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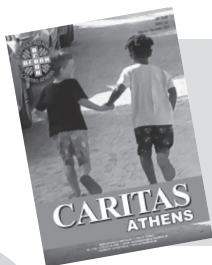
January - December 2024

CARITAS ATHENS

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■ CARITAS ATHENS MAGAZINE ■

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Message from the Archbishop of the Catholic Church of Athens

Caritas means charity.

Caritas is the charitable organization of our local Catholic Church.

Caritas is the charitable organization of the Catholic Church worldwide.

Caritas is the largest organization in the world.

All these facts are good and impressive. But the most immediate and important aspect for us is that Caritas represents a mindset, a behavior that is both individual and collective, as well as ecclesiastical.

First and foremost, Caritas is about caring for others, for our fellow human beings, especially those in need, those in insecurity and those who suffer, whether openly or in silence. This care is about paying attention to those around us, stepping out of ourselves, going beyond our personal interests and concerns, reaching out to others with sensitivity and understanding.

That is why I share something of my own with them: my words, my attention, my time, something of what I have, something that I can offer. Sharing means establishing a connection, forming an acquaintance, embarking on a shared journey, even if only for a limited period of time. Thus, a community is formed; a unity, small and brief, yet a unity that remains as a thought and as a concept, even after we are no longer together.

This is not a hobby; we do not do this because it is pleasant or because it makes us feel better. We do it because we understand that offering support and sharing is something good, something just - for ourselves and for everyone. Moreover, it is a duty and an obligation. In some cases, I realize that I do not have the right to look away, to pretend I did not see, or that it does not concern me. I know that if I do not stand by others, if I do not share, I wound humanity and human dignity all around me. The unity between people is harmed.

Let the example of the late Archbishop Anastasios of Albania remain in our hearts. It was neither what he gave, nor his extraordinary ability to find resources, to build, and to create. More importantly, it was the fact that he cared to share in the lives of others and to create unity; form a community of people where there had been division, distrust, and even more so, contempt and hostility.

This is the path for humanity and for every person - because this has always been and always will be the path of God.

+Theodoros
Archbishop of the Catholic Church of Athens

Message from the President of Caritas Athens

Dear friends,

After an absence of almost five years, due to a number of reasons, we are pleased to present you with the activities of Caritas Athens during 2024. In addition, we will share with you information on some exceptional Catholic work that has taken place in the last few years relative to projects of inclusion, as well as activities directed to the most vulnerable of our society.

We want to convey our deepest gratitude to those who make everything in Caritas Athens possible: the Clergy, the Board of Directors and staff, and last but not least our generous volunteers and donors. Without them, nothing could be achieved to help those in need in Attica, the Peloponnese, Central Greece and Evia, areas which are covered by Caritas Athens.

As a philanthropic organization of the Catholic Church, the help and support of our umbrella organization Caritas Hellas and of Catholic Relief Services from the United States has been unique. We have been able to take part in national and European programs providing many services to asylum seekers and vulnerable refugees. We have also had the unfailing help of other Caritas Organizations from abroad, specially from Germany and Italy, backing us in a number of projects.

Europe in general and Greece in particular face many new challenges in 2025.

This is the first time that the Archbishop of Athens has designated a new President of Caritas Athens outside the clergy, although he continues to be our inspiration. So, as the first layman at the head of this Organization, I encourage you to read about our activities and ask for your support any way you can.

Sincerely,

Filippos Salimpas
President of Caritas Athens

**In 2024, the Caritas family
lost a key member and pillar of support,**

Father Andreas Voutsinos

*Some thoughts on Father Andreas Voutsinos
from one of his oldest collaborators in Caritas,
of which he was the pioneer, director, and ecclesiastical supporter.*

The story began in 1978 when the then Archbishop of Catholics in Athens, His Eminence Father Nikolaos Foskolos, decided to establish a committee aimed at reorganizing the charitable work within the ecclesiastical administration of Athens. The organization of this committee was entrusted to Father Andreas, and thus the S.E.F.K.S. (Coordinating Committee for Charity and Social Support) was created, the precursor of Caritas.



When it was decided in 1981 to hold the 9th Pan-European Caritas Europe Conference in Athens, Father Andreas stood out for his organizational talent. By selecting the most suitable volunteers, he managed to make the conference so successful that it was still being discussed years later within the circles of Caritas Europe. Following this conference, he dedicated himself to organizing Caritas and Caritas Hellas.

Active, tireless, demanding, innovative, visionary, and fully dedicated to the work entrusted to him, Father Andreas managed, through great effort and persistence, to organize Caritas according to European standards. Tireless, he was always present at various meetings of International and European Caritas in order to stay informed and present our issues abroad. Here

at home, he was always on the move, personally acquainting himself with problematic situations and offering help wherever possible: earthquakes, floods, fires, Father Andreas was always there!

Assisting earthquake victims in Greece, sending humanitarian aid missions to war-torn countries, and obtaining entry permits to Greece's correctional facilities are just a few of the initiatives that made Caritas—and, by extension, the Catholic Church of Greece—better known to government ministries and social services.

