



Diocese of Joliet CRS and CCHD Coordinator Reflects on CRS Speaker's Presentation

By Kayla S. Jacobs, Diocese of Joliet

On September 7th, 2018 the Diocese of Joliet, Office for Human Dignity hosted Thomas Awiapo from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Ghana, Africa for a luncheon with parish leaders and members of the Council of Catholic Women. Awiapo shared stories from his childhood, growing up in poverty in a small village in Ghana, receiving assistance with food and schooling from Catholic Relief Services, and now he holds a Master's Degree from California State University and works for CRS in Ghana.

Awiapo began the discussion with what he called a simple message: a message of gratitude and thanksgiving. He explained that the work of Catholic Relief Services, which is the official international humanitarian aid organization for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is only possible because of the support of Catholic parishioners. Due to so many generous Catholics giving their time, talents, treasures, and prayers CRS is able to bring the Gospel message of love and hope to the poor and vulnerable in over 100 countries around the World. Awiapo wanted to put a face to that work and generosity.

In the village Awiapo grew up in there wasn't clean water. The only water they had was from a river, drinking the water ran the risk of dying, but so did not drinking it. The village did not have electricity, the only light they had was from the moon. When the full moon would come they would celebrate. Health facilities were out of the question for their village and receiving an education was rare. Food was scarce. He described nights when he was so hungry that he couldn't even sleep because of the hunger pangs. While he grew up with many struggles the most painful was losing family members to poverty. Both of his parents died of hunger and lack of health care when him and his three brothers were young. The kids had to survive on their own. Then his two youngest brothers died of hunger, one of them died in his arms. Thomas described that experience as holding bones because of how thin his brother was.

Then one day things changed for him. Catholic Relief Services came to his village and started providing food at the school. Although at the time little Thomas didn't want to attend school he really wanted the food. So much so that he would walk 5 miles there and 5 miles back just to receive it. CRS would provide a little snack in the morning for all of the students and a full meal at the end of the school day. They set it up this way to ensure that the kids would stay at the school to receive an education as well. Thomas is grateful for that little snack and thrived as a student, eventually completing his Master's Degree at California State University. Upon graduation he decided to move back to Ghana and help out the way that he was helped and works for CRS, feeding kids and ensuring their education. "Education is simply liberation," he said as he wrapped up his talk, "and that little snack is the greatest justice I have received. Today I'm sitting here, joyfully still alive."

If you're interested in learning more about Catholic Relief Services and/or if you want to order CRS Rice Bowls for your parish contact Kayla S. Jacobs, Relief and Development Coordinator, at [kjacob@dioceseofjoliet.org](mailto:kjacobs@dioceseofjoliet.org)