



Working to Reduce Poverty in America.

Opening Speech:

Rev. Larry Snyder, President of Catholic Charities USA
Catholic Charities USA 2009 Annual Gathering, September 24, 2009, Portland, OR

Good morning and welcome to the 2009 Annual Gathering of Catholic Charities USA. I need to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to Dennis Keenan and the wonderful staff of Catholic Charities of Portland for their kind invitation and gracious hospitality in hosting this gathering. We feel truly welcomed in this great city of the Northwest.

We come together today as co-workers in the Catholic Charities network. We come from all over the United States and her territories. Allow me to say a special welcome from those who have come the farthest, from American Samoa: Cecelia Solofa, Sister Elsa and Sister Evangeline.

But I need to say thanks to all of you for what you do each and every day. I know these past months have been overwhelming for you, but you continue to provide services to the most needy and vulnerable in our society. By any measure, this has been a difficult year. Our agencies are serving and turning people away in record numbers, even as they themselves have to make difficult decisions about reducing overhead and infrastructure and trying to serve more with less. Thank you for making the sacrifice to be here.

- We wanted to open with the video you just saw to set the stage for our discussions during our few days together.
- Last September, when Wall Street collapsed, we could not have known what we were about to face. The jobs lost, the growing number of unemployed. Within weeks the faces of the people you have worked with for years changed dramatically.
- In the best way we know how, we serve them without question. And their numbers continue to grow.
- Over the past few weeks we've heard that the poverty rate increased to almost 40 million; there are now close to 15 million unemployed; that even more have no health insurance
- Last year the number of people Catholic Charities agencies across the country served grew by 10.2 percent to 8.5 million. That doesn't include the first nine months of 2009.
- This is a crisis at levels we haven't seen since the 1930's
We are both proud of our ability to meet the growing demands for services and humbled by the desperate lives of the people who come to us for help.
- But when you really examine what we do, it is not a cause for celebration. Unlike McDonald's our goal is *not* to increase the number of people we serve! We want to serve *fewer* people -- for the reason that they would no longer need our services.
- We convene here today and plan our future. We need to boldly seize this moment in our history to build a new nation that is better for everyone and leaves far fewer behind.

We are called

- As an organization rooted in the Christian faith and Catholic tradition we are called to live lives that are not all about personal wealth and gain, but about the health and wealth of the whole community.
- In July Pope Benedict issued an encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, that urges all nations to rebuild their economies in a way that works towards the common good and the real needs of our neighbors.
- The Holy Father reminds us of the Gospel mandate to practice Charity.
- He challenges business enterprises, governments, unions and individuals to reexamine their economic responsibilities in the light of Charity governed by truth.
- And he calls us to think and act anew.
- We must heed this call. After all, Jesus did not ask us to *think* about caring for our neighbor. He gave us the Great Commandment: “Love your neighbor.”
- It was - and still is - a call to action. A call to community.

And so we begin

- I want to outline a bold plan today for reducing poverty in America. And I want to tell you why I believe WE need to lead the country so that the next century will be better than the last one. And I will tell you why it will take work and will take time.
- What we all do – Catholic Charities agencies and Catholic Charities USA – is rooted in our faith.
- You deal every day with the POOR, people who are hungry, or homeless, or sick, or in need of basic needs. You are on the front lines.
- At CCUSA we deal with people in Washington who study POVERTY. For them it is statistics, surveys, documents. Nameless and faceless numbers.
- We, the Catholic Charities movement, have the capacity to link both these facets of our work in a way very few, if any, other agencies can. We speak with policy experts not from the experience of the abstract, but rooted in the daily face to face work you do daily, with and among the poor people of this nation who are our clients, the hungry, the homeless, the unemployed and ill-trained, those who have little hope of attaining economic stability for themselves or their families.
- The people we speak with in Washington are the people who have the power to change the lives of millions through public policy. We speak to them with your voice.
- We are living once again in a 1930's type era.
- It is important to remember that it took several years before FDR and other national leaders could establish programs and build social safety nets that were supposed to prevent the Great Depression from ever happening again. We can be proud of that fact that two of Catholic Charities USA's founders, Monsignors Kerby and O'Grady, played a significant role in developing the Social Security Act of 1935.
- But poverty in the 21st century is very different from what it was 70 years ago. The world has changed dramatically since then. We've changed from an agricultural to an industrial to a technology-based economy.
- So we can't address poverty in a 1930's way.
- The 21st century calls for 21st century solutions.
- We must think and act anew.

The Right Way Forward

- During this our Centennial year I invite each one of you to join together in challenging our fellow Americans, businesses and corporations, philanthropists and foundations, and government leaders to address the suffering that exists around and among them. We must forge new dynamic partnerships to achieve our goals.

Individuals

- We want to engage our fellow Americans through every means possible, from community meetings to Facebook to YouTube to Wiki platforms.

Private Sector

- We'll challenge the private sector to develop new business models to make it possible for more men and women to live and support their families, while also enabling companies to grow and be profitable.

Government

- And we'll challenge our public officials - from the White House to the state house – to step up and seize this moment.
- We have an incredible opportunity to play a leading role and for Washington to hear us on these issues.
- I say this because we are not simply voices crying out for social change from an abstract moral perspective. In the words of our founding Charter of 1910, we are called to be the attorney for the poor. So we are the voices of the most destitute and those who serve them day-in and day-out. Our works are a testament to our faith. Our work is not rooted in statistics but in receiving each person with dignity and respect. Ultimately we make a difference one person, one child, one senior citizen at a time.
- And that is why WE are well positioned to move our values forward in America.

Call to Action

- To do this, I need all of you to be involved.
- In some ways we are better off than Msgr. Kerby or O'Grady were in the 1930's to do this. We have 21st century technology at our disposal that enables us to reach millions of people in this discussion. We'll start the conversation today, but we don't want the conversation to end on Saturday. So we have set up an interactive, internet-based community forum, sometimes referred to as a Wiki platform, to capture your ideas and to continue these discussions over the next few weeks. Candy Hill will explain how this is going to work in her session this afternoon.
- And so, as the conversation continues as we travel around the country to our regional summits throughout this centennial year, we will need your help, your voices, your ideas, and your participation.
- Bringing about change at this level is not going to be easy. If you think healthcare reform was rough, this will be even harder.

- And we won't get immediate results. It took FDR 4 or 5 years to address social policy issues during the Great Depression after stabilizing the economy.
- But we have an opportunity to make poverty in America morally unacceptable. Will we step up and seize this moment?
- In one of his first visits to this country, Pope John Paul II held a special audience in San Antonio in 1987 specifically for the Catholic Charities network. His speech was entitled *The Poor Have a Privileged Place in Christ* and in it he said: "We have seen how Catholic Charities and all its colleague associations have lent God their own flesh—their hands and feet and hearts—so that his work may be done in our world. For your long and persevering service—creative and courageous, and blind to the distinctions of race or religion—you will certainly hear Jesus' words of gratitude: 'You did it for me.'"

So gather, transform and serve! ...By working for a society which fosters the dignity of every human person, not only are you serving the poor, but you are renewing the founding vision of this nation under God! And may God reward you abundantly!"

In that spirit, we know we **should** do something about poverty in this country. We know we **can** do something about poverty in this country. And together, we **must** do something about poverty in this country. Let us, the Catholic Charities movement in America, invite everyone to join us in this vital work, for what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do for the entire community.

May God who has begun this great work in us, bring it to fruition.