

Address at Caritas Australia Project Compassion NSW Parliamentary Lunch

NSW Parliament House, 16 February 2015

Welcome to this year's Parliamentary Lunch to launch Project Compassion for 2015. I am grateful to Hon. Barry O'Farrell MP, Member for Ku-ring-gai, for hosting today. I acknowledge his presence and that of Hon. Mike Baird MP, Premier of NSW, as well as distinguished guests, donors and supporters of Caritas Australia's Project Compassion from the Church and beyond.

Each Ash Wednesday the priest says "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return", or similar words, marking an ashen cross on the person's forehead. As a schoolboy, I remember feeling solemn and proud to receive that sign of my Catholic identity and to wear it for the rest of the day, for all the world to see. Friday abstinence from meat, fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and giving up chocolate for the whole of Lent, were additional tokens of our heroism and Catholic identity with which our non-Catholic friends had to cope if we were at their place for dinner on Fridays! And there were the cardboard Project Compassion boxes into which you put your loose change if ever you had any left at the end of the day, and into which my father insisted we put extra from our pocket-money while thinking of the starving children in Biafra.

The point was: the penances of Lent, that mark our turning away from sin, should represent a turning towards something better and that something was our neighbours in need – even in faraway places. The New Testament says, "love covers a multitude of sin" (1Pet 4:8) and "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:14-26). For a Catholic boy growing up in Sydney, charity and good works, all meant Project Compassion boxes sitting in the living room all Lent, like chicks in a nest demanding to be fed – boxes fed so that others could be.

In his Lenten message for this year, Pope Francis warns us against opposite problems of a cold indifference by which we care little for our neighbours in need and a hot sensitivity that makes us so aware of the suffering in our world that we are left feeling powerless to do anything about it [3]. As a child Project Compassion helped me steer a middle course, one that educated me about how the other half – or nine-tenths – live and also gave me the confidence that there was something practical I could do about it. It might have meant less money for tuckshop or movies but you did feel a bit closer to those Biafrans and in the process of helping them you were being spiritually renewed yourself.

Meeting today in Parliament House I want to recognize that governments at all three levels assist the poor of our world by way of direct and in-kind aid and by way of tax deductions that encourage private giving. Dare I say, it is not enough and I am personally troubled by the decline in our nation's foreign aid, even as I recognize our very difficult budgetary environment. But in the end we cannot look to government to fix every problem for us. We need generous companies and individuals. And that means that what donors like yourselves do is crucial. Thanks to you, and many like you, nearly \$11 million was raised for Project Compassion in 2014, \$1.6m of that in the Archdiocese of Sydney and a good deal extra in greater Sydney. This generosity enables Caritas Australia to help people like

Eric and Ma from whom we will hear in a few moments, to support those in need across the world, and help them help themselves.

This year's Project Compassion focuses on 'Food for Life'. As Pope Francis has pointed out, it is a scandal that so many people in our world are hungry when there is enough food for all. Only yesterday, the Holy Father used his address to the new cardinals to consider what charity – caritas – really means. He concluded: "In a word: charity cannot be neutral, antiseptic, indifferent, lukewarm or impartial! Charity is infectious, it excites, it risks and it engages!" With your infectious, excited, engaged support, Caritas Australia can work to address the hunger of our world. So I thank you for your continued support of Caritas Australia's Project Compassion. May God bless your generosity! And may the Giver of all good things, bless ☩ our company today, our food and drink, our projects and our loved ones, and especially those in our world without food this day, through Christ Our Lord.