Father Andreas' deep love and concern for the poor and elderly never allowed him to rest. In every parish where he served as a pastor, he would actively seek out forgotten individuals in need and provide them with the necessary resources to live a dignified life, whether in their own homes or in one of the nursing homes of our Archdiocese.

Father Andreas organized annual pilgrimage trips abroad and recreational excursions within Greece, summer vacations for the elderly, prison visits, training seminars for volunteers, spiritual retreats, and religious talks to strengthen our faith. Additionally, he was the editor of a quarterly magazine promoting the work of Caritas. Generations of children enjoyed the summer vacations he offered in various regions of Greece, where he, too, became like a child and shared unforgettable moments with them.

These were just some of his activities as the Director and Ecclesiastical Representative of Caritas Athens, which he served for approximately 40 years, also holding the position of Vice President of Caritas Hellas during that time.

“Father Andreas, you are now with God, near the One to whom you dedicated your life. He will reward you for your work and contribution”.

Maria Miliari

ACTIVITY REPORT 01.01.2024 - 31.12.2024

■ ANIMATION SECTOR

March 31, 2024, CARITAS DAY: Pope Francis encourages young people with his message to make their voices heard, asking them to become “leaders of tomorrow” and “builders of the future.” He offers them a message of hope, five years after the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (*Christ is Alive*). On this day, members of parish Caritas groups spoke to the congregation about the Mission and Work of Caritas Athens.

■ BLOOD DONATION SECTOR

- April 26, 2024 & September 23, 2024: Two voluntary blood donation drives were organized by Caritas Athens in collaboration with Caritas Hellas.
- December 7, 2024: A voluntary blood donation drive was held at Jeanne d’Arc French-Greek School in Piraeus.
- December 14, 2024: A voluntary blood donation drive was held at Saint Joseph French-Greek School in Pefki. In total, 118 units of blood were collected and 88 units were offered to people that needed it.

The contribution of staff, volunteers, friends of Caritas, parents, and educators at the schools is invaluable. It is vital that we collaborate to support those in need during difficult times. Everyone’s efforts provide strength and courage in our mission to stand by those in need.

■ EVENTS SECTOR

February 25, 2024: A fundraising dance was held in the hall of the Sacred Heart of Jesus parish to support the Caritas Athens fund, aiding in the achievement of the association’s goals.

May 18, 2024: An interactive educational performance, “*Attikoulis in the Kingdom of Clumsiness*”, was organized with the support of Attiki Odos (Attica Tollway) to promote road safety for elementary and middle school children as part of the “*Small World*” program initiative.

June 1, 2024: A theatrical performance, “*Love in Three Phases*”, was presented by the amateur troupe Yiannis Alexakis.

December 11, 2024: The 2024 Christmas party organized by Caritas Athens once again left a lasting impression, filling children’s hearts with warmth and joy. With the support of Webster University, the event hosted 80 children from various countries, accompanied by their parents, creating a beautiful, multicultural atmosphere.

The young guests enjoyed face painting, games, and dancing under the guidance of a clown who brought energy and fun to the celebration. A rich menu featuring food, juices, and sweets kept the children energized, while Santa Claus, a favorite of all, distributed gifts, rounding off the evening in the best possible way.



The sparkle in the children's eyes and their smiles encapsulate the true meaning of Christmas: solidarity, giving, and love. Initiatives like this serve as an example of how collaboration can bring joy and hope to those in need.

■ COMMUNICATION & PUBLIC RELATIONS SECTOR

Throughout 2024, the Communication & Public Relations sector enriched the organization's website, www.caritasathens.gr, and Caritas Athens' social media platforms with updates, activities, and relevant content within its purview.

2024 CALENDAR: For the eighth time, Caritas Athens published a wall calendar. The calendar was distributed to all parishes in Athens, Patras, and most ecclesiastical regions in Greece, including Syros, Tinos, Santorini, Corfu, Rhodes, and Chios.

■ PRISON MINISTRY SECTOR

Prison inmates are thirsty for spiritual nourishment, seek the Holy Bible, and generally need conversation and human communication. A group (priests, Sisters of Mother Teresa, and volunteers) strives to support them despite any difficulties, following the words of Jesus: «I was in prison, and you visited me.» These groups regularly visit the inmates in prisons (Korydallos Prison, Women's Prison of Thebes, and Patras Prison). They celebrate the Holy Mass for Catholic inmates and also provide support, personal hygiene items, and clothing.

■ PARROQUIAL CARITAS INITIATIVES

The parish Caritas organizations realize significant work that has a positive impact on the local community and beyond.

