

Social Mission Conference 2010
‘Transforming Ourselves and Society in Charity and Justice’

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

‘Values and Social Change in a Post Crisis World’

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be with you today in Singapore for this Social Mission Conference, organised by Caritas Singapore.

In preparation for my visit this week, I consulted a travel guide to learn a little more about Singapore. And the first thing I read was: “Singapore is a **small** country on a **small** island.”

Of course, the guide then went on to list many impressive statistics about Singapore’s standing as a leading financial centre and one of the world’s wealthiest countries. But that first sentence made me think that the value of smallness is often overlooked in this increasingly globalised world, in which ‘bigger’ is invariably equated with ‘better’.

Of course, I speak as a **small** person who works in the world’s **smallest** country. The Vatican City State is less than half a square kilometre in size – so Singapore looks pretty big to me!

More than 30 years ago, the British economist E. F. Schumacher published a groundbreaking book entitled “*Small is Beautiful*”. Now... I am no expert on economics, but I do like some of the ideas expressed in this book.

Schumacher put forward the concept of “smallness within bigness”, maintaining that if large organisations are to function properly, they should behave like a related group of small organisations. For me, this sums up very well how both Caritas Singapore and Caritas Internationalis operate. Caritas Singapore Community Council is the umbrella organisation for numerous Catholic organisations involved in charity and community work in Singapore. And in turn, Caritas Singapore is a member of the Caritas Internationalis confederation.

As a whole, Caritas Internationalis is one of the largest humanitarian organisations in the world, but we are made up of 164 smaller organisations. We are, I believe, a perfect example of “smallness within bigness”.

It is true that the Caritas confederation includes some of the world’s biggest humanitarian and development organisations, but it also includes many of the smallest – often doing outstanding work in some of the world’s most dangerous and difficult environments. We have Caritas Iraq caring for malnourished babies and children in that war-torn country; there is Caritas Pakistan who have been helping refugees fleeing violence in the Swat Valley; Caritas Uzbekistan, one of our smallest Caritas members, was recently confronted with a serious humanitarian crisis following ethnic violence in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan; our newest member, Caritas Samoa, had to deal with a devastating tsunami last October; and of course Caritas Haiti has been at the centre of relief and rebuilding work following the catastrophic earthquake there early this year.

All of these small Caritas organisations can count on support from the wider confederation, coordinated from our general secretariat in the Vatican.

But the small Caritas organisations, in turn, provide the Caritas confederation with its great strength. They give us a grassroots presence in practically every country in the world.

They enable us to respond quickly and effectively in times of disaster, and their experience working alongside the poor gives Caritas Internationalis a respected and authentic voice on the world stage. This is important because Caritas is not just about responding to humanitarian crises – we also seek to play our part in creating a better world.

If there is one good thing to have come out of the global financial crisis that has wreaked havoc in the world over the past two years, it has been a new focus on ethics and values, which perhaps offers the best hope that a better world is possible.

So I would like to turn now to look at some of the values that underpin our work at Caritas Internationalis and how they are translated into action.

I referred earlier to Schumacher's book "*Small is Beautiful*". The subtitle of the book is "*Economics As If People Mattered.*" In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the concept of systems based on the idea that "people matter", has never been more relevant.

Schumacher linked some of his ideas about economics to the principles of Buddhism, but he was also heavily influenced by Catholic Social Teaching, and in fact converted to Catholicism in 1971.

Central to the values of Catholic Social Teaching is respect for the human person.

Concern for the human person is what was clearly lacking in the strategies and decisions that led to the financial crisis. Attention was focused on financial mechanisms, profits, bonuses – anything but the human beings at whose doors the trail of disaster ended: poor people largely, people who had been given loans they would struggle to repay, and who would

subsequently lose their meagre savings and homes as a result.

Caritas believes that all social and economic systems should serve the common good, rather than the interests of elite minorities. We maintain that the morality of any society can be judged on the basis of how it treats its most vulnerable members. In our humanitarian work and in our advocacy campaigns, we exercise a preferential option for the poor, prioritising the hungry, the weak, the marginalised and persecuted.

When we start to see global issues in terms of ‘people’ – in terms of individual lives – we are far more likely to begin to feel real compassion for those affected. Compassion of course means “to suffer with” and it therefore goes hand in hand with the core value of solidarity – that sense of responsibility we feel for others by virtue of our interdependence as members of a common humanity.

When we truly feel the suffering of others, we cannot help but question the reasons for that suffering. It is not enough to merely ease the suffering – we have to challenge its causes and do our best to prevent future suffering.

When we dig deeper into the major causes of the suffering that Caritas encounters daily, one problem emerges as a common factor. Whether we are looking at conflict, climate change, HIV/AIDS, migration or natural disasters, poverty appears as a cause or effect – and often both.

Poverty, in all its many forms, is thus a key focus for us. We view all global issues through the lens of the poor and we seek the transformation of unjust systems that perpetuate poverty, whether they be economic, political or cultural.

From our General Secretariat and our offices in New York and Geneva, we lobby the United Nations, international institutions

and governments to recognise their moral obligations to end the scandal of global poverty.

