

50 years of Caraes Ndera: a story of love, care, and professionalism in Rwanda

When we look back on 50 years of Caraes Ndera, and we do so with a grateful and thankful heart, we can divide our reflection into three parts, linked to the three times in which Caraes Ndera grew and evolved into what it is today.

It all started in 1964, when the then archbishop of Kabgayi asked the Brothers of Charity if they could do something for the psychiatric patients who went without care in Rwanda. The Brothers of Charity were known in Rwanda for their work in education, but in other countries they were also known for their work in the field of mental health care. In Belgium, they were the first to start a more human and professional care for psychiatric patients, who were still in chains at that time, in prisons, no longer considered as human beings. Their living conditions were worse than those of animals. It was the Brothers of Charity's founder, the Servant of God Peter Joseph Triest, together with the first Brothers of Charity and later on with the help of the first Belgian psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Guislain, who developed a new approach in the care of psychiatric patients from 1815 onwards.

History repeated itself here in Rwanda.

After several talks and reflections, a unique structure of collaboration was set up so as to realize a plan, so as to develop solid mental health care for psychiatric patients in Rwanda. The Rwandan government, the Belgian government, the Brothers of Charity, and the Catholic Church of Rwanda set up a consortium, called 'Caraes', which means 'loving care of the sick', with legal foundations in both Rwanda and Belgium. It was the first time in history that the congregation entered into this kind of collaboration. Every one of the four partners took their responsibility, which resulted in the construction of the first psychiatric hospital in Rwanda, on the hill of Ndera, the first stone of which was placed on 4 July 1968. This is the reason why we can say that Caraes Ndera has existed for 50 years this year.

Which were the great events during the first 25 years? I will discuss them in the first part of the history.

Psychiatric patients, who were in prisons, were liberated and brought over to the psychiatric centre, where they finally received suitable therapy and care.

When the first patients were admitted to the hospital in 1974, it had a capacity of 40 beds, but 3 years later, there were 140 beds already. In 1977, a special home for chronic psychiatric patients was built with a capacity of 12 beds.

Very soon, the need for decentralization was felt, and so in 1978, a psychiatric clinic was opened in Butare near the Groupe scolaire. With the support of the World Health Organization and the Catholic University of Leuven, a further plan for decentralization was developed, with the installation of mobile teams serving no less than 10 medical centres all over the country.

With that image, we could celebrate our first anniversary of 25 years in 1993, and we were able to look at Caraes Ndera with great satisfaction. And God saw that it was very good.

But then, God closed his eyes, and here in Ndera as well the tragedy of the genocide of the tutsis of 1994 was enormous. Patients were killed, staff was reduced, and the buildings destroyed. A dream that was realized in 25 years' time was destroyed in just a few days. Only in October 1994, the first efforts were made to start up the care for psychiatric patients again, here on Ndera Hill. It was as though we had to start from scratch. We are very thankful that several organizations came to our aid and support us. We specifically think of the Belgian Government, Swiss Humanitarian Aid, the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity, and other groups that the new Rwandan government invited to be involved in the restart of our psychiatric centre. The greatest challenge was the lack of professionals, and so we decided to set up our own training programme for psychiatric nurses. Together with the Kigali Health Institute, we were able to develop our training programme in the former buildings of Twizere, and provide the country with its first well-trained psychiatric nurses. I would like to remember Dr. Bonaventure Muremyangango, who was our hospital's first medical physician from the very beginning and who started to work with us again after the restoration of our centre. People like Dr. Bonaventure are true monuments of our history of mental health care in Rwanda.

Around the year 2000, we could say that our care was back to the level before the genocide, and so it was time for new plans. Again, God saw that it was very good.

And so we enter the third period of the history of our hospital. The first step was the development of a small centre for people with post-traumatic problems in the city of Kigali. In 2008, a house was rented in Kicukiro. It meant the start of 'Icyizere', which means hope and trust. Yes, it was our purpose to give these people new hope.

With the support of Misereor from Germany and the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity, we were able to develop a totally new centre in Kicukiro. Today, it has three departments and there are still more plans for the future.

Inside the hospital, we started with a neurology service, and in 2009 we inaugurated a completely new neurological clinic, the first specialized neurological service in Rwanda.

For children with mental disorders and specifically post-traumatic stress issues, we started a new centre: the Kundwa Centre for children.

Caraes Butare became an actual hospital with completely new buildings. Also in Ndera, new buildings appeared every year and existing buildings were renovated, always with the purpose of improving the therapy and care of our psychiatric patients. For the education of children with intellectual disabilities, a new day centre called 'Humura' was created. For small children, we now have our School of Charity

- Mama Andréa. We can repeat with great confidence that God is seeing this with great satisfaction.

It is therefore with a grateful heart that we are here today.

We are grateful for those many brothers and staff members who have worked for Caraes over the years and who have dedicated themselves to the care of people with mental disorders. By doing so, they contributed to a real change in mentality at the social level. Even though the taboo about mental illness has not completely disappeared, the large population in Rwanda now knows that mental illness is a disease that can be treated and cured, and that there are several good places in the country where this can be done.

We are grateful for the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity, who started this care and continued to support its further expansion. With their Belgian NGO Caraes, now Fracarita Belgium, they have always tried to find the necessary financial means to support the further development of the care. We must not forget the input of the Belgian government, which has made a substantial contribution to the operation of the institute for many years.

We are grateful to the Rwandan government, which from the outset was very aware of the trouble in which people with mental disorders found themselves and therefore did not cease to stimulate the development of mental health care and also make it physically possible. The agreement between the congregation and the Rwandan government, which established cooperation and placed it in a legal framework, is truly innovative and exemplary.

We are grateful for the Rwandan Catholic Church, who were the first to ask the congregation to take the fate of mentally ill in Rwanda to heart. They showed great evangelical compassion for the poorest in society of which Jesus said that He himself was present in those who were sick, poor, neglected, alienated, or in prison. Sick, poor, neglected, alienated, imprisoned: all that was the fate of those who suffered from mental illness, and the Church in Rwanda, and through the Church the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity, did not close their eyes and heart for that.

After 50 years, we all look forward to the future with hope and with confidence, and we hope that many will continue the work of Caraes Ndera with the same positive momentum. Always with 'Caraes': loving care of the sick. It is love that makes us creative to keep growing on a professional and an organizational level, but also in terms of the material framework. For the person who loves, nothing is impossible. It is and it remains our great dream: that every person with a mental disorder might really find healing and consolation, and this through real charity, which means with

love, compassion, sound service, and in a professional way. No health without mental health. Let Caraes always remain Caraes: loving care of the sick.

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