- ✓ They provide financial aid, food, clothing, bedding, sheets, towels, small furniture, electrical appliances, personal hygiene items, baby products, toys, books, stationery, orthopedic supplies, and medicine to impoverished families, individuals living alone, single-parent families, the homeless, and the elderly.
- ✓ They organize bazaars, memorial coffee gatherings, events, and fundraisers to support their mission financially.
- ✓ They visit individuals who live alone, offering companionship and support.
- ✓ Mediation for the accommodation of elderly individuals without family support in the nursing homes of our ecclesiastical province, «*Good Samaritan*» and «*Holy Cross*».
- ✓ Provision of legal assistance for residence permit issues, covering legal expenses.
- ✓ Organization of a seminar on domestic violence, as well as hosting meetings of the *Alcoholics Anonymous* (AA) group to support their recovery efforts, and accommodating Volunteer Blood Donations organized by Caritas Athens.
- ✓ Hosting in the «Auditorium» of the amateur theater group «*Yiannis Alexakis*», whose performance proceeds were donated to support the mission of Caritas Athens.
- ✓ Provision of first aid training courses.
- ✓ Operation of Listening Centers, staffed by volunteers and the parish priest, offering emotional, psychological, and material support to those in need.

■ REFUGEE PROGRAM

In this sector, Greeks, migrants, and refugees seeking asylum or awaiting relocation to another European Union country, find solidarity, support, personal empowerment, friendship, hope, respect, a smile, advice, guidance, food, clothing, and essential supplies.

At the building on Kapodistriou Street, more than 190 people are served daily, except on Saturdays and Sundays. Specifically, from January 2024 to December 2024:

- ✓ **37,460** meals were distributed to those in need.
- ✓ **631** individuals received clothing.
- ✓ **1,500** vouchers worth **€10** each were given to vulnerable families for food purchases.
- ✓ **1,511** people received support from the Social Service in areas such as counseling, social history assessment, clothing distribution, job counseling, psychological support, visits, referrals to institutions, and other activities.
- ✓ **870** families received diapers and milk.
- ✓ **335** individuals attended free Greek and English language classes.

■ DAY OF THE DEPARTED

On the Days of All Saints and the Departed (November 1st & 2nd), a fundraiser was held in our ecclesiastical province with the message «Turn Love into Action», encouraging donations of a can of milk or half a kilo of beans to support the Refugee Program.

■ SOCIAL SERVICE

The Social Service of Caritas Athens provides support to socially vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants, single-parent families, the unemployed, people with disabilities, and more. It is an open service, meaning that assistance is offered to all those in need, regardless of country of origin, legal status, religion, etc.

For example, individuals from Greece, African countries, Arab countries, and various European countries such as Ukraine, Bulgaria, Poland, and Albania, among others, receive support. However, a prerequisite for benefiting from these services is the ability to speak Greek or English, as interpretation services are not provided. From February to June 2024, a social work student from a college in Belgium completed her internship at the Social Service.

You will find details about the Social Service's activities on a page that follows.

■ NATIONAL, EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

In 2024, Caritas Athens participated in the implementation of National, European, and International Programs in collaboration with Caritas Hellas and the Caritas Internationalis network, CRS, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MMA), and Caritas Italiana. The goal was to enhance the effectiveness of the Organization's work, improve

its services, and maintain its strong presence in humanitarian initiatives.

■ FINANCIAL AID PROGRAM WITH PREPAID CARDS – “CASH”

Since December 2021, Caritas Athens, in partnership with CRS, has been implementing a **cash assistance program** funded by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

The program provides financial aid to adult asylum seekers and their family members, housed in open reception centers in mainland Greece, Reception and Identification Centers on the islands, and hostels collaborating with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. Individuals in detention are excluded.

The financial aid is intended to help cover basic needs such as food, clothing, footwear, personal hygiene items, telecommunications, transportation within their place of residence, school supplies, and medical expenses.

The amount of aid depends on the number of family members and is categorized into **full** and **partial** financial aid. Partial aid is given to those living in accommodations where meals are provided, while full aid is given to those without meal provisions.

The program's main activities include distributing cards, monthly payments, communicating with beneficiaries, documenting problems they face, and blocking cards in case of loss. The program also supports organizations during the card distribution process and provides interpretation services when requested.

For the first nine months of 2024, the program supported 9,872 beneficiaries via the national hotline in seven languages (Arabic, Farsi, French, English, Sorani, Kurmanji, and Urdu). The program continues in 2025.

■ HELIOS Program - HELIOS II

Caritas Athens, in collaboration with CRS and Caritas Hellas, participates as a partner in the HELIOS program, which has been implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and its partners with funding from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MMA) since January 2022. This is an integration program designed exclusively for Beneficiaries of International Protection.

The program provides services aimed at independent living and social integration. It includes support for autonomous housing through rental subsidies, Greek language courses, daily life integration lessons, participation in activities, employment assistance, and case progress monitoring.

In 2024, due to the pending approval of project funding, the HELIOS program was temporarily suspended from the beginning of the year until January 23. From January 24 to August 31, all program components were operational, and beneficiaries received full services. The housing team conducted weekly visits to the accommodation facilities in Corinth, Ritsona, Malakasa I & II, Andravida, Pyrgos, and Oinofyta.

However, as of September 1, registrations for new beneficiaries were suspended, along with services such as integration monitoring, employment counseling, integration courses, housing search support, and housing workshops. Nevertheless, rental subsidies continued for beneficiaries already enrolled in the program, managed by the IOM team, while the national support helpline (Helpline) remained operational through the Caritas Athens team.