We campaign for fair trade, debt cancellation, and for governments to honour their commitments to increase development aid spending. We want to see that aid targeted at meeting the genuine needs of the poor, rather than those of elite sectors of society or the national interests of donor countries. Aid should be delivered free of conditions, respecting existing structures and capabilities.

We also call for poorer nations to have a greater role in their own development, with increased representation in key international institutions such as UN organisations, the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organisation.

Caritas believes that development should be based on a complete understanding of what the human person is, embracing spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical, material and economic elements. We strive to develop the whole person, helping people to realise their full potential so that they can effectively use their local resources to meet their own needs.

Economic growth is certainly one factor in development, but it is not the end of the story. So when we read in our newspapers – as we have done recently – about “spectacular” growth rates in Africa, we need to question what those growth rates are doing for the poorest people on that continent. If they are still going hungry, if their children are still not in school, if they are still dying needlessly from preventable diseases, then economic growth will have done nothing but make the rich richer. Economic growth must be accompanied by genuine social change that tackles injustice and inequality.

Through our local member organisations, Caritas supports the development of civil society in countries where governments need to be reminded of their duties of protection and care for

their citizens. Civil society has an important role to play in ensuring that growth and development benefit all sectors of society.

We also need to be wary that talk of economic growth in Africa does not make the world's richer countries think they can renege on their development aid obligations. For instance, a decade ago, donor countries promised to provide the finance to deliver universal primary education in Africa, but they have been contributing less than one-fifth of the \$11 billion annual cost of meeting their pledge in the low-income countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. We now face the prospect of there still being 23 million not in school by 2015 – the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals.

Caritas Internationalis is calling for an urgent reaffirmation of commitment to meeting the MDGs and we will be lobbying world leaders at the MDG Summit Meeting in New York in September.

Caritas sees the world as **one united human family** and believes we all have a moral duty to respond to the suffering.

As I mentioned earlier, poverty is a cross-cutting issue in all our work. So I would now like to talk a little about how values such as an option for the poor and respect for the human person shape how Caritas works in some of our key priority areas.

So for example in responding to humanitarian disasters, we are not just involved in emergency relief operations, we also look at how poverty makes people especially vulnerable, and we work to establish disaster preparedness and risk reduction strategies.

The Haiti earthquake provides a striking example. It is often said that it is not earthquakes that kill people; it is buildings that kill people. Many people died in Haiti simply because they

were in poor quality buildings that collapsed on top of them. You only need to compare the death toll in Haiti with the much more powerful quake that hit Chile shortly afterwards. There were more than 200,000 deaths in Haiti but fewer than 500 in Chile.

Climate change is another area where Caritas takes a pro-poor, people-centred approach. For us, climate change is more than a scientific or economic problem. It is about **people** whose fragile homes are swept away by floods and wrecked by hurricanes. It is about **people** whose crops are failing, whose cattle are dying; people who are forced to leave their homelands in search of food.

Caritas, therefore, in addition to calling for agreement on significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, seeks **Climate Justice** – solutions that prioritise the needs of poorer countries, in terms of adaptation strategies and disaster preparedness; as well as funding for continued sustainable development.

Climate change is becoming an increasingly important factor in another of our priority issues: migration. But here again, poverty is at the heart of the problem. A globalised economy has a tendency to view labour as just another commodity that may be imported or exported at will. For Caritas, migrant workers are people – husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. We support their right to move freely in search of work, but we vehemently oppose forced migration, especially the trafficking of women and children.

Caritas provides help and counselling for migrant workers, and campaigns for more legal channels of migration and measures to improve integration. We have a particular focus on the **feminisation of migration**, which has seen ever greater numbers of women leaving their families to work abroad, either through choice or by coercion. Caritas is hosting a

major international conference on migration in Senegal in November.

The need for a **compassionate, people-centred approach** is also of vital importance in our work on HIV/AIDS. Part of any solution to the HIV pandemic will clearly be the scientific development of new treatments, but the care of those living with HIV/AIDS, and the prevention of new HIV infection, depend on our ability to work closely with those at risk – often poor people on the margins of society. Caritas also works to ensure that scientific solutions, in both diagnosis and treatment, are made available to all those who need them. In particular, we campaign for greater access to ‘child friendly’ antiretroviral drugs for children, better diagnosis, and prevention of mother-to-child infection.

Finally, in the area of **peace-building**, small but significant steps are made by courageous individuals working together with their brothers and sisters across racial, ethnic and religious divides, to serve those in need. In the Middle East, for example, Caritas has been involved in a number of initiatives aimed at bringing together representatives of the different religions. We took part in a ‘Convoy for Peace’ into Gaza, that involved rabbis, imams and priests in delivering truckloads of aid, including hygiene kits provided by Caritas Jerusalem.

I could go on to give many more examples of our work, but the key point I am trying to make is that no matter what the issue, solutions to global problems must always be founded on the principle of respect for the individual human person. We must recognise that we are all one humanity and every individual is a precious member of that family. If we are to build a better world, our governments, our international institutions, our financial systems, our global corporations must all hold to this principle.

We must learn to value the smallness within the bigness.