



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING
PROMOTED BY THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL "COR UNUM"**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 11 November 2011*

*Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Friends,*

I am grateful for the opportunity to greet you as you meet under the auspices of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" in this European Year of Volunteering.

Let me begin by thanking Cardinal Robert Sarah for the kind words he has addressed to me on your behalf. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to you and, by extension, to the millions of Catholic volunteers who contribute, regularly and generously, to the Church's charitable mission throughout the world. At the present time, marked as it is by crisis and uncertainty, your commitment is a reason for confidence, since it shows that goodness exists and that it is growing in our midst. The faith of all Catholics is surely strengthened when they see the good that is being done in the name of Christ (cf. *Philem* 6).

For Christians, volunteer work is not merely an expression of good will. It is based on a personal experience of Christ. He was the first to serve humanity, he freely gave his life for the good of all. That gift was not based on our merits. From this we learn that God gives us himself. More than that: *Deus Caritas est* – God is love, to quote a phrase from the First Letter of Saint John (4:8) which I employed as the title of my first Encyclical Letter. The experience of God's generous love challenges us and liberates us to adopt the same attitude towards our brothers and sisters: "You received without paying, give without pay" (*Mt* 10:8). We experience this especially in the Eucharist when the Son of God, in the breaking of bread, brings together the vertical dimension of his divine gift with the horizontal dimension of our service to our brothers and sisters.

Christ's grace helps us to discover within ourselves a human desire for solidarity and a fundamental vocation to love. His grace perfects, strengthens and elevates that vocation and enables us to serve others without reward, satisfaction or any recompense. Here we see something of the grandeur of our human calling: to serve others with the same freedom and generosity which characterizes God himself. We also become visible instruments of his love in a world that still profoundly yearns for that love amid the poverty, loneliness, marginalization and ignorance that we see all around us.

Of course, Catholic volunteer work cannot respond to all these needs, but that does not discourage us. Nor should we let ourselves be seduced by ideologies that want to change the world according to a purely human vision. The little that we manage to do to relieve human needs can be seen as a good seed that will grow and bear much fruit; it is a sign of Christ's presence and love which, like the tree in the Gospel, grows to give shelter, protection and strength to all who require it.

This is the nature of the witness which you, in all humility and conviction, offer to civil society. While it is the duty of public authority to acknowledge and to appreciate this contribution without distorting it, your role as Christians is to take an active part in the life of society, seeking to make it ever more humane, ever more marked by authentic freedom, justice and solidarity.

Our meeting today takes place on the liturgical memorial of Saint Martin of Tours. Often portrayed sharing his mantle with a poor man, Martin became a model of charity throughout Europe and indeed the whole world. Nowadays, volunteer work as a service of charity has become a universally recognized element of our modern culture. Nonetheless, its origins can still be seen in the particularly Christian concern for safeguarding, without discrimination, the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. If these spiritual roots are denied or obscured and the criteria of our collaboration become purely utilitarian, what is most distinctive about the service you provide risks being lost, to the detriment of society as a whole.

Dear friends, I would like to conclude by encouraging young people to discover in volunteer work a way to grow in the self-giving love which gives life its deepest meaning. Young people readily react to the call of love. Let us help them to hear Christ who makes his call felt in their hearts and draws them closer to himself. We must not be afraid to set before them a radical and life-changing challenge, helping them to learn that our hearts are made to love and be loved. It is in self-giving that we come to live life in all its fullness.

With these sentiments, I renew my gratitude to all of you and to all those whom you represent. I ask God to watch over your many works of service and to make them ever more spiritually fruitful, for the good of the Church and of the whole world. To you and your associates I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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