During the first nine months of 2024, a total of 1,374 cases were recorded for interpretation services provided by the housing team across all program sections (Housing and Verification).

From July 1, when Caritas Athens took over the National Support Helpline (Helpline), 759 cases were recorded in the IOM database.

As of October 1, Caritas Athens continued its participation in the project, operating the national support helpline in direct collaboration with IOM, as CRS withdrew from the project.

The program was completed on November 30, 2024.

■ CHILD INTEGRATION PROJECT “MIKROS KOSMOS”

The Child Integration Project «Mikros Kosmos» is an inclusion and educational program with the primary goal, among others, of supporting children from families of asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection, refugees, and migrants to achieve their best possible adaptation to Greek society, while also ensuring optimal integration into the Greek public school system.

The services offered include, among other things, Greek language lessons, science classes, social-emotional learning activities, youth projects, psychosocial and creative activities, theater games, parental counseling, support with school homework, and online Greek language lessons for mothers and children.

The program was based on the cooperation of CRS, Caritas Athens, and ELIX.

During its function the program offered, in a welcoming environment,

Greek language lessons for mothers who were able to come along with their children. These children could either participate in preschool activities (ages 4-5) simultaneously or, in case they were younger (ages 1-3), stay with their mothers in the classroom during the lesson.

Throughout the year, various activities were organized, such as visits to museums (Maria Callas Museum, Bank of Greece Museum), a visit to the Kypseli Municipal Market, a trip to Pedion tou Areos Park to create a plant logbook, attendance at theater performances (e.g., *The Invisible Tonino* and *Attikoulis in the Kingdom of Clumsiness*), and two celebrations marking the conclusion of the program on September 22 & 23. During these events, both young students and mothers received certificates of attendance, gifts, and participated in interactive activities.

Additionally, two issues of the quarterly school newspaper were published with the active participation of all students, and a multilingual guide was completed, translated into the supported languages, to assist students with their schoolwork at home.

During the nine-month period of 2024, the program served 102 children and 95 mothers.

The program was concluded on September 30, 2024.

SOCIAL SERVICE, JANUARY - DECEMBER 2024

Tn average, 150 beneficiaries per month are served by the Social Service.

The actions of the Social Service include:

- ✓ Gathering social and medical histories to assess needs.
- ✓ Conducting individual counseling sessions for adults and teenagers (an average of 30 sessions per month).
- ✓ Gathering social and medical histories to assess needs.
- ✓ Connecting beneficiaries to services and other organizations to address further needs (80 referrals made).
- ✓ Employment counseling (e.g., creating CVs, connecting with employers).
- ✓ Organizing seminars and workshops in collaboration with *Just Human*.
- ✓ Distribution of basic necessities, clothing, and baby products (185 families served).

- ✓ Scheduling medical appointments (45 appointments in total).
- ✓ Collaborating with other NGOs for more comprehensive assistance in special cases.
- ✓ Referrals from parishes to the Social Service.
- ✓ Distribution of vouchers to cover basic necessities (an average of 80 individuals per month).
- ✓ Presenting the social work of Caritas Athens and the role of the Social Service in Catholic schools and in Greek- or foreign-language universities.
- ✓ Participating monthly in the ACCMR's (Athens Coordination Center for Migrant and Refugee issues) «Interculturalism and City Communities» working group, where NGOs on the City of Athens platform exchange information and foster collaboration.
- ✓ Training and supervising social science students from Greek and foreign universities who are realizing their internship at the Social Service.

Identity of the most vulnerable seeking assistance from our Social Service:

- 10% Greeks: Cases include individuals housed in shelters operated by the Municipality of Athens. Additionally, there are elderly individuals with health issues and unemployed persons without a support network. Their primary requests are assistance through vouchers and the provision of essential goods.
- 20% Migrant Population: This group consists of families permanently residing in Greece, single-parent families, unemployed individuals, people with serious health issues, and those living in shelters. They primarily come from Poland, Bulgaria, and Albania.
- 70% Refugee Population and Asylum Seekers: Recognized refugees originate from Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Syria, Ukraine, Palestine, Togo, Sudan, Ivory Coast, and the Philippines. The majority of asylum seekers come from Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea, Cameroon, and Egypt.

Families receiving baby supplies have young children and are from Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea, Cameroon, Syria, Palestine, Togo, and Bulgaria. Many of these families are either large (with four or more children) and unemployed or are single-parent households.

Ioanna Mitsoni
Head of Social Service

SAINT MARTIN DE PORRES, PATRON OF CARITAS

“A Heart for God and Hands for His Neighbor”

Saint Martin de Porres, born on December 9, 1579, in Lima, Peru, is one of the most beloved figures in Christian history. The son of a Spanish nobleman, Juan de Porres, and Ana Velázquez, a woman of African descent, Martin grew up in a society where racial and social discrimination was common. However, his life was marked by humility, selfless service, and a deep relationship with God.

