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Caritas Oceania Media Statement – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

"Our Sacred Ocean Cries Out": Caritas Oceania calls for radical listening, planetary dignity, and bold action on climate and for all of creation

WELLINGTON – In the leadup to the COP31 climate conference in Türkiye, Caritas Oceania calls on governments, international leaders, and Church communities worldwide to recognise the Pacific as a "sacred Ocean" facing urgent action in response to extreme human and ecological disruption.

The call comes in the wake of synodal gatherings and spiritual reflection across the Pacific, culminating in the Caritas Oceania Regional Forum and Synodal Conversation on the Ocean held in Wellington in late October.

Drawing on the firsthand testimonies of frontline islanders, indigenous custodians, and community workers, Caritas Oceania proposes a vision that unites the fight against climate vulnerability with a spiritual calling to defend the dignity of both humanity and creation.

"Out in the field, our role is not to dictate or assume control, but to arrive with the humility of listeners," says Caritas Oceania President, Cardinal Soane Mafi. "When we stand with the smallest and most vulnerable, we encounter the very face of Christ in our broken and grieving communities. Their pain, culture, and survival must guide every humanitarian and ecological decision."

The Caritas Oceania call comes out of years of listening and journeying with the poor in Oceania, as the regional network of seven Catholic agencies continues to live out the mandate and challenge laid down for them at the dawn of the Millennium. Then, the Bishops of the region gathered in Rome at Synod of Bishops of Oceania, and:

> *…called upon the governments and peoples of Oceania to protect this precious environment for present and future generations. It is their special responsibility to assume on behalf of all humanity stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, containing over one half of the Earth's total supply of water. The continued health of this and other oceans is crucial for the welfare of peoples not only in Oceania but in every part of the world.* (Pope John Paul II: *Ecclesia in Oceania,* 2001)

"Our Ocean today is being crucified," says Mena Antonio, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand Chief Executive, and Vice-President of the global Caritas Internationalis confederation. "Twenty-five years on from *Ecclesia in Oceania*, our reflection today leads us to urge humanitarian organisations and civil society to move away from top-down aid and paternalistic models. Pastoral action must begin by listening to the lived reality of those on the frontline – communities enduring coastal salinisation, rising tides, sudden illness, and the trauma of recurring cyclones."

Rooted in Pope Francis' ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Synodal Conversation event challenged decision-makers to adopt an expanded understanding of dignity that encompasses entire ecosystems. In the Pacific world view, land, sea, culture, and spirituality are indivisible. Environmental harm directly attacks indigenous identity, community health, and intergenerational futures.

Caritas Oceania is calling for bold, innovative approaches to environmental justice, such as formal 'consecration' of the Pacific Ocean and exploring the concept of legal personhood for the Pacific Ocean under a rights-of-nature framework, as has happened in other locations.

Through its synodal discernment, Caritas Oceania proposes the following:

- **Spiritual Consecration of Oceania:** Initiating steps to explore dedicating Oceania—as a sacred expanse of land and sea—under the maternal protection of Our Lady, renewing our sacred duty as guardians of life.
- **Uncompromising Climate Advocacy:** Amplifying local Pacific voices in global policy forums to demand rapid climate mitigation, loss and damage accountability, and the protection of frontline islanders' rights through strong leadership.
- **Synod on the Ocean:** Seeking a people-centred, Pacific-led full Synod on the Ocean, grounded in *Laudato Si'*, to reflect the pastoral concerns and needs of 'tangata o le moana'.

"Despite serious environmental threats, Caritas Oceania affirms that despair does not have the final word," says Cardinal Mafi. "Grounded in solidarity and communal faith, our island communities continue to navigate difficult waters with courage, deep resilience, and enduring joy. We are committed to work with the governments and people of the region to promote the 'Blue Pacific' as a peaceful and harmonious place where life flourishes for the benefit of all."

"We find ourselves in a season marked by tears, yet alive with resurrection hope," says Mena Antonio. "Caritas Oceania stands ready to walk alongside our communities, reweaving the ecological mat of life and advocating fearlessly for our sacred home, on behalf of all humanity."

ENDS.

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Caritas Oceania is a Catholic humanitarian, development and social justice network working across Oceania through its seven members. We are part of the Caritas Internationalis confederation of 160+ Catholic agencies serving the poor through emergency relief, integral human development, and advocacy for justice, peace and the protection of human dignity.