

Mesdames, messieurs, thank you for welcoming me this morning.

It is a privilege, we as Caritas are very honoured and grateful indeed for this invitation.

In a couple words let me introduce myself, I am humanitarian coordinator with Caritas Belgium, I have worked in that field for over 30 years, I was based first in Cairo, then Paris, Rome, in Brussels now, with a special focus on the crises in the Middle East (Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Syria ...) , but I have been involved too in our Caritas responses to crises in Haiti, DRC, Myanmar, South-Sudan, and many others. These various experiences provide me with a certain understanding and perspective about the way crises develop, how solidarity can make a difference, and how the humanitarian community has tried over the years to change and to improve the quality of its interventions.

More importantly, let me introduce the organization I'm working with. Caritas is not only a humanitarian organisation, a humanitarian NGO. It is part of the catholic church, its mandate is to express solidarity towards the poorest and the most vulnerable. Its mission is therefore very diverse. There is emergency response in humanitarian crises, there is social work with migrants and refugees, social care for the sick, the poor, the elderly. Volunteers, professionals, engaged in various fields, driven by common values (what we called the catholic social teaching). Not all the staff and volunteers are necessarily catholics of course, and certainly not all the people we are trying to help and to serve.

Charity and service have been present in all religions for ever, we are not here for a history lecture. Let's just mention that Caritas, as a structure and organization, was first established in Germany at the end of the 19th century, then similar structures developed all over Europe, and the United States (1910), with a major boost after the second world war, to address the needs of all the victims and displaced people all across Europe. In the 50s the international confederation "Caritas Internationalis" was established by the Holy See, with a General Secretariat based in Rome, in charge of coordination, global advocacy, and ensuring a series of quality standards in terms of accountability, management, transparency.

Now it is a global confederation of 162 national members – that is, almost in every single country. Some of them are quite small and tiny (I'm thinking of Caritas Tunisia with three permanent staff), some are huge organizations, like Catholic Relief Services in the US, with an annual budget close to one billion dollars. For clarification, it should be noted that not all 162 Caritas organizations are known under the name "Caritas". Of course we have Caritas Italiana, Caritas Bangladesh, Caritas Mozambique, Caritas Belgium ... but in France the common name is Secours Catholique, in the UK it's CAFOD, in Ireland it's TROCAIRE, etc., for historical reasons, they were established earlier than the Confederation itself, and you just don't change a name that is also a "brand" so familiar with the public.

When a major crisis happens, and we are talking today about the war in Ukraine, the Caritas confederation has a coordination mechanism to make sure that the local/national Caritas receives help and support in the most effective and efficient way.

The local Caritas is always the first to respond. When there is a flood in Bangladesh or a hurricane in Mozambique, it's Caritas Bangladesh and Caritas Mozambique who will be there immediately and organize the response. Because they are actually part of the affected community, they were there before, they are often affected themselves by the way ... So it's not like we would "deploy" some

teams to go there, like many international NGOs do, Caritas is there because it is part of the community.

The same goes for Ukraine. Caritas Ukraine was established in 1992 when the country became independent. Therefore it has been active, mostly in social work, for about thirty years, with offices and teams all across the country. They are all Ukrainian nationals, most of them are Catholics (Greek-Catholics or Roman-Catholics), and they have been working with the poorest segments of society, the elderly, the sick, orphans, the disabled, also the Roma minorities, etc.

Caritas Ukraine even had a significant experience in terms of humanitarian response. When the former war broke out in 2014, with the invasion of Crimea and attacks on the Donbass region, they deployed emergency teams to assist the victims and the survivors, very close or even across the frontline, and also took care of the thousands of displaced families all over the country. I remember having visited Dnipro and the area at that time, 2015, as we were already supporting Caritas Ukraine's humanitarian programs.

This means that when this war started last year on February the 24th, of course everybody was surprised, but at least they were prepared - to some extent of course.