From childhood, Martin displayed a special sensitivity to prayer and caring for others. At the age of 15, he entered the Dominican Monastery of the Rosary in Lima, where he began working in humble tasks such as barbering, nursing, and serving as a lay brother. Despite the prejudices of the time, his devotion and unwavering charity earned him recognition from his community, and in time, he was accepted as a monk into the order.

His life was dedicated to the poor and the sick. Without making distinctions of race or social class, he founded an orphanage and organized a network of aid for those in need. His generosity and immense love made him well-known throughout Lima, where he was called «Martín of Charity» («Martín de la caridad»). Many miracles are attributed to him, including unexplained healings, bilocation (the miraculous ability to be present in two places at once), and the multiplication of food for the hungry.

Saint Martin de Porres' spirituality was rooted in a deep union with God through prayer and penance. He spent countless hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and offered sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. Additionally, his love for nature led him to care for animals with the same affection he showed to the sick and the poor.

Martin passed away on November 3, 1639, leaving behind an indelible legacy of love and service. He was beatified in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI and canonized in 1962 by Pope John XXIII, becoming the first Black saint of the Americas. Today, he is recognized as the patron saint of social justice and barbers, and his example continues to inspire those who seek a life dedicated to serving others.

Saint Martin de Porres is a shining example of selfless love and solidarity. His life teaches us that true faith is expressed through acts of kindness and service to others. His example remains an inspiration, reminding us that a heart that loves God cannot help but open itself to others—especially those in greatest need.

«I care for you, but God heals you.»

Saint Martin de Porres

Fr. Luis Alberto Valerio Lemes



«CASA FAMIGLIA» OF THE COMMUNITY OF POPE JOHN XXIII

**A living example of generous help and support
for the most vulnerable in Greek society.**

Come and meet the Community of Pope John XXIII in Greece: “Casa Famiglia” and “The Hut of Bethlehem.”

The Community has been present in Athens since August 2014 with a *Casa Famiglia* (family home) in Neos Kosmos, in a space provided by the Apostolic Nunciatur.

The proposal to open and operate a branch of the Community in Greece came from the Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency Archbishop Edward Joseph Adams, following the launch of solidarity pairing initiatives carried out by Caritas Italiana. These initiatives were inspired by Pope Benedict XVI, who, during the 2012 World Meeting of Families in Milan, proposed the creation of a new model of intervention and solidarity based on the ability of families and Christian communities to live and share fraternity beyond their national borders.



We, Filippo and Fabiola Bianchini, as a married couple and members of the Community, along with our four children — two biological and two in foster care — moved to Greece to open a Casa Famiglia. Our mission is to share family warmth and love with those deprived of it — the «least of these» — by living with them 24/7. Our work is fully integrated into the activities of Caritas Athens.

Typically, the individuals hosted in Casa Famiglia are highly vulnerable. When they arrive at our home, they are often psychologically and physically broken. We strive to provide them with a welcoming family environment that empowers and revitalizes them. Naturally, we offer full support in legal, health, educational, and nutritional matters, seeking external services from both private and public entities when necessary. Each week, **we also go out to meet the homeless on the streets of central Athens and Piraeus**, offering them warm tea, a sandwich, a listening ear, and an invitation to sleep at the homeless shelter, the “Hut of Bethlehem,” located in Kallithea and open three nights a week.

During the 2024/2025 year, the Community is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of its founder, Don Oreste Benzi, and we will mark this anniversary along

with ten years of our presence in Greece. The celebration will take place in Athens, at the Cathedral, on Saturday, May 17, 2025.

The Community was founded by Don Oreste Benzi, a Catholic priest from Rimini, Italy, who proposed a specific vocation to those choosing this path of life. The welcoming of people in situations of misery and need becomes the visible aspect of a clear and precise mission.

Don Benzi (7/9/1925 – 2/11/2007) served as a parish priest in Rimini for half a century (1949–2000). He appeared frequently on television, authored over 60 books and was a tireless defender of the rights of the poor, particularly young people caught in drug addiction and prostitution. Often risking his own life, he spent years walking the streets at night, offering hope and an alternative to those who wanted to hear that hope was still possible.

«Moved by the Holy Spirit to follow the poor, enslaved, and suffering Jesus, the members of the Community commit to directly sharing life with the least of these — sharing life with their life, taking responsibility for their condition...» (Excerpt from the Foundation's Charter)

In order to respond to the many needs encountered over the years and to remain close to those who suffer and live on the margins of society, the Community of Pope John XXIII has designed and established various welcoming and shared-living facilities. While inspired by the Casa Famiglia methodology, these facilities are adapted to meet different situations.

What is “Casa Famiglia”?

Casa Famiglia is a residential community that functions like a natural family in every sense.

Its foundation is the presence of two parental figures — a father and a mother — who choose to share their lives in a stable, continuous, and permanent way with individuals from diverse challenging circumstances.

The goal is to meet the essential and profound needs of those hosted: the need to feel loved and the need to feel useful and important to someone — a genuine relationship with a father and a mother. This is the first step toward the elimination of the root causes of injustice. Those hosted no longer feel cared for as mere beneficiaries but instead feel chosen and valued by their parental figures. The personal and meaningful relationship with the parental figures and the bonds formed among the individuals hosted create a healing environment. This environment soothes and heals wounds, revives love, rekindles hope in life, and restores dignity.

