

With the 7.2 million supply of cardboard rice bowls depleted, Catholic Relief Services rushed production of 500,000 can wrappers (left) to supplement collections for the Operation Rice Bowl campaign of Lent 1977. (CNS)



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The colorful cardboard boxes of Catholic Relief Services' Rice Bowl program are a Lenten mainstay. Many of us are so accustomed to them, we might not even see them in piles on the back tables in our parishes, college Catholic student centers or diocesan offices. We also might not find them deep in our kids' backpacks from their Catholic schools or religious education programs.

But this year — on the 50th anniversary of these tiny collection baskets in squarish bowl shapes — their humble effort to help is all the more urgent as Catholic Relief Services faces financial cuts that could likely end its operation.

Virtually all of the foreign-based assistance of the U.S. bishops' overseas relief agency has been terminated, said Bill O'Keefe, executive vice president for mission and mobilization at Catholic Relief Services.

And its publicly supported programs are on life support after President Donald Trump [issued a freeze](#) on nearly all foreign assistance programs funded through the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Right now, the agency's Rice Bowls seem akin to David's stones in the battle against Goliath, aiming to take on world hunger while the federal government freezes funding that had long helped CRS with its work.



A 2014 photo shows CRS Rice Bowl designs from over the years. (Catholic Relief Services/Lauren Carroll)

"Hunger doesn't go away," O'Keefe said, adding the need is incredible because "governments around the world, including our own" are cutting assistance.

O'Keefe spoke with The National Catholic Reporter just two days before Lent began and the relief agency was set to once again kick off its annual Rice Bowl appeal.

"Global hunger is growing, after coming down," he said. He stressed, "Now is really a time for us as a community to come together and support our brothers and sisters being abandoned by governments."

In fiscal year 2023, Catholic Relief Services received more than half its \$1.2 billion budget from U.S. government grants and agreements, a [2024 audit](#) showed. Currently, CRS anticipates reducing its budget by half this year because of expected reductions in U.S. foreign assistance, the group's president and chief executive officer, Sean Callahan, said in a February [internal email first disclosed by NCR](#).

Where to send CRS Rice Bowl donations

Online

English: crsricebowl.org/give

Spanish: crsplatodearroz.org/donar

By phone

Call 877-435-7277 between 8 a.m. and 11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time and tell the operator that the gift is for CRS Rice Bowl.

By mail

Please write "CRS Rice Bowl" on the memo line of your check and mail it to:

Catholic Relief Services
Attention: CRS Rice Bowl
P.O. Box 5200
Harlan, IA 51593-0700

And while we're looking at numbers, here's another figure: The World Health Organization reported in 2023 that about [733 million people faced hunger](#) — or one in 11 people globally and one in five in Africa.

According to a [report](#) by five United Nations agencies, more than 580 million people could be chronically undernourished in 2030. It points out that elevated hunger levels are quickly becoming the new normal, causing long-term and generational harm to children, families and communities.

"This increase in hunger that we're seeing is devastating," said Callahan, in a CRS press release. "Families have to wait for hours in line for just one sack of rice or one container of water that might only last them the night. CRS Rice Bowl donations enable us to help during these emergency moments, as well as set up long-term help and development."

To keep up with this important work amid such huge setbacks, CRS officials are tapping into the determination the original Rice Bowl creators had back in 1975.

At that time, about 435 million people faced hunger. Although that number is significantly lower than current figures, it was still staggering. And in the North

Central Sahel region of Africa, 2 million people died of starvation from 1972 to 1975 after a drought caused a famine there.

The bleak and faraway news did not discourage a group of Catholics in the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania. In 1975, they took up the Lenten practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving specifically for those suffering in this African region stretching from Senegal to Sudan. Their donations marked the beginning of what was then called [Operation Rice Bowl](#).

This group worked together with other local faith communities in collecting money to feed the hungry. The next year, this effort became a national program and the following year the U.S. bishops made the relief effort an official Catholic Relief Services program.



