Love across borders

A day in the life of Caritas
Over the past six decades the world has seen incredible changes. Communism has fallen and computers have transformed the world where there is enough food. There are 1.2 billion people today but the world bottom billion people live without access to adequate healthcare and education. Many countries still struggle with poverty and injustice. But Caritas is a steady force, investing in Jesus Christ. The heart of our love across borders is within the people all over the world who are trying to help their sisters and brothers. Caritas workers often belong to the communities in which they work. They understand their language, culture and needs. They help people regardless of faith, race or political allegiance. Caritas International is the Church’s answer to this need to cooperate more at an international horizon to reverse the gains we have made.

At its birth in 1951, the confederation had just 13 member organisations. They were inspired by the then substitute Secretary of State for the Holy See, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, who would become Pope Paul VI in 1963. In his 1947 encyclical Populorum Progressio, Pope Pius XI had called for aid to many people suffering. While some make progress, others stand still or move backward and the gap between them is widening.

Over 40 years later this is a true and visible story. Caritas confederation must work faster and with more passion. We face more challenges, such as climate change, appearing on the horizon to create the gains we have made.

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In the encyclical Dei Caritas Christi (1967), Pope Paul VI said: “The Church is one of those living forces that are always present, the living force of love that gives life to the Church.” This love does not offer people material help but refreshment and care for their souls, something which offers even more necessary than material support.

This living force of love across Caritas workers throughout the world. Every day they pass on to the people they help. Not a thing just given it is also received. It is received many times over, in many forms, from the millions of people helped by Caritas, in the evident gestures of generosity.

Caritas workers are strengthened and inspired by the confederation’s deep roots. Caritas confederation must work with the people as is guiding light. You give food, you give money and you give love. When you give love, you have a stronger and you make the world whole. You clothed me, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me. Matthew 25:31-37.

When hundreds of thousands of people were dying in Ethiopia’s famine in 1984, Sr Maura Chia was then a CARITAS member organisation. She visited families where emaciated children were at death’s door and when ragged parents could do nothing but watch. She offered a man whose house she had visited in the morning to do a food assessment came looking for her.

“When you visited our house we had nothing to offer you. But now you’ve left, our hen has laid this egg,” he said. “We want you to have it. Thank you for staying with us this morning.”

Caritas now has over a million staff and volunteer who are engaged in answering the call to enable the poor to transform their lives.

Our work may take the humblest form, such as a community worker giving beans and providing a woman in Africa who does not know how she will feed her children. Or we may use the power of our confederation to take the poor’s message onto the global stage and to lift the life of the world’s most vulnerable leaders.

Heroes and heroines live on for generations in the stories that are part of the living memories of the people. The stories of the founders of Caritas International remains present in the living memories of those who have followed in their footsteps. Here are some stories from the lives of Caritas members volunteers and benefactors around the world.

Caritas Internationalis marked its 60th anniversary in 2011. With offices in over 160 countries providing humanitarian relief, integral development and peacebuilding, Caritas is at the heart of the Church’s mission, and the Church is one of those living forces that are always present, the living force of love that gives life to the Church.” This love does not offer people material help but refreshment and care for their souls, something which offers even more necessary than material support.

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The day the earthquake hit Haiti, I became trapped in my office in Port-au-Prince. My colleagues didn’t know if their family and friends were dead or alive. None of us was prepared for it and we were all in a shock. How do you prepare for seeing thousands of people dead or severely injured?

With so many buildings down and unstable I ended up sleeping in a garden out of the office. There was no water or electricity and communication was down. This meant that to confirm information or talk to people, you had to get out in a car and look for them in the city. With rubble blocking the roads, this wasn’t easy, but it was the only way of checking who had survived and which buildings still functioned for work purposes.

Staff who survived the earthquake were sent abroad to save them from further trauma. I went to the Dominican Republic for about four days but even after the disaster, it was still wrenching to leave the team back in Port-au-Prince.

Despite the uncertainty and enormous difficulties, Catholic Relief Services along with Caritas Haiti and other Caritas member organisations, immediately started work. I was tasked with setting up and leading the health emergency response.