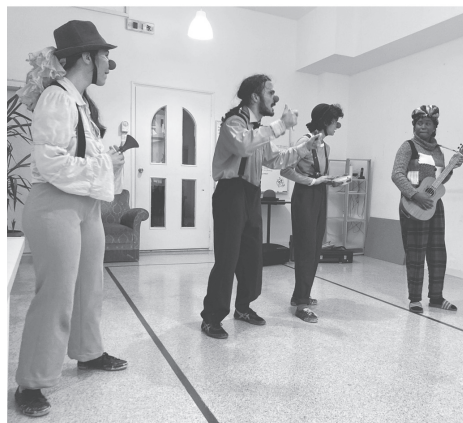
Fabiola Bianchini
Member of the Board of Directors

SOCIAL HOUSE

A Place of Service, Encounter and Joy

Many readers may already be familiar with the modern history of this space of hospitality. Located in Neos Kosmos, near the center of Athens, just a few steps from the metro station bearing the same name, as well as the tram station, this house is situated in the heart of a neighborhood known for the presence of refugee and migrant populations. Over the past few years, the House has provided various social services.

This service-oriented space has hosted countless refugees and displaced individuals over time. The crisis triggered by ISIS in the Middle East, which began to escalate in 2014, had a significant impact on the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq. During the years of conflict, many people were forced to flee their homes due to violence and persecution. In the aftermath of these conflicts, this house became an oasis for our brothers and sisters from the Middle East who had lost everything, always working in collaboration with other CARITAS organizations, such as Caritas Udine in Italy.



It is worth noting that, to this day, we have collaborated with the NGO Just Human, Caritas Athens, and the Local Church, with the presence of two clergy members (Father Emilio and Father Luis), both in hosting and supporting the human development of refugees from Africa - all of them women with one or two children. We have never exceeded the number of six or seven refugees with their children, as we believe that expanding our service to too many people would not allow us to be truly effective.

Our service, however, is not limited to this. In this space, we also provide support to vulnerable individuals with health issues, primarily people from the provinces who need to stay in the capital for necessary medical care but face financial difficulties in affording accommodation. All the individuals we host are here on a temporary basis, as the assistance we offer cannot and should not be indefinite or excessively prolonged.

The house, with its shared spaces, is also used for various types of events: parties and gatherings, language classes (English and Italian), workshops, and seminars.

Over the past three years, we have hosted volunteers from Italy, young people who, during a year of service, engage in social activities as part of the «Caschi Bianchi» (White Helmets) program. It is worth mentioning that everyone - guests,

volunteers, and clergy - works together in maintaining and cleaning the house, as well as organizing various events and activities, each contributing according to their abilities.

Through all of this, we strive to maintain and promote a fraternal, supportive, Gospel-inspired, and family-like atmosphere. This allows us to proudly say that Social House is, without a doubt, a place of service, encounter, and joy.

Fr. Luis Alberto Valerio Lemess

“Dilexit Nos” HE LOVED US – An Encyclical of the Heart

By **Richard G. DeClue, Jr., S.Th.D.**

A new encyclical was promulgated on October 24, 2024: *Dilexit Nos*, which means “He loved us.” The document is “On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ.” This article provides a very brief summary of the text.

The encyclical consists of a brief introductory paragraph, five main chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction cites multiple Scripture passages about Jesus Christ’s love for us. The first chapter (2–31) reflects on the image of “the heart” as an expression of Christ’s love (2). In both Greek antiquity (philosophy and literature) and in Sacred Scripture, “the heart” symbolizes the core of the person, where one’s authentic thoughts and emotions reside and from which they proceed.

One needs to guard the heart, seeking what is truly important in life rather than what is superficial (3–8). Pope Francis admits this is challenging in today’s world. For, “we find ourselves immersed in societies of serial consumers who live from day to day, dominated by the hectic pace and bombarded by technology, lacking in the patience needed to engage in the processes that an interior life by its very nature requires” (9). Precursors to our contemporary lack of interiority are already found in what Francis calls “pre-Christian rationalism” and “post-Christian idealism.” Both of these ideologies fail to appreciate the unifying power of love, which stands at the center of human personhood (10). The consequences of such heartlessness are exemplified by Nikolai Stavrogin, a character in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, whom Romano Guardini describes as being heartless and therefore incapable of being close even to himself, let alone of entering into intimate relationship with others (12).

The heart overcomes fragmentation both within an individual person and in society. For the individual, “our fulfilment as human beings is found in love. In loving, we sense that we come to know the purpose and goal of our existence in this world. Everything comes together in a state of coherence and harmony” (23). With respect

to interpersonal relations, “the heart makes all authentic bonding possible, since a relationship not shaped by the heart is incapable of overcoming the fragmentation caused by individualism. Two monads may approach one another, but they will never truly connect. A society dominated by narcissism and self-centredness will increasingly become ‘heartless’” (17). The inability to enter into human relationships, *a fortiori*, means that one is “incapable of openness to God” as well (17). A counter-example is Mary who “pondered” in her “heart” (Luke 2:19, 51) and was completely open to God and his will (19).

