

**Catholic Networking Session
2010 International AIDS Conference – Vienna
July 16, 2010**

**Keynote Speech by Lesley-Anne Knight,
Secretary General, Caritas Internationalis.**

Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

My thanks to Dr Franz Küberl, President of Caritas Austria and Msgr Bob Vitillo for their words of welcome this afternoon. I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to all of you at this Catholic Networking session and to see familiar and well as new faces from all over the world.

In preparation for this event today, I began by questioning its purpose. Why are we gathered here, specifically as Catholics?

Is there a uniquely Catholic approach to the global HIV pandemic? And if so, what is it?

I fear that there may be people here in Vienna this week who would answer that it is one characterised by dogma, hypocrisy, moralising and condemnation.

Others might put it more simplistically and say it is an approach that hinders the prevention of HIV infection by forbidding the use of condoms.

It is an unfortunate reality that in spite of all the outstanding work that has been carried out in this area by dedicated Catholic workers all over the world for the past 23 years, we are still dogged by these criticisms.

The danger in this situation is that we withdraw into a kind of Catholic ghetto, becoming entrenched in our positions, and closing our minds to the opportunities for development, innovation and collaboration that next week's international conference offers.

So I think it is useful to reflect on the qualities that might underpin a Catholic approach that fosters dialogue, cooperation and an honest and open assessment of how we can respond even more effectively to what is one of the great challenges of our times.

As I tried to envision the characteristics of this Catholic approach, three concepts came to mind. Now, as you know, the language of HIV/AIDS is already littered with acronyms and abbreviations, so I hesitate to introduce yet another, but I like to think of these three concepts as the 'three Cs'. And they are Compassion, Communion and Conscience.

I will now go on to look at each in turn and explain how I think they can inform our response to the HIV pandemic.

Compassion lies at the heart of a Catholic approach to HIV/AIDS. It means literally "to suffer with". In other words, we cannot view the suffering of others without suffering ourselves. Compassion is not detached, self-righteous pity, but true solidarity that moves us to action.

In the first instance, we are called to tend to the suffering person. And this is what Catholic organisations, workers and volunteers have been doing so effectively for so many years.

But if we truly feel the suffering of others, how can we not go on to question why they are suffering?

This leads us to dig deeper into the causes of that suffering. In the context of HIV, this means identifying and challenging the structures that make people vulnerable to infection, whether these be poverty, discrimination, oppression or lack of education.

The role of poverty in the HIV pandemic cannot be overstated. It is both a cause and consequence of HIV infection. From a viewpoint based on compassion, we therefore have no option but to see the problem through the lens of the poor.

We need to develop a much better understanding and appreciation of how the circumstances in which people live make them vulnerable to HIV infection, and powerless to prevent it.

Our compassion needs to extend to people who are marginalised by society: to groups such as injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers, and prison populations.

This presents us with the challenge of coming to terms with the realities of life for people within these groups. We need to be able to feel their suffering too and develop realistic solutions that will be effective in these diverse, difficult and complex contexts.

The development of effective, evidence-based solutions brings me to the second of my ‘three Cs’: **Communion**.

Among Christians, communion has a number of meanings, but the word can also be used in a broader sense. My dictionary gives the definition: “the sharing of thoughts, beliefs or feelings”. And that of course is the purpose of these networking sessions and the forthcoming International Conference.

The sharing of thoughts, beliefs and feelings is a vital part of the process of innovation. It opens up new possibilities, reveals deeper and different understandings, and can lead us to a productive reassessment of our own thoughts, beliefs and feelings.

Communion also refers to the communion of the Catholic Church and the broader communion and fellowship of the Christian community.

It is important that we as Catholic organisations get together on occasions such as this to share our ideas. But we should also participate in dialogue with other faith-based

organisations working in the field of HIV/AIDS. Faith-based organisations deliver around a quarter of the help provided worldwide for people living with HIV.

We have thousands of workers all over the world whose experience, gained over many years of tireless work in the field, can be of invaluable help in the planning of new strategies and interventions. We are proud to have some of those people with us today, and participating in the main conference. It is important that your voices are heard.

This conference provides an ideal opportunity for us to also actively engage with the broader community of actors in the field of HIV/AIDS. As Catholics we have much to share, but we also have an opportunity to listen and to learn. We don't hold all the answers. We should participate in conferences such as this with open minds and hearts, seeking information to develop new solutions rather than reinforce entrenched ideas.

The sharing of our feelings and experiences in fellowship with others also has a vital role to play in breaking down some of the taboos associated with HIV/AIDS. If we are to end the stigma of HIV infection and promote effective prevention strategies, we need to be able to enter into frank and honest dialogue about what are sometimes difficult issues for us to talk about.

Finally, I will turn to my third 'C': **conscience**.

Conscience is the moral sense of what is right and what is wrong that guides our thoughts and actions.

We are familiar with it as it affects our individual lives, but we can also speak of conscience at different levels. For instance, we can talk of conscience in terms of humanity as a whole, referring to the conscience of the international community. As faith-based organisations, we can appeal to this global conscience. We can promote the concept of one humanity and

the idea that it is clearly wrong to do nothing while others suffer.

The development of a 'global conscience' is an important factor in putting pressure on our international institutions and governments to honour their commitments in tackling the HIV pandemic. It can also influence pharmaceutical companies to play their part in providing accessible affordable treatments.

There is some evidence that such a 'global conscience' is developing over the issue of HIV/AIDS. A worldwide UNAIDS survey published this week showed that AIDS was considered the world's most important healthcare issue – despite the fact that the majority of those questioned did not think they were personally at risk.

Conscience also has a role to play at community level, whether these communities are villages, families, churches, or any other group. Conscience determines how groups treat their weaker, more vulnerable members. A sense of community conscience could end the stigmatization of those living with HIV, and the gender inequality and gender violence that make women and girls more vulnerable to HIV infection.

Conscience should make churches, schools and other community groups ask themselves whether they could do more to promote equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Lastly, conscience operates at an individual level. It determines how we act in our day-to-day lives and work. It reminds us that in return for the rights we enjoy as individuals we have a duty to serve the common good.

The world of HIV/AIDS is a highly complex one that presents many moral dilemmas. Listening to our conscience is not always easy; it often requires us to confront uncomfortable truths, to challenge our prejudices, to accept criticism, to move out of our comfort zones.

There are of course many other characteristics of Catholic action in the field of HIV/AIDS that I could mention, but I have chosen these three because they seem to me to be relevant to where we are today in this ongoing and evolving challenge. I hope that this reflection will have provided some food for thought as you enter into these networking sessions in preparation for the coming week's conference.

As we continue our work, may we be:

Driven by **compassion**, to ease suffering and to tackle all its causes;

Open to learning and the sharing of ideas and feelings, in **communion** with others;

Guided by our **consciences**, so that we “act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God”. (Micah 6:8)