Message of Caritas Internationalis
On Occasion of World AIDS Day 2006

In conjunction with the World AIDS Campaign and on the occasion of World AIDS Day 2006, Caritas Internationalis joins leaders of governments, civil society, and faith communities to remind the global human family of our obligation to "Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise". Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations working to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed, in more than 200 countries and territories.

In response to the urgent appeal issued by Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the 2005 observance of World AIDS Day[1], Caritas Internationalis renewed and intensified the commitment it has made every four years since 1987 – that is, "to make a significant contribution to the struggle against the spread of HIV and to assist Caritas member organisations in mobilising an effective response to the needs posed by the HIV epidemic."[2] That commitment is rooted in the Catholic teaching and tradition upon which Caritas was founded. This doctrine recognises God's promise to grace each and every human person with a unique and life-long human dignity and God's mandate to prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society.

From its experience at accompanying such efforts at global, regional, national, and local levels, Caritas Internationalis is well aware of the tragic impact already wrought by the pandemic and of future projections for even more catastrophic consequences. Caritas workers and many others engaged in faith-based responses to the pandemic accompany those living with or otherwise affected by HIV as they struggle to:

- gain access to anti-retroviral treatment and other essential medicines and health services;
- seek to overcome malnourishment and poor nutrition;
- insist on quality education for their children;
- attempt to monitor and guide "AIDS orphans" who find themselves in child-headed households or, worse yet, living on the streets;
- promote value-based HIV prevention education programmes that aim at long-term behaviour change which respects the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of each and every person;
- search for opportunities at gainful employment with just wages;
- demand an end to HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

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1 "Pope assures AIDS Sufferers of his support," Vatican Information Service, 30 November 2005, VIS 051130 (150).
2 Work Plan of Caritas Internationalis, 2003-2007. The Confederation first identified HIV as a priority area for reflection and action at its General Assembly in 1987; that commitment has been renewed at each subsequent quadrennial General Assembly since that time.

During 2006, the Caritas Confederation "kept the promise" through actions that include the following:

- continuing sponsorship of and support for responses to HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and prepared, in collaboration with Catholic Medical Mission Board (U.S.A.) and the AIDS Office of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference, a Best Practice Study of the Catholic Church response to the pandemic in this region[3];
- launching, through its regional structures and other collaborating partner organisations, of new efforts in areas which are experiencing an increase in HIV impact, including Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East/North Africa, some parts of Asia and Oceania;
- examination of the impact of HIV on other issues designated as priorities for the Confederation, including response to disaster situations, prevention of human trafficking, and promotion of gender equity and justice;
- participation, as representative of faith-based organisations, in the UNAIDS Global Steering Committee for Universal Access to HIV, care, support, treatment, and prevention;
- partnership with the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance in its overall campaign to end HIV-related stigma, promote HIV prevention education, and advocate for access to HIV treatment, especially on behalf of children living with HIV.[4]

As it prepares for another General Assembly, to be held at Vatican City, in June 2007, Caritas Internationalis will stand firm in its efforts to "Keep the Promise" and will follow, as guiding principles for such reflection and action, the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

AIDS is to be combated by realistically facing its deeper causes and the sick are to be given the loving care they need. Social issues and the Gospel are inseparable. When we bring people only knowledge, ability, technical competence and tools, we bring them too little.[5]

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3 To be published by UNAIDS in December 2006.

4 In its *Action Alert,* dated 02 November 2006, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance – *www.e-alliance.ch* – reports that*: "*without treatment, half of all children born with HIV in poor countries die before age two; in 2005, 2.3 million children under 15 were living with HIV and AIDS; of these, 660,000 need anti-retroviral treatment **now** but less than 10% are getting it; fewer than 10% of pregnant women living with HIV and AIDS are receiving treatment that can virtually eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV; in 2005, 380,000 children under 15 died of AIDS and over half a million were newly infected with HIV; medicines to treat HIV in children can cost four times more than treatment for adults."

5 Pope Benedict XVI, homily at the Neue Messe, Munich , Sunday, 10 September 2006
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060910_neue-messe-munich_en.html