

**Caritas France
General Assembly
Paris - 26 June 2009**

Speech by Dr Lesley-Anne Knight, Secretary General, Caritas Internationalis

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Staff and Friends of Caritas,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you this week and to return to this wonderful city. I spent a year living and studying here during my twenties, and Paris will always have a special place in my heart. Paris has given the world so much in terms of its contribution towards science, art, culture and many other aspects of our lives. And similarly, Secours Catholique – Caritas France has made an enormous contribution towards shaping Caritas Internationalis, so it is a particular pleasure to be able to participate in your General Assembly this week, to be able to hear your views, discuss our vision for the future of our confederation, and our response to the urgent global challenges that we face.

One of the great strengths of our confederation is that we bring together so many different organisations – united by a common faith, a common vision and purpose. Building a coherent, united organisation in a world of such diversity can be a major challenge. I read the other day that exactly 600 years ago this week, the Roman Catholic Church was split into three with the appointment of Pope Alexander V in Pisa, joining Pope Gregory XII in Rome and Pope Benedict XII in Avignon. Reflecting on this turbulent time in the history of our Church gives me hope, because whatever problems we face today, at least we don't have three popes!

Unity is important, because in unity there is strength. And unity has never been more important than today when there is an urgent need for us to speak out, clearly and powerfully, on the world stage, as we face unprecedented problems of global proportions.

Over the past 18 months, we have seen how a crisis that began in a small segment of the United States housing market has evolved into a global recession. The scale of the financial crisis has graphically illustrated the extent to which our modern world is inextricably connected. Despite the initial confident claims of some countries, virtually no part of the world has remained unaffected.

These events have had three important consequences:

- They have prompted a long overdue reassessment of our major international institutions and of how our international financial systems operate.
- They have strengthened the growing realisation that solutions to many of the challenges facing the world today can only be found through global collaboration and cooperation.
- And thirdly, they have highlighted the need for an ethical, values-based approach to the global challenges we face.

These three consequences have important implications not only for how nation states cooperate, but also for how our Caritas organisations work together through Caritas Internationalis. I would like to reflect today on some of these challenges, and on the role Caritas, as a united global organisation, can play in responding to them. I shall also consider the vital contribution of individual member organisations such as Secours Catholique as well as individual Caritas workers around the world.

Let us begin with the economic crisis. This was a crisis born of greed and irresponsibility – greed and irresponsibility that now threaten not only the United States and Europe, but the entire world.

At the heart of this crisis was not just a huge financial deficit, but a deficit of ethics. The ‘invisible hand’ of capitalism became the hand of a thief. What is truly worrying though is that in looking at the reform of our financial systems, the talk is mainly of the need for greater government regulation – there is not much mention of the role of conscience.

What is needed is an economic system that responds to the needs of humanity as a whole, rather than serving the needs of the minority. An economic system based on the concepts of human dignity and the common good.

Unfortunately, the priority seems to be a quick return to ‘business as usual’.

The United States and the European Union have committed **40 times** more money to rescuing the financial sector than to reducing poverty and climate change. The United States’ financial rescue package of 800 billion US dollars is almost equivalent to the **total** amount of development aid provided over the past ten years by 23 of the world’s richest countries¹.

At the same time, it now seems highly unlikely that the commitments to increased development aid made by the G8 countries at Gleneagles in 2005 will be met. And the UN Millennium Development Goals, which aim to halve the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, are looking increasingly unattainable. In fact, the global economic crisis threatens to reverse much of the progress that has been made on poverty alleviation. The UN World Food Programme forecasts that the number of hungry people in the world will increase by a further 130 million this year, rising to 980 million.

For Caritas Internationalis, the global response to the economic crisis needs to be based on justice. As with many crises, it is the poorest, the most vulnerable, and the least responsible for the problem, who are being hit the hardest.

Developing countries, which suffered badly from last year’s soaring food prices, now face further problems due to the decline in global trade, falling commodity prices, reduced remittances from migrant workers, and cut-backs in foreign direct investment.