Within a few days we had a team of more than 100 volunteers and health professionals who wanted to help. We were strengthened by hundreds of international medical volunteers. It was great to have everyone – nationals and internationals, young and old – pitch in and lend their hands to make a difference.

We quickly did assessments and set up clinics in some camps to provide healthcare. We also established secondary care in some Catholic and faith-based hospitals in the country. This was to provide a public health message to help raise people’s awareness about health issues.

One of the things that remained a challenge in those first weeks was the enormous number of cargo planes and trucks coming in with supplies that needed to be coordinated, stored and distributed. At the end of the day we truly had a pharmacy warehouse team of more than 15 people coordinating this, not counting the teams dealing with food and other items.

Since the 2010 earthquake, my portfolio has quintupled. Some people say I really know how to multi-task and the Haiti earthquake has really tested that ability. Based on a strategy to strengthen the faith-based network, we are working hard to achieve an overall improvement in Haitians’ access to healthcare. But it will take time.

The medical director of the hospital asked me for help to evacuate survivors. A former colleague from the World Health Organisation had just informed me that we only had 10 operating rooms in the capital. The hospital was overloaded with earthquake survivors. We took the decision then and there to re-open François de Sales. Within 48 hours we were performing operations.

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One bitterly cold winter’s morning, I arrived at a shanty town on the edge of Pretoria carrying a bucket of ash. The white remains from burnt wood would be used to mark the lines on a football pitch.

Billion-rand stadiums had been built in other cities in South Africa and teams from all over the world were coming to play in the 2010 World Cup. Our “stadium” was a clay pitch that volunteers had just cleared of stones, weeds and rubbish. Our goalposts were made of wood that we had found lying around.

I’d had the idea of organising people on our Caritas Peacebuilding Programme into teams for an event parallel to the World Cup. So, Caritas and the Damieita Peace Initiative organised 16 teams from Africa and one from France into a tournament – the Football Peace Cup.

The tournament aimed to help people reflect on themselves and to recognise the value of others. The message was that, despite differences in skin colour, language, nationality, ethnicities and religion, we all belong to one human family.

In the townships in South Africa, people don’t have electricity and so couldn’t easily watch the World Cup. But their enthusiasm brought the tournament into the township as people from the international community left the relative luxury and security of the stadiums to enjoy games played by the underprivileged community.

That July morning, as the older children started to organise themselves into teams, they suddenly realised that they didn’t have a ball! They disappeared and returned with plastic bags and rags. I looked on in amazement as they somehow knotted it all together into a ball and started to play. I was reminded that necessity often brings out creativity and ingenuity that might otherwise go untapped.

The community members who had created the soccer pitch with their own hands had an enormous sense of pride and achievement. It was something so simple and yet it had profound implications for the community.

I’ve worked in South Africa for over thirty years and I have seen how the apartheid system destroyed people’s self-worth and self-confidence. With my job at Caritas, I’ve been amazed and overawed by the awakening of the realization in people that they have potential and power to transform their own lives and communities.

Part of my job is holding workshops across the country to help people discover how they can use their resources to help themselves and their communities. Probably my greatest joy in my job is the inspiration I get from the poor, especially women, who are willing to give of their ‘nothingness’ in order to help somebody else. People often have a thirst for spirituality and transformation.

The Peace Cup ran until the 3rd July – just before the real World Cup ended. I felt a great sense of triumph for the community. They had regained a sense of dignity and self-esteem. It was the first step in reclaiming their potential and power to bring about a change in their lives.
When I went to the UN for Caritas International, I had three minutes to communicate what was in my mind and heart. I hope we were to the voice of the poor, who are not getting education or chances in life, who have no access to healthcare and whose children will never live out their lives because of the cruel lottery of their birth.

I hoped that my three minutes would move something in the hearts of the people listening at the UN and this would make countries uphold their Millennium Development Goals promises.

It was my first time in New York. I live in Dakar, Senegal, but often go to Europe. It was incredible to see the skyscrapers, the clean streets and the fast-paced life, but I was also shocked to see people rummaging through rubbish bins for food in such a rich city.