Relatedly, Pope Francis notes, “Saint Bonaventure . . . teaches that, ‘faith is in the intellect, in such a way as to provoke affection. . . for example, the knowledge that Christ died for us does not remain knowledge, but necessarily becomes affection, love’” (26). St. John Henry Cardinal Newman similarly took “the phrase *Cor ad cor loquitur* [heart speaking to heart]” as his motto, “since, beyond all our thoughts and ideas, the Lord saves us by speaking to our hearts from his Sacred Heart” (26).

Pope Francis believes that if we wish to change society, we ought to begin with the heart. “It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds and wills” (28). Many of society’s ills are rooted in disordered hearts. Quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, Francis writes: “For ‘the imbalances affecting the world today are in fact a symptom of a deeper imbalance rooted in the human heart’” (29). The key to healing is Jesus, whose “Sacred Heart is the unifying principle of all reality, since ‘Christ is the heart of the world’” (31).

Love, of course, is more than mere sentiment. It must be lived in words and deeds, which Francis emphasizes in Chapter 2. “Christ showed the depth of his love by concrete actions. By examining his interactions with others, we can come to realize how he treats each one of us” (33). We are called to imitate Christ’s example, and he is pleased with us when we do. “Jesus thus appreciates the good that he sees in us. . . . even if others are not aware of our good intentions or actions, Jesus sees them and regards them highly” (41).

In Chapter 3, Pope Francis turns to the Church’s reflection on the Sacred Heart. He notes that, in devotion to the Sacred Heart, the heart stands as a representative image of “the whole Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man” (48). The heart represents “the inmost core of his Person” (54). In practically every culture in history and across the globe, the heart has served as “a symbol of personal intimacy, affection, emotional attachment and capacity for love” (53).

Francis repeatedly notes, however, that when venerating images of the Sacred Heart it is not the image itself that is the object of worship. “Rather,” quoting the Council of Trent, “‘through these images that we kiss, and before which we kneel and uncover our heads, we are adoring Christ’” (56). The images are there to direct our hearts and minds to Christ, truly God and truly man, so that we can more easily contemplate his love and offer him our adoration. It bespeaks the grandeur of the

miraculous Incarnation, reminding us that God the Son, in addition to his divine love for us, through his full humanity, truly loves us with a human heart. “Our devotion must ascend to the infinite love of the Person of the Son of God, yet we need to keep in mind that his divine love is inseparable from his human love. The image of his heart of flesh helps us to do precisely this” (60).

The Church Fathers were insistent about the reality of Jesus’ human affections. As just a few examples, Pope Francis quotes from St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St. John Damascene (see 62). The Sacred Heart devotion reminds us of this profound truth.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not just Christological; it is also Trinitarian. Christ’s “love is ‘the revelation of the Father’s mercy,’ and his desire is that, impelled by the Spirit welling up from his heart, we should ascend to the Father ‘with him and in him’” (77). The Sacred Heart devotion is also Eucharistic. One of its core encouragements is the reception of communion on First Fridays of each month (84) as well as to spend an hour in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament on Thursdays (85).

In Chapters 4 and 5, Pope Francis focuses on personal spiritual experience and communal missionary commitment as “essential aspects that contemporary devotion to the Sacred Heart needs” (91). Francis begins Chapter 4 with a long series of biblical quotes that bespeak the love of God and his care for his chosen people throughout salvation history (93–100). He follows that with similar testimony found in Church history, especially from the Fathers through the high scholastics (102–108). The love of God revealed in Sacred Scripture and testified to throughout Catholic tradition should lead us to our own personal union with Christ. As Pope Francis writes: St. Bonaventure “presents the heart of Christ as the source of the sacraments and of grace, and urges that our contemplation of that heart become a relationship between friends, a personal encounter of love” (106). Francis points to examples of this in subsequent centuries. “A number of holy women,” he writes, “in recounting their experiences of encounter with Christ, have spoken of resting in the heart of the Lord as the source of life and interior peace,” naming St. Lutgarde, St. Mechtilde of Hackeborn, St. Angela of Foligno, Dame Julian of Norwich, and St. Gertrude of Helfta as models (110), later adding Ludolph of Saxony, St. Catherine of Siena, St. John Eudes, and St. Francis de Sales as further examples (111–118). Of course, he highlights St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and the apparitions of Christ that she experienced in the seventeenth century, which were the source of present-day Sacred Heart devotion (119–124). The message entrusted to her was defended and promoted by St. Claude de la Colombière (125–128).

