

January 24, 2012

Dear Members of the University Community,

On Tuesday February 7, the University signs a formal agreement with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) that will partner USF and CRS in a global solidarity educational effort that may eventually impact all of Catholic higher education. CRS is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community. CRS selected USF because we are known as an institution that is “walking the talk of faith doing justice in very concrete ways, supported by its institutional charism and strategic initiatives” (letter of 11.21.11). This external recognition is a telling tribute to the serious and effective efforts of our faculty, staff and students to blend academic rigor with social responsibility. Initially, a handful of USF faculty will be working together with CRS to help develop curricula in various disciplines that promote a disciplined sensitivity to human suffering, especially among the poorest and most vulnerable members of the global village and an awareness of the particular applicability of key Catholic social tenets to poor populations in developing countries.

As an expression of this soon-to-be partnership, I was part of a mid-January CRS-sponsored delegation for Catholic university presidents to Rwanda and Burundi. The experience was an eye, mind and heart opener, as well as an inspiring introduction to the people and work of CRS and to the possibilities of our new partnership.

CRS was formed in 1943 to assist in post World War II relief work in Europe. In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide that saw about one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu’s murdered in one hundred days, CRS reshuffled its organizational cards because of the ambiguous role of the Catholic Church in the genocide, where in some instances Hutu/Tutsi identity proved stronger than religious ties. CRS has since broadened its mission from disaster relief to embrace human development of poor and marginalized populations in collaboration with local church groups and other indigenous grassroots organizations and NGOs.

We were exposed to a number of remarkable African initiatives supported by CRS. These works included such critical efforts as post-genocidal reconciliation in Rwanda, improving agricultural practice in the face of widespread crop blight in Burundi, developing community-funded micro-lending groups among the poorest, starting a neighborhood clinic to care for pregnant women and HIV-AIDS patients in a Kigali slum, to name just a few. What is most noticeable in all these efforts was the role that CRS plays in supporting local groups through workshops and courses that train community members in basic leadership and organizational skills and offering resources to jump start various projects. CRS is not a “big brother/sister” organization, but one that forms genuine partnerships with highly motivated, determined and intelligent, if not formally educated, members of the community.

Perhaps the most unforgettable and touching experience was listening to personal testimonials from genocide victims and perpetrators in the parish of Gishaka on the outskirts of Kigali. Through a process facilitated by members of the parish's Justice and Peace Commission – trained by a diocesan and CRS-supported program – a woman talked about finally being able to forgive the man who murdered her husband, destroyed her home and burned all her possessions. That man stood next to her, and, in turn, spoke of how he came to realize his need for forgiveness from her. The process of forgiveness/reconciliation was long and painful for both; there was no magic moment, only a long, gradual, difficult journey toward mutual healing. The woman told her story of finally coming to the insight that there could be no “restitution” because her husband's murderer – like herself – had absolutely nothing to give but his own remorse. The realization slowly dawned on her that she and he had to come to a peaceful *modus vivendi* or the violence would never end and their wounds would never heal. The testimonials we listened to were remarkable expressions of the very best of our human spirit under the worst of circumstances.

Each member of our delegation independently recognized in both countries the complete absence of a problem that has reached epidemic proportion in the US: obesity. How ironic that the “first world” suffers from the effects of overeating while many of the people we visited within Burundi and Rwanda survive on only one meal a day and suffer from malnourishment – while living a lifestyle that expends far more calories than we: walking is the most common means of transportation, water is a several mile haul, cassava flour is ground by hand and cooked over charcoal made from hand-chopped trees.

Ten days in Africa showed me, once again, how responsive a USF Jesuit education is to one of the most compelling “signs of our times”: widespread poverty and human degradation. Africa, many other developing countries and pockets of misery in the U.S. are all forceful arguments for USF's commitment to educating students of “high academic achievement, strong leadership capability, concern for others and a sense of responsibility for the weak and vulnerable” [*Vision, Mission and Values*]. My thanks, admiration and congratulations to our faculty, staff and students who are committed to a higher standard of education that does not rest with mere academic excellence but aims to realize the fullness of our humanity by helping the poor and powerless realize theirs. Humanity is not a zero-sum game, and it most certainly will never come at the expense of others.



Sincerely,

Stephen A. Privett, S.J.
President