I mentioned our coordination mechanisms, when there is a major crisis. In this specific case, even if they were prepared, and present all over the country, the scale of the needs immediately became so huge that international support had to be organized and coordinated immediately. Let's remember that Ukraine was not the only country affected: in just a couple days and weeks, there were millions of refugees entering Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova. And then beyond, all across Europe. So, immediately, we had Caritas Poland, Caritas Slovakia, Caritas Hungary, Caritas Romania, and Caritas Moldova, responding to emergency needs at the border crossings, providing shelter, water, food, hygiene kits, assistance and protection. There was a special focus on protection, by the way: most of the refugees were women and children, and there was a significant risk for their safety, with some trafficking networks that were well present in the region, and well prepared too.

So it was obvious that Caritas Ukraine, and all the Caritases in the neighbouring countries, would need solidarity and support from the network. In our countries, like Belgium, we had to cope with an influx of refugees too, it was a bit chaotic at the start, but it was nothing like Poland having to deal with 4 or 5 million entries in just a couple weeks.

What we had too, was a fantastic show of solidarity. Refugees were more welcome than ever (that raises other questions ...). There was obviously an extraordinary media attention and coverage. People gave very generously to NGOs, Caritas and others.

Caritas Ukraine were facing so many challenges. The scale of the needs, the violence, the disruption of the most vital services and infrastructures. A team that was great, but obviously not ready to address so many challenges at the same time and everywhere in the country.

Safety is always an issue of concern. Nobody is safe when your city or your village is under attack and bombing. Humanitarian workers are facing exactly the same risks as the people they are trying to assist. On the 15th of March (a year ago), the Caritas center in Marioupol was targeted and destroyed by a missile-tank, killing two employees and five persons who were there to seek protection.

Nevertheless, over the following weeks and months, Caritas managed to scale up the response, in Ukraine and in the neighbouring countries.

Concretely, that means that the Caritas confederation worldwide managed to mobilize significant amounts of funding. And also tried to support the local Caritas organizations whenever they expressed a need for additional human resources and expertise.

Let's have a closer look at the various components of an emergency response in such a context :

- Very immediate basic needs for displaced and refugees : providing assistance at the border crossings, train stations, bus stations, city centers, etc. Hot meals, water, hygiene kits, camping beds, showers, blankets, clothes, administrative and legal assistance, referral to medical facilities, ... in Ukrainian language, Russian, other ... Need to be there 24/7, logistical challenges, psychological dimension, protection. That was in place in the very first hours of the conflict, in Ukraine and at the borders.
- Shelter : organization of accomodation centers in public places, schools, sports halls etc. And matching the supply and demand with all the people and families offering rooms at home.
- Coordination with local authorities, other organizations, civil protection, red cross, informal volunteers groups
- Handling in-kind donations : without even asking, the Caritas teams were quickly overwhelmed with all sorts of goods, food, hygiene items, clothes ... both from private individuals, from the area or even from abroad, and from companies and businesses (thousands of truckloads) : need for storage space, sorting, packaging, dispatching ...
- As the days and the weeks pass, the nature of the needs changes : helping people to register in schools, to do some paperwork, to find a more suitable accomodation, to address basic needs (providing them with some cash assistance), to look for a job
- Medical needs : at some stage, during the first six months, we could also provide our partners in Ukraine with some very specific medications and surgery equipment, that we delivered in the Dnipro regional hospital.
- The psychological needs are always there : people can be terribly traumatized, under shock. They are worried about family members back home, sometimes they have no news from their husband/father/brother who is fighting somewhere.
- Management : you need to scale up everything. Appoint and train new staff and volunteers (including refugees/displaced, often very qualified and relevant). Scale up logistics, financial systems, office and storage space.
- Communications : there is pressure from the media and from other Caritas organizations across the world : need for pictures, figures, stories, reports. That's key for our fundraising colleagues, especially in the very early stages.
- Coordination : you are welcoming volunteers and staff from sister Caritas organizations (eg finance people, logistics experts, program officers, etc) : need for logistics, safety procedures, onboarding sessions, training, equipment, accommodation ...
- You also need to pay attention to the local people ! Whether in Ukraine or in Poland, Hungary, etc, some of the "host-communities" can be very poor themselves, and the arrival of refugees brings an additional burden. One of the key humanitarian principles is to try to "do no harm" : you must be careful to ease potential tensions, prevent conflict, promote peaceful coexistence and social harmony.