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Quoted in “*Shaping the Post-Crisis World*”, PricewaterhouseCoopers, World Economic Forum 2009.

These problems, however, are not confined to the developing world. As you well know, here in France, there is rising unemployment, poverty and hunger, and the threat of social and political unrest.

CI member organisations such as Secours Catholique are seeing an increase in the number of poorer citizens relying on their services. In January, unemployment in France soared by 90,000 to around 2.2 million – the highest one-month leap since records began. By March, the figure had risen to nearly 2.5 million².

Rising unemployment and poverty levels in the developed world mean that there is a real danger that the problems of the world's poorest countries will be neglected. Caritas organisations such as Secours Catholique that have a dual function – serving the poor at home as well as overseas – have a vital role to play in ensuring that their governments look beyond their own national interests and do not use the excuse of tighter finances to ignore their aid promises to the poorest on the planet.

The financial crisis has also highlighted the injustice of global economic and trading systems that are dictated by the richer nations. If we are to review these globalized systems in the light of the crisis, then how can it be just that so many countries are excluded from the process?

The meeting of the G20 in April was a step in the right direction as far as increased participation is concerned, and did provide a greater degree of representation for developing countries. But we should not forget that there are close to 200 countries in the world, so we have a long way to go before we can truly say that this is an inclusive process.

The concepts of justice and global ethics are also at the heart of the Caritas Internationalis approach to climate change – one of our key priorities as we prepare for the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December. Climate Change is a prime example of an issue that demands to be tackled at a global level and where the Caritas confederation has a real opportunity to be an effective voice internationally as a united global organisation.

Climate change is a question of justice because both its causes and consequences are inequitable: the development of industrial nations has been the main cause of climate change, while it is the world's poorer communities who will suffer its impacts soonest and most severely.

It is a question of ethics because the richer countries of the world need to recognise their moral responsibility to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, whilst providing finance, technology and expertise to enable poorer countries to realise their legitimate right to develop their own economies.

Poorer countries will also need additional help in adapting to the climate changes that are already under way.

² The Economist, May 14, 2009.

So far, 12 countries have pledged US\$6.1 billion to two climate investment funds with the World Bank. But no money has been deposited in them yet and any money available will be in the form of loans, not grants, with stringent conditions on how the money is spent.

Caritas member organisations in the developed world, and especially Caritas France, clearly have a role to play in holding their own governments to account for their commitments. The world's richest countries have together pledged around US\$18 billion in the last seven years, but less than 10 percent of this has been disbursed. And according to the UN, between US\$50 billion and US\$70 billion every year will need to be invested immediately to help the poorest countries adapt to floods, droughts and heat waves.

At an international level, Caritas has a unique opportunity to speak with authority on this subject. Many of our member organisations are on the front line in the battle against the effects of climate change. Our Caritas Internationalis Reference Group on Climate Justice (on which your own Michel Roy is a representative) includes representatives from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Peru and South Africa. Being able to bring their voices and stories to the attention of the world community in a coordinated manner gives us the ability to present a powerful case.

Another priority area for Caritas Internationalis is migration – and here too, there are clear ethical and justice issues. Too often, the stranger in our midst is greeted with fear and hostility, rather than the welcome that a properly ethical and Christian approach demands.

In Italy it has now been made a crime to enter the country illegally and you can be sent to prison for renting housing to an illegal immigrant. Here in France your Immigration Minister has hailed as a success the removal of nearly 30,000 illegal migrants from France during 2008³.

Even legal migrants now have fewer job opportunities and face greater discrimination. Migrant workers are the first to lose their jobs.

Many of our Caritas organisations work with migrants – in some cases, helping incoming migrants, and in others, helping to protect the rights of their own citizens working abroad. And at the international level, Caritas Internationalis has established a new advocacy team to focus on the issue of migration, and in particular the migration of women.

Here again, the experience of our member organisations lends an invaluable authority and legitimacy to our advocacy activities at the global level.

