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U.S. Military Academy cadets wait to load live 105 mm shells into an M119 105 mm Howitzer artillery weapon during tactical and physical training activities Aug. 7, 2020, at West Point, New York. U.S. bishops have signed a letter calling for the U.S. to cut military spending and instead invest in ending poverty. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)



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Eighteen U.S. bishops have signed a [letter](#) calling for the United States to cut military spending and instead invest in ending poverty.

"The growing gap between the rich and the poor is compounded by a growing gap between our nation's spending on weapons and preparations for war and our commitment to end poverty," the statement said.

Pax Christi USA, a Catholic peace organization, led the [Bread Not Stones](#) campaign behind the letter. Since October 2023, Pax Christi USA's grassroots membership has contacted at least 99 different bishops in 65 different dioceses, leading to the 18 bishop signatories on the final letter.

In December, the U.S. Congress [authorized](#) a record \$886 billion in annual military spending, up 3% from the previous year.

The campaign's name comes from [Matthew 7:9](#), where Jesus asks his disciples, "Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread?"

In a statement to NCR, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, who is also bishop president of Pax Christi USA, wrote, "Pax Christi USA sees the US military budget, especially the part earmarked for weapons development, as offering stones when so many social programs in the US are underfunded, resulting in poor nutrition and hunger in our country."



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, bishop president of Pax Christi USA, speaks at a meeting Dec. 6, 2022, in Rome. The topic was "Pope Francis, nonviolence and the fullness of *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth)." (CNS/Courtesy of Pax Christi International/Martin Pilgram)

The most recent [data](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveals that 12.8% of U.S. households faced food insecurity in 2022, with 5.1% of U.S. households reporting someone skipped meals because of lack of resources.

That level of food insecurity represented a significant [increase](#) from 2021, when only 10.2% of households faced food insecurity, as Congress [chose](#) not to renew social safety net programs instituted because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022's fiscal year, the U.S. [spent](#) \$183 billion on the USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs, a 6% decrease from the previous year with an adjustment for inflation.

In his Jan. 8 speech to ambassadors to the Holy See, Pope Francis [renewed](#) a call for military spending to be diverted to a global fund to end hunger and finance development in low-income countries to prevent violence and migration, a proposal he made in his 2020 encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#), drawing on Pope Paul VI's [teaching](#).

Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, whose archdiocese includes two of the three U.S. nuclear weapons research facilities and houses the biggest U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons, also signed the letter. Wester told NCR, "The spending is just astronomical for us in Santa Fe at the Los Alamos laboratories and Sandia." But, he said, "we don't see the benefit at all."



Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, offers a reflection on the urgent need for nuclear disarmament during a prayer service for United Nations diplomats at the Church of the Holy Family Sept. 12, 2022, in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The archbishop highlighted that, despite the military spending that occurs in New Mexico, the state struggles with hunger, [poor educational achievement](#), violent crime, addiction and poverty. "The money that's spent on nuclear weapons becomes even more egregious as you look at the needs that we could be fulfilling in our country," he said.

Wester [released](#) a 2022 pastoral letter calling for nuclear disarmament titled "[Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament](#)," and he has since committed to extensive [advocacy](#), which has included taking part in a [trip](#) to Japan to commemorate the 1945 U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The bishop signatories of the letter also included two U.S. cardinals — Robert McElroy of San Diego and Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey — as well as current and former bishops from Detroit; Dubuque, Iowa; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Phoenix; Monterey, California; Jackson, Mississippi; El Paso; Little Rock, Arkansas; Peoria, Illinois; Los Angeles; Des Moines, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; and Milwaukee.



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, left, and Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey (CNS photos/David Maung, Lola Gomez)

Pax Christi USA leadership emphasized that many of their hundreds of members did not report the bishops they contacted, so they suspect the total number of bishops contacted is higher than they report. The organization also publicized some of the bishops who either did not respond to requests to sign the letter or declined the opportunity.

Tom Cordaro, a Pax Christi USA ambassador of peace and member of the leadership of the organization's Illinois chapter, said, "For too many bishops in the United States, they hide in the anonymity of silence," escaping "accountability" and "transparency."

"This campaign was an attempt to begin to change that dynamic because their silence speaks just as clearly and just as loudly as their speaking does," he said.

Among the bishops that Pax Christi USA [said](#) had declined to sign were Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago and Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle.



Military Services Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, speaks during a Nov. 14 session of the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Cordaro said that bishops who declined to sign often told Pax Christi USA that they either did not sign statements or that they would only sign statements sponsored by the U.S. bishops' conference.

The president of the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference, Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, did not respond to NCR's request for comment about the conference's position on the Pax Christi USA campaign.

Pax Christi USA told NCR that, while the 2023 campaign is officially over, they still hope to add more bishops' signatures.

Wester said, "Pax Christi is a wonderful organization, and I would like to see more bishops support it."

Cordaro said that he hoped that the campaign would amplify Catholic voices, including bishops' voices, during the next round of congressional budget negotiations.

"When you spend money on aircraft carriers, you don't have money to spend on schools or on health care or affordable housing," he said, also mentioning the lack of funds to address climate change and international poverty.



U.S. Navy sailors are seen aboard aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman Feb. 2, 2022, in the Adriatic Sea. The Truman strike group is operating under NATO command and control along with several other NATO allies for coordinated maritime maneuvers, anti-submarine warfare training and long-range training. (CNS/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

The bishops' sign-on letter is part of a March 2022 revival of an earlier Pax Christi USA campaign [begun](#) in March of 2000, also titled "Bread, Not Stones." During that campaign, 34 Catholic bishops backed the organization's efforts, and a nonprofit led by Ben and Jerry's co-founder, Jerry Cohen, lent the group a bus to take their message on a nationwide tour.

Cordaro said that both campaigns have struggled to engage people in rational conversations about the federal budget because of the challenge of "war fever" in times of conflict, with the first campaign starting before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"Those who are in favor of a military solution to conflict will use these kinds of events to scare people into thinking that the only reasonable response is one of overwhelming military force," Cordaro said. "Even suggesting that the idol of military power is just that, a false idol, it makes you a heretic in civil discourse," he said.

Wester acknowledged that the campaign is not likely to be heeded right away, saying that those involved take inspiration from the [parable](#) of the persistent widow who eventually wore down the unjust judge.

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The archbishop said he believed change would come when politicians began to feel pressure from voters. "We've got to really do a campaign for our Catholics in the pews to encourage them to educate themselves on the issues and to advocate for these issues," Wester told NCR, saying Bread Not Stones is adding to that effort.

In his statement, Stowe referenced the recent Advent [reading](#) from Isaiah 2, where the prophet says, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again."

"We seem ever farther from that day with state-sponsored violence increasing day by day," the bishop wrote. "It is time for followers of the Prince of Peace to work harder for the realization of this prophecy."

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