As I told the UN, poverty is not abstract. It can be seen in the faces of millions of human beings who live it every day, especially women and children. The suffering is worldwide.

Caritas works with this poverty every day. However, the real power to combatting it lies in government policy. My speech at the UN was an example of Caritas international advocacy. Yes, we give out food and provide healthcare and education and many other things to poor communities, but we know that it’s the thinking of the rich world is essential to “making poverty history.”

I used my time at the UN to meet many people from other NGOs, the media and also government representatives. I took the message of the silent millions to them, like the people in my country who suffer because their basic needs in life such as food, water, health and education aren’t met.

Three other speakers from Caritas member organisations were with the at the UN. They defended everyone’s right to food, water, health, education and freedom. My guide for the day was Cardinal Daniel Njue, the Cardinal representative at the UN and he makes sure the Caritas voice of the poor is heard in UN proceedings.

I think that the MDGs have made some difference to the life of poor people in Senegal in small areas, many children between 6 and 7 years old now have the opportunity to go to school. But good standards are still missing – some classes have 70 pupils! We must be careful that governments don’t just ‘pay lip service’ to the MDGs without any real thought to whether they are actually helping people and going further.

At the end of my day at the UN, I had a sense of underachievement as it was difficult to see the impact of our speeches. But we were convinced that something positive would happen. As long as civil society make governments aware of their responsibilities, governments will do more to help and take care of the poor.

But I still have doubts. Months after my trip to the UN, I often think of what we said and if the financial interests are more important than human rights. Sometimes the international community shows with the financial wave rather than from the poor. Caritas will continue to work to ensure the voices of the poor aren’t drowned out when the international community is dominated by other considerations.
It's 10am on Monday morning. I've already been at my desk at Caritas Vienna's migrant centre for two hours. I've been preparing for the week ahead by taking appointments and looking at my database to prepare files on clients who will be seeing me.

My first visitor is Mr. K, a 29-year-old man from Serbia. He has come to the migrant centre to help solve his financial problems and issues at home. He talks nervously about his private problems and his uncertain residence status.

Mr. K is unable to work at the moment because of health issues. The money he gets from an insurance policy doesn't cover all his monthly costs and this leaves him very anxious about his responsibilities and his family's future.

I listen to him and give him a space to talk about his fears. Once he's done, we discuss possible options to help him. I give him 200 euros to keep him going as he leaves.

I've seen a lot of migrants in the course of my work here over the past six years. So many stories, so many hands of fate being dealt. I like being able to support my clients so they can cope with difficult situations. My legal training helps us work out the best judicial solutions possible, but Austrian law is being changed constantly which makes it much more difficult for migrants.

There are 18 of us working in the migrant centre. Some are legal and social advisors, others help in the clearing office and others deal with housing. We take part in about 10,000 consultations a year, working in German, English, Turkish, Arabic, Croatian, Spanish and French.

The problems I have to deal with vary. Just now someone was learning about what to do after he was refused asylum. Another person was asking for help looking for a new apartment. It's important that I don't give clients a false impression of what's possible, but I have to balance this with an assessment of their situation in a clear and optimistic way.

Mrs. S is my next client. She is a migrant from Iran who wants to have her son with her in Austria. I look through her documents and I promise to help her find a new request. I'm not that hopeful it will work. It's just a shame that the law can't see the desperation and understand the desires of the people in such crucial decisions.

The demand for advice by migrants is rising because more and more of them are threatened by poverty. People come to us because they see no very precarious situations and work is just a future income. It's law and insecurity is rare.

I see myself as a kind of coach who helps them work out solutions to their problems. The hope is that this kind of support will help the migrants look ahead with more optimism and less fear.
You see rich countries who want to use the maximum of the Earth’s resources but they don’t worry about the poor. They don’t seem to realise people will have to suffer for this choice.

I travelled to the climate change talks in downtown Bangkok in a taxi with people from India and the Philippines. There was a sense of anticipation. We were saying to each other: “Something’s got to happen!”

The Bangkok climate change talks were in September 2009, just a couple of months before the UN climate conference COP 15 in Copenhagen. We wanted consensus on the Kyoto Protocol and we wanted countries to stop delaying important climate decisions.

