



4th SUNDAY of LENT 30th March

IRENE from DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC of the CONGO (DRC)

Irene lives in the DRC, one of the most impoverished nations in the world. Millions of people have been killed as the result of conflicts, and due to increasing emergencies and political instability, nearly 70% of the population are living below the poverty line.

On top of this, Kongolo, a rural area in the DRC, is marked by high poverty levels, scarce educational resources, and limited employment opportunities. The Youth Capacity Strengthening Program (YCSP), supported by Caritas Australia and run in partnership with Caritas Kongolo, is designed to tackle these issues by empowering young individuals, especially young mothers, to gain self-sufficiency and become active contributors to their communities. Caritas Kongolo works in the region to find particularly vulnerable young people, including people who had lost both parents, former child soldiers and survivors of gender-based violence – and this is why they selected Irene to participate in the program.

Irene's childhood was marked by hardships – after her father died in a war, Irene, her mother and siblings were displaced with her mother the sole breadwinner. Despite the difficulties for her mother to afford school fees, Irene persevered to attend school for as long as she could. However, as a teenager, she was sexually assaulted by one of her classmates and became pregnant. Irene was pressured to marry her assaulter due to cultural and societal norms. Abandoning Irene, her husband fled soon after she had her first child. "I suffered with my child there alone, none of his family members helped me," Irene said.

Overwhelmed by the responsibilities of supporting her first child on her own, Irene returned to her mother's household. A while later, her husband returned, and she began living with him briefly, before he later fled again after learning she was pregnant a second time. Thankfully, her mother stood by her. "She welcomed me again without complaining, continuing to look after me and my two children after I gave birth. She cultivated cassava for our food, sometimes fishing to diversify our meals. We survived thanks to my mother's sacrifices," Irene explained.

The level of poverty they faced meant her mother would sometimes have to sell their basic supplies like pots or go into debt, to afford the basic needs of the family. They slept on the ground as it was too expensive to buy mats for sleeping. Each sleeping mat is only around \$1.60AUD.

Without the skills to find employment, Irene had a very limited chance of escaping the cycle of poverty. However, thanks to Caritas Kongolo, Irene was able to join the Youth Program and undertake a sewing course

which also provided sewing machines and fabrics for. In addition to this, Caritas Kongolo ran agricultural training sessions and provided hoes, peanut seeds, corns, masonry and carpentry equipment to Irene's community.

At the end of the course, Irene and her peers were provided with sewing machines so they could earn an income. The trainers came back several times with more machines, fabric, and sewing materials for new students that Irene and others had helped train.



On top of this, Irene now has agricultural skills to cultivate food. She said: “We have a group field, but I also have my own field that produces the food we eat today at home... Before, we didn't have plates to serve food, but today, thanks to sewing, I now cover all the household needs. Regarding the children I send to school, there are my orphaned nephews from my late brother. I provide for all their needs. These are the changes in my life thanks to this job... There are 15 of us at home, and I take care of everyone.”

The impact that this program is having on the lives of some of the world’s most vulnerable young women cannot be understated. Irene continued: “our lives are so different now. Before, women depended on men's income, but now, with our sewing skills, we can take care of ourselves... When I teach others to sew, I feel comfortable and useful to my community.”

Thanks to the program, Irene has been able to break out of a cycle of poverty and provide an education for her children and nephews so that they will be able to access a well-paid job on completion of their studies.



REFLECTION for FOURTH SUNDAY of LENT

Joshua 5:9–12 | Ps 33:2–7. R. v.9 | 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 | Luke 15:1–3. 11–32

One of the most beautiful expressions in the Bible comes from the prophet Ezekiel (Ezk 11:19). ‘Thus says the Lord, I will take their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh.’ It is a call to be tender and compassionate.

You would need a heart of stone not to be affected by the stories we encounter today. Most of us have heard the story of the two sons in today’s Gospel over and over. The brilliance of the way Jesus tells stories is that it still gets under our skin. Here are two young men who think they can live on their own terms. One has a sense of entitlement and demands his share of his father’s estate which he then squanders. He is finally prepared to eat humble pie and find his way home. The other son has a different sense of entitlement. He believes that his hard work and reliability should provide him with a greater share of his father’s love. At different times in our life, we can relate more to one or other of these people. Jesus implies that they are both blind to the way God’s love works and that they both need to grow. They have both been dead and now must come to life.

The story we encounter this week is also deeply moving. Irene, aged 25, lives in the Kongolo region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Her story above shows how Irene’s life changed after she participated in the Youth Capacity Strengthening program, run by Caritas Australia’s partner, Caritas Kongolo. Through the program, she undertook training in sewing and livestock farming, enabling her to generate income to support her family.

Our second reading today reminds us that we are ‘ambassadors for Christ.’ St Paul says, ‘for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation.’ Let us all be part of building that new creation, setting the world to rights as best we can. Our part is to reach out in compassion and love to heal the wounds of the whole human family. Let us all Unite Against Poverty as pilgrims of hope in this Year of Jubilee.

Your generous support this Lenten Season will enable Caritas Australia to provide life-changing support to vulnerable communities in need.



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Thank you for standing with us, as we *Unite Against Poverty this Lent*.

