

## **Caritas Rwanda – 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

### **Address by Lesley-Anne Knight Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis**

Happy Birthday Caritas Rwanda! Isabukuru nziza!

My Lord Bishops, Reverend Fathers, distinguished guests, sisters and brothers, colleagues and friends in Caritas.

I would like to thank Abbé Oreste Incimatata for inviting me here today for this celebration. On behalf of our Caritas Internationalis President, His Eminence Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, I congratulate you all and thank you for the privilege of sharing this special and joyous 50th year moment. I'm very honoured to be here as a representative of the 165 members of Caritas Internationalis.

The saying goes "God spends the day elsewhere, but He sleeps in Rwanda". But there are tangible signs that he is at work here too. His work can be seen in the tireless and courageous efforts of the staff of Caritas Rwanda and its 60,000 volunteers.

As Caritas Rwanda marks its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is a moment to celebrate the commitment and dedication of all these staff, volunteers, communities, parishes and bishops. You are an important part of the Caritas Internationalis community, part of and at the heart of the mission of the Church, a sign and sacrament of God's love for all humanity.

Belonging to Caritas Internationalis has significance for our mission... Our very name, *Caritas Internationalis*, means "the love between nations". Caritas sees the world as one united human family. We are profoundly moved by the suffering of our sisters and brothers and feel we have a moral duty to respond.

Caritas Rwanda was founded in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the 1959 revolution. Caritas Rwanda responded to the immediate needs of those driven from their homes, and then, with the support of the bishops, it went on to develop until it had a presence in every parish.

Caritas Rwanda provided much needed service to poor communities, especially to women and girls, and to farmers. Caritas always offered its help to all, without distinction, and came to be a meeting point for various communities.

But violent conflict can wipe out years of development progress at a stroke. War and genocide in the 1990s had devastating consequences for the people of Rwanda and for the work of Caritas leaders such as Fr. Michel Descombes.

Caritas Rwanda was forced to suspend its activities. Friends and colleagues, including Caritas staff, were lost. It was a time of great tragedy, and of many prayers.

Tragic events like those in Rwanda, and also in Bosnia in the 1990s, showed that peace building and reconciliation is an essential element in development. These events caused a huge shift in how humanitarian agencies like Caritas work.

The Caritas confederation set about reshaping its approach to development and began integrating peace building into its activities. We put resources into teaching grassroots peace building around the world, and this remains a priority for us today.

The words “*never again*” are often heard in countries such as Rwanda, that have endured appalling tragedy. But Rwanda’s experience can also serve as a warning to other countries facing similar crises. So when Kenya stood on the brink in 2008, Caritas Rwanda joined other Caritas members who had lived through such tragedies in sending that message. Today, in Africa we must send the same message again to Somalia, Sudan and to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The task facing Rwanda, Caritas Rwanda and the Church in 1994 was vast. Forgiveness is at the heart of reconciliation and at the heart of our Christian faith. Caritas and the Church led reconciliation efforts, as well as supporting rebuilding and reconstruction.

That the Rwanda we see before us today – a prosperous Rwanda at peace – exists is an enormous testament to the people who took part in that work. It is with deep respect that I pay tribute to them.

Anniversaries are also about looking forward, to renewal and new beginnings. At the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals in New York in September, we learned that many African countries are a long way from achieving these goals by the 2015 deadline.

Rwanda has shown what can be done. It is very likely to meet its targets for substantially reducing child and maternal mortality. And Rwanda is the first country in the world to have more than 50 per cent of its parliamentary seats held by women. What a wonderful tribute to the wisdom, discernment and intelligence of the men of Rwanda!

Huge challenges remain, in Rwanda and in other parts of Africa. Caritas Rwanda has a key role to play in meeting these challenges, with renewed energy, commitment and leadership.

Conflict is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. And in working to promote integral human development, Caritas Rwanda is also working for justice and for lasting peace.

As part of the Caritas Internationalis family, you are at the heart of the Church’s response to human suffering. May you continue to embody God’s love for all those in need, regardless of who they are, and what is their faith, so that they may live in peace and have life in abundance.

I join my words of love and congratulations to you with the words of Isaiah:

“They shall turn their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into sickles. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:4).

Dr Lesley-Anne Knight

Secretary General

Caritas Internationalis

Kigali, 31st October 2010