In our humanitarian work we are increasingly having to respond to 'man-made' emergencies. As we have seen, the increasing number of climate-related disasters can be said to be 'man-made' if they are related to climate change. A second type of 'man-made' disaster involves famine and the displacement of peoples caused by conflict and oppressive governments. Our response in these situations presents some

³ Reuters, 14 January 2009.

complex challenges, with the need to balance the humanitarian imperative to provide swift and effective relief for those who are suffering, with the need to speak out against violence and oppression.

Just two weeks ago I was in Beijing with the Caritas Internationalis Korea Working Group, which faces a particularly difficult and complex situation. The fact that Caritas is able to deliver humanitarian aid even in these most difficult of circumstances is a credit to our confederation and also lends considerable weight to our statements in support of peaceful solutions to problems such as the threat posed by Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

Other areas where CI continues to operate in extremely difficult and complex conditions include Sudan, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Colombia and Myanmar.

The strengthening of CI competence and capacity to deliver a professional and effective disaster relief response is an overarching priority. The establishment of the CI Humanitarian Advisory Council brings together the collective wisdom of experts from several of our leading member organisations to support this key priority.

As we have seen, many of the challenges we face today are a result of systemic failures. The financial turmoil in our world is a failure of our economic systems; climate change is a result of our flawed energy and ecological systems; conflict and oppression often result from poor governance systems. But above all, we are suffering a failure in our value systems – values such as transparency, integrity, compassion, solidarity, partnership, the common good, and justice.

The world is experiencing a crisis of exclusion, of injustice and inequality. Sixty percent of the world's population still exists on only six per cent of the world's income, while entire communities are exploited and neglected. In a world so deeply divided between rich and poor, North and South, religious and secular, us and them, we need more than ever, common values and a global ethic that unite us as a human community.

When we see the failure of the key institutions, systems and leadership that should sustain our societies, it is tempting to fall into despair. But this can also be seen as an opportunity for renewal, for a grassroots transformation.

As an international faith-based organisation, Caritas Internationalis is well-placed to take a lead in such a transformation, based on just and ethical solutions to global problems. As Caritas people we are people of faith, people of religion. And the root of the word religion means “to rebind” – to bridge the separation between peoples, to reintegrate the marginalised, to heal our communities, to re-establish men and women at the service of our societies.

As Caritas Internationalis, this means looking deeper at how we can “re-bind” our confederation: how we can better contribute towards its effectiveness as a global organisation; how we can find innovative ways of working together in collaboration, for the common good.

There is a saying in English that “Charity begins at home.” At a time of financial crisis this can be selfishly used to justify the argument for helping our own people before others. The temptation is towards national introspection and nationalism. But there is another interpretation: And that is that charity begins with self-reflection and internal transformation, the discovery of who we are as individuals and as organisations. And that transformation then leads to an expression of charity and love in the wider world.

If we seek, as Caritas Internationalis, to be part of a more effective force in the world, we can begin by reflecting on how we are contributing to this goal, both as Member Organisations and as individuals.

A General Assembly such as is this is a valuable opportunity for such reflection. At the level of CI, we are contributing to this process through the development of a set of resources under the title ‘*I am Caritas*’.

This includes a booklet from the President, Cardinal Rodriguez and the CI Theology Commission entitled “*Caritas – A Sign of God’s Love for Humanity*”, which we hope will inspire Caritas workers to delve deeper into how we are a visible sign and sacrament of God’s love in our world, and how we need to bring together our actions and words.

We have also created a special web site for all Caritas staff and volunteers around the world so that we can share our experiences, helping us to understand the essential connection between our work and our faith.

When we reflect on who we are as part of Caritas, we rediscover the source of our being and our strength. And then in the face of all despair, we find joy.

Thomas Aquinas said that our capacity for joy is a response to the God who created us and who delights in our desire, who calls us to flourish as good creatures in a good world.

Aquinas says: “As the sun pours light into the air, so God pours grace into the soul.”

As Caritas people, we can have no better desire than to pour love into the world.

We are solidarity, we are hope, we are love, we are Caritas.

Lesley-Anne Knight
Secretary General
26th June 2009