

The Bishop's Pastoral Letter relating to the Annual Appeal for Catholic Care

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

In today's Gospel parable of the prodigal son, Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us about the merciful love of God our Father. The account invites us to contemplate the compassionate heart of God. Irrespective of our faithfulness or unfaithfulness, God's love for us remains constant and true. Only from that perspective can we truly understand that in the eyes of God our Father, who created us in his image and likeness, we are all his children and therefore all brothers and sisters of one another.

Such boundless love and generous mercy are our heavenly Father's gift to us; a love given in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Through his teaching and the gift of grace, he renews our hearts and shows us the way in which we should live our lives, the way we should regard others, and how we should treat our neighbour. As Christians, we are called to bear witness to the Gospel, to the merciful love of the Father made known in the suffering, death, and resurrection of his Son. Empowered by his Holy Spirit, we are called also to make the community of the Church an oasis of loving mercy, a place where *caritas* - charity - abides. In such a community, no one should look at others with indifference, or avert their eyes in the face of the suffering of their brothers and sisters. Rather, we are given the example of the Father who desires with merciful love to embrace his little ones in their poverty, and to welcome and provide for those who are rejected, abandoned, or ignored.

The mission of our diocesan Caritas charity, Catholic Care, is to be a sign of the merciful and loving embrace of God our Father. This witness is given by offering practical service and support to those in whom our suffering Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, is living among us now: in those who are disadvantaged, in the vulnerable, marginalised, or persecuted. Throughout its 158-year history, Catholic Care has worked hard across the Diocese of Leeds to be a sign of God's compassion by caring for people in need or those left unsupported by society. Together with the pastoral and spiritual care provided by the parishes of our diocese, Catholic Care continues to express the Father's merciful love in our communities today.

Over the past two years, despite the many changes and challenges thrown at us by the pandemic, Catholic Care has kept all its services going, often in new and innovative ways. As a result, it has been a constant support for those in need when others were simply not there. In times of crisis and through specialist services, the charity supports our diocesan schools, and the children, young people and families served by them. In praise of this work, one Headteacher stated: "One of the standout things for us as a school was [Catholic Care's] commitment to being in school and maintaining face to face meetings with staff, pupils and parents during lockdown 3, at a time when most of the other professionals we were working with, withdrew."

Catholic Care helps older people to retain their independence and live in their own homes. It also provides an immensely valuable service caring for some of our retired clergy who are frail or need personal support.

Perhaps the area where this year's Annual Appeal can help Catholic Care most, is in its work in the community. The charity already works with refugees and asylum seekers in our diocese, people traumatised and in need of support after fleeing war and persecution. It took a lead in responding to the 'Community Sponsorship Resettlement Programme' for Syrian refugee families, welcoming families from holding camps and empowering them to have a better life here in the diocese. And now, the charity is responding to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and preparing to help those seeking refuge in our land.

Even before the economic effects of the pandemic were felt or the recent and increasing steep rise in food and utility costs, many families were already experiencing food poverty and making a daily choice between eating or heating. Their lives are now far worse, and many do not know how they will manage. Through its 'Crisis Fund', Catholic Care is helping to support these families with food vouchers and hampers, and it runs community markets for the benefit of all. As part of its community services the charity also runs a young carers project, 'stay and play' groups, social groups for older

people and a confidential counselling service for adults. Through its 'Gianna Project', Catholic Care supports pregnant women, many of whom have been trafficked and suffered horrific abuse.

Catholic Care already enjoys good relationships with parishes across the Diocese of Leeds. It would like to build on those relationships by having in a parish, wherever possible, a 'Catholic Care Parish Representative'. These volunteer representatives would promote the work of Catholic Care and, especially, the work it undertakes to support people in our own local communities. If the past two years of the pandemic have taught our society anything, it is that people want to do what they can to help, to give something back, and to make the world around them a better place. Taking on the role of a Catholic Care Parish Representative volunteer will be another way in which a person can give something back and put their faith into action.

I know Catholic Care will gladly welcome volunteers to undertake this role. The charity is also looking for volunteers to join its active Board of Trustees. As the Chairperson of that Board, I ask you to support the Annual Appeal for Catholic Care and to give as generously as you can to assist its vital work. Through our support of Catholic Care, let us help to make its mission and work in our diocese an ever greater sign of the compassion and loving mercy of God our Father.

On this Laetare Sunday, I assure you of my prayers and every blessing.
I remain yours in Christ

+ Marcus
Bishop of Leeds
26th /27th March 2022