, Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, whom I thank for his presentation. I would like to thank you for your daily devotion to serving the Church on the Council and in various Catholic institutions on every continent. You are attentive agents and leaders in facing emergency situations, reacting to all forms of poverty and enslavement and promoting the integral development of individuals and peoples. I thank the Lord with you for all he enables us to accomplish to alleviate the misery and suffering of our brothers and sisters.

The mission of your dicastery, whose name calls to mind the unanimity of the first Christian community — they were of one heart in prayer, in the breaking of bread and in fraternal sharing (cf. Acts 2:42-47) — is to manifest in the Church charity, which has its source in Christ. Moreover, "the Body of Christ is built up in all charity" (Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Letter to Ferrandus*, 14).

2. Your assembly is first of all an opportunity to *review the 25 years of the Council's existence*, founded in 1971 by Paul VI. You are God's stewards, responsible for carefully administering the gifts of the faithful, sensitizing Christians to the needs of their brothers and sisters, constantly reviving the spirit of generosity in the Church, harmonizing and co-ordinating various interventions. Through your plans of action and your work, you are also the leaven of unity in the Church and bearers of hope for all the poor, who become aware of the importance of the Gospel for transforming the world. By conducting theological and exegetical reflections for a deeper

understanding of the spiritual meaning of charitable service, you restore to charity its title of nobility: it cannot be reduced to selective efforts without long-term commitment. At the same time, you have appropriately developed formation in the practice of charity, so that the civilization of love may extend to the four corners of the world.

Our society is undergoing many crises: an increase in the number of the poor, displaced persons, the marginalized and the homeless; an increase in social inequalities and dehumanizing forms of work. To deal with these situations, *the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum"*, to which *Pope Paul VI* gave *a specific identity which must be preserved*, is essential. With a global vision of the needs of our world, it aims at combining the resources and initiatives of Catholic aid organizations by the exchange of information and increased cooperation (cf. Letter to Cardinal Villot *Amoris officio*, 15 July 1971), in close collaboration with the diocesan Bishops, who are responsible for leading the People of God and for guiding pastoral life, as well as with all the institutions of the local Churches and the other organizations of the Roman Curia concerned with charitable matters, in the broadest sense of the term. Likewise, it is responsible for maintaining trustworthy relations with the specialized agencies of the UN, whose determination to eradicate poverty with an extensive programme, in the spirit of the commitments made at the Copenhagen World Summit, I applaud.

Wherever they are carried out — and this is the meaning of charity — *interventions of aid, help and assistance must be made in a spirit of service and as a free gift*, for the benefit of all those people, without any ulterior motives of possible supervision or proselytism, which would suggest that charity is offered in part for political or economic goals.

3. Another purpose of your dicastery's assembly is to *prepare the Year of Charity*, which will precede the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Contemplation of the Trinity leads man to live in love and opens him to charity. St Matthew reminds us of the deep connection between prayer and almsgiving. Prayer enlarges the heart and makes it attentive to men; by developing fraternity, sharing enables us to be aware that we are children of the same Father (cf. Mt 6:1-15). And it is by drawing from the source of love that we will be able to love truly (cf. *Centesimus annus*, n. 25).

That final preparatory year, when we will turn our gaze to the Father of all mercy, is particularly appropriate because "charity is the form of all the virtues" (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 8). Charity brings us into the mystery of God, makes us docile to the Holy Spirit, enables us to rediscover the value of reconciliation with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 50), and leads us to do good works (cf. Jn 14:12-17).

4. It is necessary constantly to rekindle in the faithful the desire to *show the love of the Lord, who does not differentiate between persons* and puts the good of others before all else (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, n. 82). "By works of charity, one becomes neighbour to those to whom one does a good turn" (Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Solomon*, I), and extends a hand to one's brothers and

sisters; thus the Church bears witness that every person is more valuable than all the gold in the world; she will be anxious as long as men and women face catastrophes or conflicts, die of hunger, lack what they need for food or clothing, for their own health care or for nourishing those for whom they are responsible.

5. By their witness of fraternal charity, Christ's disciples also contribute to justice, peace and the development of peoples. "*Charity is the greatest social commandment. It respects others and their rights. It requires the practice of justice, and it alone makes us capable of it. Charity inspires a life of self-giving*" ([Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1889](#)). The desire to make justice and peace reign in our world implies that one is concerned to share resources. Charity contributes to this, because it creates ties of mutual esteem and friendship between individuals and peoples. It inspires generosity in men, who become aware of the need for greater international solidarity. It should be recalled that this cannot be achieved without a true service of charity which implies not only sharing one's surplus, but also being ready to share one's own necessities. As St Ambrose of Milan illustrated so well, distinguishing between the necessary and the indispensable enables each person to be more open and more generous to his needy brothers and sisters, to purify his personal relationship with money and to moderate his attachment to the good things *of this world*. (cf. *De Nabuthe*).

6. In all the members of the Church and all people of goodwill, *the Jubilee* must foster an awareness of the need to co-operate in meeting the challenge of sharing, of the equitable distribution of goods and of joining forces; in this way everyone will contribute to the building up of a more just and fraternal society, the premiss of the kingdom, because love is a witness to the kingdom to come and it alone can radically transform the world. Charity restores hope to the poor, who realize they are truly loved by God; they all have their place in building society and have a right to what they need for their subsistence.

Love for the poor highlights the need for social justice, as the document, [World Hunger](#), which your dicastery published last year, recalls. But at the same time, it should be stressed that charity goes beyond justice, for it is an invitation to go beyond the order of mere equity to the order of love and self-giving, so that the ties woven between people are based on respect for others and the recognition of brotherhood, which are the essential foundations of life in society.

7. *Those who practise charity carry out a profound work of evangelization*: "The spirit of poverty and charity is the glory and witness of the Church of Christ" (Second Vatican Council, [Gaudium et spes](#), n. 88). Sometimes, action in communion is more eloquent than any teaching; and actions joined to words give particularly effective witness. The disciples of the Lord will recall that serving the poor and suffering is serving Christ, who is the light of the world. By living daily in the love that comes from him, the faithful help spread light in the world. Charity is also mankind's highest development; it conforms men and women to the Lord and frees man from earthly possessions. Thus they can truly examine themselves to learn whether they possess goods or are possessed

by them, whether wealth is the centre of their attention or their heart is open to their brothers and sisters.

8. At the end of this meeting, dear brothers and sisters, I commend the activities of the Pontifical Council “Cor Unum” to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, asking her to support you as she supported the Apostles in the Upper Room, as they awaited the Spirit of Pentecost. I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing to you all, to those who collaborate with you in the works of charity and to your loved ones.

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