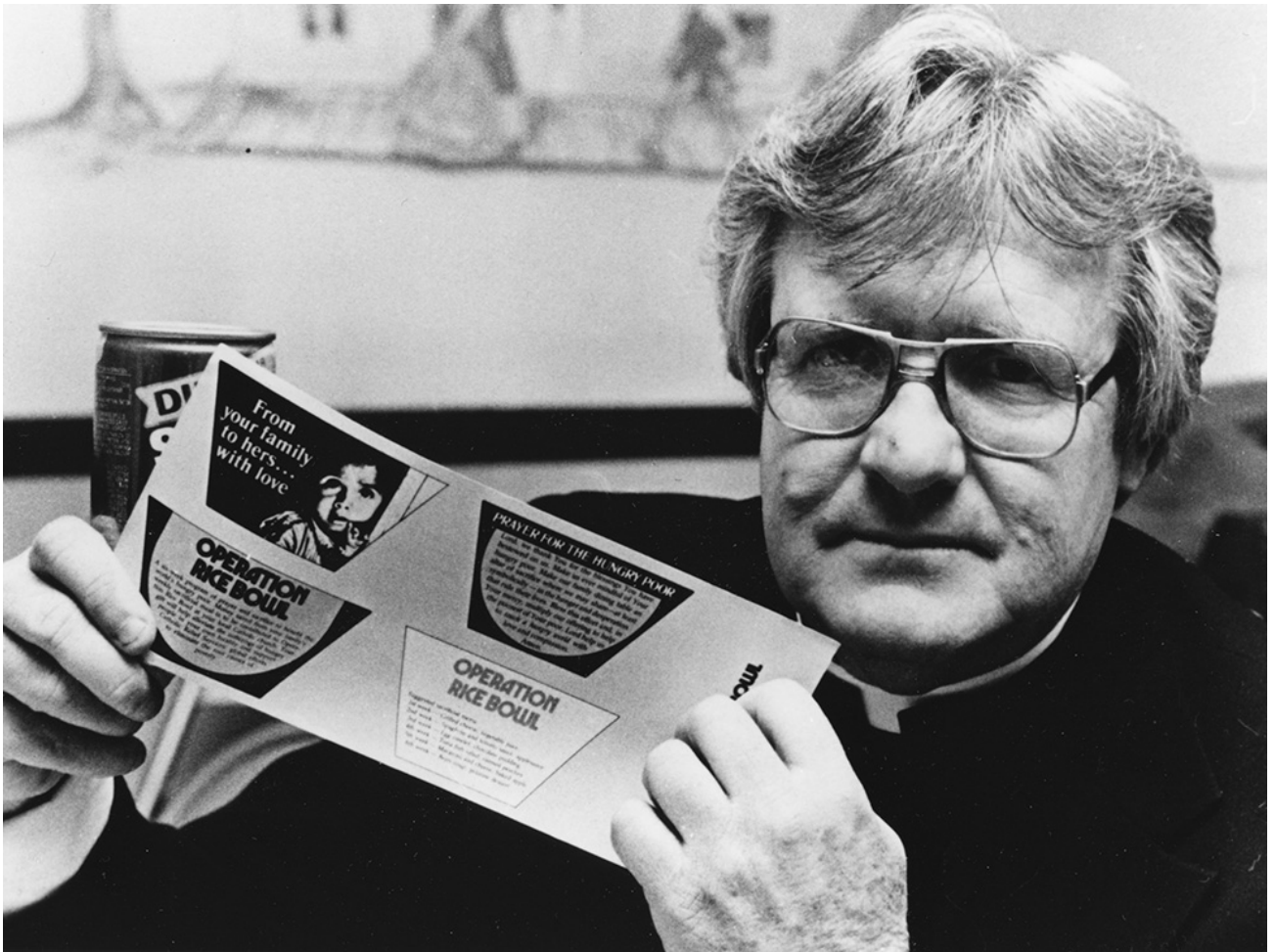
Workers in Philadelphia load a shipment of rice bound for Bangladesh in summer 1976, in a relief effort handled by Catholic Relief Services, using funds from the first national Operation Rice Bowl campaign. (CNS/Bob Strawn)



With the Operation Rice Bowl program going national in 1976, families were urged to prepare one sacrificial meal each week of Lent and offer the money saved to help feed the starving people of the world. This example for a simple meal from 1976 consists of macaroni and cheese, and vanilla pudding.
(CNS/Robert H. Davis)



An example for a simple meal for the 1976 Operation Rice Bowl campaign consists of egg salad, toast and rice pudding. (CNS/Robert H. Davis)



Msgr. Robert Coll, one of the founders of Operation Rice Bowl in the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania, shows collection can labels for the national campaign in 1979. (CNS/Paul Cullen)



Workers in Philadelphia load a shipment of rice bound for Bangladesh in summer 1976, in a relief effort handled by Catholic Relief Services, using funds from the first national Operation Rice Bowl campaign. (CNS/Bob Strawn)

Since it started, the campaign has raised more than \$350 million and in recent years it has annually raised about \$8 million.

The CRS [website](#) points out that donations from the Rice Bowl campaign annually helps more than 200 million people in at least 120 countries and 25% of the funds support local diocesan food relief efforts.

Initially, these donations were meant to be from the money one might normally spend on something given up for Lent. That doesn't seem to be the main impetus anymore; the effort is promoted as part of the Lenten tradition of almsgiving and the box is not the only way to give. Rice Bowl donations can be sent online, by mail or phone.

Collectively, these boxes are almost the equivalent of millions of bake sales at parishes, schools and pastoral centers — small steps to make an inroad into the huge problem many might not think about on a regular day.

Meanwhile, O'Keefe said he was inspired that at least 80,000 people [took part in a recent action alert](#) that urged members of Congress to lift the freeze on foreign aid.

Our work will "absolutely continue," O'Keefe said, thanking generous Catholic donors and new efforts to meet needs to help more people. But the struggle right now, he added, appropriately, "feels Lenten."

This story appears in the [Lent 2025](#) and [Trump's Second Term](#) feature series.