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Retired Catholic Relief Services leader to receive 2012 Laetare Medal

by Catholic News Service

NOTRE DAME, Ind. -- Ken Hackett, who retired in December after 18 years as president of Catholic Relief Services, will receive the University of Notre Dame's 2012 Laetare Medal.

Holy Cross Fr. John I. Jenkins, university president, announced the honor Sunday. Given annually since 1883 to a Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the church and enriched the heritage of humanity," it will be presented at Notre Dame's 167th commencement ceremony May 20.

"Ken Hackett has responded to a Gospel imperative with his entire career," Jenkins said in a statement. "His direction of the Catholic Church's outreach to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and unsheltered of the world has blended administrative acumen with genuine compassion in a unique and exemplary way."

Born in West Roxbury, Mass., Hackett joined the Peace Corps shortly after his 1968 graduation from Boston College. Assigned to a Catholic mission in rural Ghana, he worked in an agricultural cooperative and saw "the actual impact of American food aid on the health and well-being of very poor kids in a very isolated part of a West African country," he said recently.

After completing his Peace Corps assignment, Hackett joined CRS, the U.S. Catholic relief and development agency, in 1972. He started his career in Sierra Leone, where he managed a nationwide leprosy program and a maternal and child health program.

Subsequent positions took him to various posts in Africa and Asia, as well as in CRS' Baltimore headquarters. As regional director for Africa, he managed the agency's response to the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85. He also supervised CRS operations in East Africa during the crisis in Somalia in the 1990s.

Hackett was appointed president of CRS in 1993. During his tenure, he established a division focusing on outreach to dioceses, parishes, Catholic organizations and colleges and universities and laypeople were first appointed to the CRS board of directors.

Catholic Relief Services now operates in more than 100 countries, with a global staff of nearly 5,000.

Hackett is a former North American president of Caritas Internationalis, the confederation of humanitarian agencies of the Catholic Church, and continues to serve on the board of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum at the Vatican and as an adviser to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Laetare Medal is named for the fourth Sunday of Lent on the church calendar, known as Laetare Sunday, when it is announced each year.

Among the previous recipients of the Laetare Medal are Civil War Gen. William Rosecrans, President John F. Kennedy, Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, novelist Walker Percy, Chicago Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin, labor activist Msgr. George G. Higgins and jazz composer Dave Brubeck.

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