Just to give you a rough idea : in just one year, Caritas Ukraine had to increase its staff, multiplying it by ten (from ca. 250 to 2500). And they handled a total budget of about 100 MEUR. By the way, it

makes it clearly the largest and most efficient NGO in the country. But what a challenge ! And you need to be extremely flexible : the context is changing on a daily basis. Some areas can come under fire, some others can be quiet for a couple weeks, people are displaced from one place to another, hope to go back, sometimes they do, and then have to leave again. We are talking here of about 8M people who are refugees abroad, and over 6M who are displaced inside the country. Probably 90% of them women and children.

To a lesser extent, the same goes for the Caritas organizations in the neighbouring countries. Flexibility is needed too. You never know when a new “wave” of refugees might show up at the border. Or sometimes the people you are helping decide to go back home, they have heard it’s safe again ... just to come back two weeks later.

If generosity and solidarity was truly overwhelming and fantastic at the beginning, everywhere, as time goes by there is however some “donor fatigue”. Also in Belgium we are hearing this. Families calling : we’ve been hosting this Ukrainian lady and her children for 6 months now, don’t you have another solution for them ? Donations are not coming in any more. We need to think about the sustainability of the programs, at least looking at the medium-term, one, two, three years : even if the war ends tomorrow (and that doesn’t look likely), some needs will be there for a very long time.

We at Caritas Belgium have of course a limited capacity, but it’s still significant. We have raised about 5MEUR. We have set up a special unit in Brussels with a hotline, a helpdesk, ready to answer all the questions that came up from the refugees and the hosting families. It was quite challenging at the beginning, not even the administration or the authorities knew exactly what were the rights and the procedures to follow to access housing, schools, medical services ... We have legal experts, we also hired two Ukrainian ladies, refugees themselves, social workers, so that we can answer the phone in French, Dutch .. and Ukrainian and Russian.

We have very quickly provided financial support to our Caritas partners, in Ukraine, Poland, Moldova, Slovakia, to support their rapid response programs. I visited them a couple times, to express our solidarity, to understand better the challenges they are facing, to reflect together about where can be our best “added value”. For example, we are now in a close relationship with Caritas Slovakia, who have developed an important program to address the psychological needs of traumatized women and children. The program is implemented in Slovakia and also inside Ukraine, and it relies very much on social workers and psychologists who are themselves Ukrainian refugees or displaced. They are provided with specialized training, tools, supervision. Somehow, besides addressing basic humanitarian needs like food and shelter, it is a way to think about the future.

Thinking about the future. It has been more than one year now, into that nightmare.

We think that we have a duty to think beyond the humanitarian needs. Aid is essential of course, it’s even vital, but humanitarian assistance is not a solution. We are witnessing the damage done and the long-term consequences of the conflict. We have all seen the pictures, the amount of destruction, it reminds me of Beirut thirty years ago, Aleppo more recently ... Infrastructures and public services, buildings, houses, farming lands, landmines everywhere in the fields, chemical pollution of water resources ... And the impact on society, less visible perhaps, is certainly even worse. So much violence and hatred. Wounded bodies and hearts, broken families and communities, traumatized children ... It wil take decades of caring, healing, re-building.

I tried to offer you some insights about the way we see and implement solidarity. Our work is possible thanks to the solidarity and generosity of ordinary people, tens of thousands of individual donations.

At the same time, and in sharp contrast, when I listen to the political debate, I am actually shocked. Expressing “solidarity with Ukraine” should be more than just looking at a shopping list of military equipment. Arms dealers are making millions of profit out of this violence and suffering. I believe that there are other ways. That not enough is invested into diplomacy and non-violent ways of conflict resolution.

So let me end this with a final call.

Last January, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres addressed the Security Council with these words : *“This war is not only senseless, but exceedingly dangerous, and it touches all of us. It must end.”*

Just before that, for Christmas, Pope Francis said *“May the Lord inspire us to offer concrete gestures of solidarity to assist all those who are suffering, and may he enlighten the minds of those who have the power to silence the thunder of weapons and put an immediate end to this senseless war!”*

Here are two men, each in a very unique and remarkable position, with great authority and legitimacy - but limited power, agreeing : This war is senseless, it must end.

Thank you for your patience, your attention, and your support.