The Prime Minister of Thailand said at the talks, “There is no plan B. If we do not realise plan A, we go straight to plan F, which stands for failure.”

I was at the meeting with Caritas representatives from Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, South Africa and Kenya. In previous day’s preparations, I made it clear that it wasn’t always necessary to shout to get your views across. The media is important as that gets the message to many other people.

For part of the day, we split up and went to different sessions so we could lobby. I attended an adaptation session. It was the first time I’d ever attended such a big meeting on climate change and I was struck by the attitudes of some countries. They tried to block anything that would make change and some delegates made extra-long speeches to others, hindering their chance to speak.

In my country, Pakistan, there is no rain and everyone prays for it. Then it comes and it is devastating. Inland, Pakistan is mountainous but then it flattens out towards the sea. Heavy rains just sweep down into the plains and wash people’s homes away. This happens quite frequently. The people don’t own the land and their houses aren’t built to withstand disasters.

Caritas is working with communities on adaptation and mitigation across the world with projects such as mushroom farming in Cambodia, tree planting in Haiti and cyclone preparedness in Bangladesh. We think that with a bit of input communities can become better able to withstand the effects of extreme weather.

We demonstrated on the streets of Bangkok, calling for more climate justice. I took three young women from Pakistan to participate in the climate talks. I think it is very important to get young people to understand the climate issue and to speak to their own countries. We sat on the pavement with placards saying things like “Earth is slowly dying, save her, go green.”

I think that with the involvement of young people there will always be some hope. That evening we all went back to the Caritas Asia office to discuss how everyone felt. There was great suspicion that nothing would happen at an international level. If that was the case, we would have to continue doing what we could at the grassroots. But we need governments and experts to guide us in our choices and initiatives. Without their backing how are the poor ever going to be able to live with climate change?

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I'm just finishing my thesis in psychology and I work with children with learning difficulties. I'm also about to get married! These things help me in my personal and professional growth, but the development of my heart is in the hands of Caritas.

I started working with Caritas Uruguay at the beginning of 2009. Every year, they invite people who are interested in working with them to come along and talk to them. When I went to the meeting they talked about their work and their organization and something inside me told me that I should work with them.

In the beginning, I went along and did anything they needed me to do. But as the training progressed, I started to focus on volunteers and donations. These two things are really important to Caritas Uruguay, and without them they couldn't carry out their mission to support the poor and vulnerable.

A typical day starts with me answering the emails of people who have offered donations. People want to send all sorts of things such as clothes, furniture and things they no longer use. Caritas Uruguay doesn't just rely on personal donations, but also encourages businesses to engage in social responsibility.

We coordinate the donations coming in and match them up with the people who need them. We help all sorts of people in various ways. We give people in prison support and help them get back into society once they've released. We help women who are victims of violence. We help drug addicts beat their addiction. We do many more things too.

In my job it's important that I answer people who either need help or who want to donate quickly. We try to be as positive as possible and convey how grateful we are. We are very friendly and offer a personal service to people. We want them to have full confidence in what we provide and consider us as a good example of social commitment and Christian values.

We are working hard to build up our team of volunteers. Those who offer their time to us do lots of different things. They may give legal or financial advice to people in difficulty, or they may support schools or help out various disadvantaged groups in poor neighbourhoods.

Even though Caritas is known on an international and national level, we discovered that the young know the least about us. We are working to change this so they will be interested in our work and may decide to join us.

What I love about Caritas is the warmth and friendliness in our office. People are happy, despite the difficulties we sometimes face, and the smallest achievement is a cause for celebration. There's a real sense of purpose, joy, application, strength and resilience.

A backbone of volunteers in Uruguay

Sofie Labadie helps Caritas Uruguay with fundraising and volunteers in her spare time.
Zenaba, 22, was raped by soldiers who captured her town, Mongo, five years ago. She had been sleeping at home when the soldiers arrived. They tied her up and attacked her along with three other women.

‘When the combatants raped me, as aunt of nine children, I went to the hospital for HIV screening. The doctor tested me and said I need to be tested three months later. The second screening tested HIV-positive. I was desperate because AIDS is incurable and I thought I would die at any minute,’” said Zenaba.