St. Charles de Foucauld and St. Therese of the Child Jesus also “reshaped certain aspects of devotion to the heart of Christ and thus helped us understand it in an even more evangelical spirit” (129). Thus, after several paragraphs devoted to the

personal dimension of their devotion to the Sacred Heart (130–142), similar reflections from within the Jesuit tradition (143–147), general reflections on the Sacred Heart’s role in developing the interior life (148–150), and some further comments, Francis turns in Chapter 5 to the evangelical—that is, missionary—dimension.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart calls before us God’s infinite love for us. This should move our hearts to respond with our love for God personally. But it ought not stop there. For, as Francis teaches: “Our best response to the love of Christ’s heart is to love our brothers and sisters” (167). In other words, we should not keep the love of God to ourselves; we ought to share it with others.

That is why, from the very beginning, the Church has been dedicated to serving the poor and needy. “In contemplating the pierced heart of the Lord, who ‘took our infirmities and bore our diseases’ (Mt 8:17), we too are inspired to be more attentive to the sufferings and needs of others” (171). Francis continues by giving examples from the history of spirituality that testify to the “bond between devotion to the heart of Jesus and commitment to our brothers and sisters” (172; see also 173–180). Pope Francis views such examples of loving the downtrodden as a significant part of what it means to make reparation to the heart of Jesus (181–204). In this regard, Pope Francis asks some challenging questions:

What kind of worship would we give to Christ if we were to rest content with an individual relationship with him and show no interest in relieving the sufferings of others or helping them to live a better life? Would it please the heart that so loved us, if we were to bask in a private religious experience while ignoring its implications for the society in which we live? (205)

Quoting from Pope St. John Paul II, Francis insists that “consecration to the heart of Christ is thus ‘to be seen in relation to the Church’s missionary activity, since it responds to the desire of Jesus’ heart to spread throughout the world, through the members of his Body, his complete commitment to the Kingdom” (206).

In summation, Pope Francis ends the encyclical with a prayer. “I ask our Lord Jesus Christ to grant that his Sacred Heart may continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just, solidary and fraternal world. May he be blessed forever” (220).

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WHO ARE OUR VOLUNTEERS?

Caritas Athens owes much of its success to the dedication of its **volunteers**, who play a pivotal role in implementing all its actions. Volunteers are the heart of the organization, embodying its mission of solidarity and selfless service. The help of Caritas volunteers is essential to our mission of listening to the pleas of those in need and responding with action and love.

Our volunteers come from diverse backgrounds and are coordinated primarily by **local parishes**. Others learn about Caritas through their **schools and universities**, both in Greece and abroad, through fellow students, friends, or media sources.

Each year, our organization collaborates with **Greek and international universities in Social Sciences**, offering students the opportunity to complete their **internships** at the Social Service of the Refugee Project. Universities from abroad, such as **Webster University (USA)**, send students annually for a few months of **voluntary work**, contributing to our mission.



Can You Contribute as a Caritas Volunteer?

When you volunteer your help to people in need, your practical and compassionate actions can make a difference in their lives. But that's not all. Volunteering can open your eyes, change the way you think. It can give your life a deeper meaning and a stronger purpose.

Here are some comments from volunteers who helped us during 2024:

- Maria, a German volunteer living in Athens, says: *"I want to help as much as I can. At Caritas I can do that and I like the people I work with. I have made good friends."*
- Vasilis, a Greek who helps at the soup kitchen, states: *"I want to help people in need and now I have free time to do it. In Caritas I found what I was looking for. In other NGOs there were restrictions for volunteers, but not in Caritas"*.
- Carmen, a Spanish volunteer, finds Caritas' activities interesting: *"In this organization I can help with various activities, such as sorting and distributing clothes, the soup kitchen, even visiting nursing homes, but always together with other volunteers and in a safe and organized way. I feel a sense of belonging to a community with the same purpose, something that was missing from my life before"*.

If you have some free time and would like to help the work of Caritas, please contact our main office on Omirou Street, tel. 2103626186 or with the Refugee Center on Kapodistriou Street, tel. 2105246637, from Monday to Friday morning.

CAN YOU HELP THE WORK OF CARITAS ATHENS?

You have been informed about the major activities of Caritas Athens during 2024.

The work of love cannot be measured or valued.

We have not solved all the problems of those who live under difficult conditions—displaced, desperate, or confined.

But we reach out our hand to support them.

That hand can become a human chain, a warm embrace that eases the pain of those in need!

In order to be able to support our most vulnerable fellow human beings, we have the continuous support and assistance of our Clergy, all our parishes, our staff, volunteers, as well as many NGOs, foundations and organizations.

We are deeply grateful to the Attica Food Bank and the NGO “Boroume” who provide food for our Soup Kitchen. We express special thanks to the PAUL pastry shop and the Sklavenitis supermarket chain, as well as to the generous anonymous donor who offers our Social Service Department supermarket coupons so that the people we support can buy what they need more immediately.

We sincerely thank everyone who contributes to the work and mission of Caritas Athens.

A special **thank you** to our dedicated volunteers, who are always present. Through their commitment and generosity, they help turn our goals into real, meaningful action.

If you would like to support our work in any field of action, you can make a financial or material donation (food, long-life milk, baby formula for infants up to 12 months, clothing, shoes, bedding & essential supplies) and by offering your time and skills as a volunteer.

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