Despite such trauma, hope has entered Zenaba’s life in the form of Hina (meaning “we are resurrected”), an association for people with HIV/AIDS funded by Caritas Chad (SECAD EV). Hina provides a variety of services to people with HIV such as food assistance and moral support and helps them become more self-sufficient.

With Hina’s support, Zenaba has learned to take care of her own health and that of her husband. “We need to eat a good diet as this is important for people with HIV. If we can afford it, we try to eat meat, fruit and vegetables.” Her daily life has now taken on a routine which offers security and helps her deal with her HIV status.

“As a Muslim, I begin my day with prayer. Then, as is the local custom, I go around to my neighbours to pass on regards before preparing breakfast,” says Zenaba.

Usually, Zenaba would fetch water after breakfast. But this heavy and difficult job is now done by someone provided by Hina/Caritas Chad.

At 9 am, Zenaba will go to the market to buy some things for lunch as she is very conscious that she has to eat well to stay healthy. After she’s prepared and eaten lunch, she sits and chats with her friends and neighbours under the trees.

The day passes pleasantly and at night Zenaba sleeps in the single room in her and her husband’s house. Their two children sleep at their mother’s home where there is more space.

Zenaba dreams to have more children. She has learned from Hina/Caritas Chad that with the right medication, her HIV status should not cause a problem if she decides to extend her family.

Yan is a young woman and the two children she has are not enough” (the age).

1897 - First Caritas founded in Germany.

1951 - Caritas organisations meet in Rome for the first general assembly of "The International Caritas Conference". Caritas becomes "the official mouthpiece of the Church in relation to its teachings in the area of charity work".

1954 - Caritas Internationalis officially recognised by the Vatican.


1956 - Revolt in Hungary.


1962 - Caritas Internationalis welcomes 14 new member organisations into the confederation. In a period marked by independence after colonial rule, nine of these are from Africa.

1965 - End of Second Vatican Council.

1967 - Caritas Bangladesh starts relief operations following a devastating cyclone which hundreds of thousands of people died. Caritas starts partnering with local relief groups in Bangladesh in July 1967.

1968 - Pope Paul VI blesses Caritas aid trucks before they leave for the Biafra crisis. Caritas starts airlifting food and relief goods to Biafra in July 1968.

1969 - Twenty-one new member organisations join the Caritas confederation.

1970s - Caritas Bangladesh starts relief operations following a devastating cyclone in which hundreds of thousands of people died. Caritas starts partnering with local relief groups in Bangladesh in July 1967.

1970 - Caritas publishes "Deus Caritas" which acknowledges Caritas' leading role in the Churches charitable activities.

1975 - First Gulf War.

1976 - Caritas launches its online peacebuilding tool kit to boost access to peacebuilding activities.

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1984 - Hunger crises in Ethiopia and China.

1989 - Fall of the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain.

1991 - First Gulf War.

1994 - Over 800,000 people are killed in three months during the Rwanda genocide. Caritas focuses on helping women and building peace in the aftermath.

1995 - Palliative care adopted.

1997 - Kyoto protocol adopted.

1998 - Hurricane Mitch hits Central America. Over 15,000 people die.

1999 - Pope Benedict visits a Caritas homeless shelter in Rome.

2000 - Caritas launches its online peacebuilding tool kit to boost access to peacebuilding activities.

2001 - First Gulf War.

2002 - Over 800,000 people are killed in three months during the Rwandan genocide. Caritas focuses on helping women and building peace in the aftermath.

2003 - Caritas provides its emergency and non-emergency relief activities.

2004 - Hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans. Over 150,000 die.

2005 - Caritas launches its online peacebuilding tool kit to boost access to peacebuilding activities.


2008 - Caritas provides over 100,000 people with food assistance.

2009 - Caritas launches its online peacebuilding tool kit to boost access to peacebuilding activities.

2010 - Haiti earthquake. Over 150,000 people die.

2011 - Japanese earthquake and nuclear disaster. Caritas' particular focus is on responding psychologically.