

Testimony of **Bill O’Keefe**
Executive Vice President, Catholic Relief Services
 Regarding **Fiscal Year 2026 appropriations** to the House subcommittee on
National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs
 April 2, 2025

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Frankel: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the international relief and development agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), along with the USCCB requests that you protect international poverty-reducing humanitarian and development assistance in Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) appropriations. We urge you to prioritize the accounts below to at least the levels indicated.

Appropriations Accounts (\$ in thousands)	USCCB/CRS FY26 Request
Global Health Programs Includes maternal and child health, nutrition, vulnerable children, HIV/AIDS (USAID and State), Global Fund, global health security, malaria, tuberculosis, neglected tropical diseases	10,030,450
Development Assistance	3,931,000
International Disaster Assistance	4,779,000
Complex Crises Fund	55,000
Economic Support Fund	3,890,400
Migration and Refugee Assistance	3,928,000
Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance	100,000
Millennium Challenge Account	930,000
Contribution to the International Development Association	1,380,256
Green Climate Fund	500,000
U.S. International Development Finance Corporation	998,250

A Catholic Vision for U.S. International Assistance

The Catholic mandate to serve the common good takes on an increased urgency in 2025 as the Church celebrates a Jubilee year - a Holy year of grace when we are called to bring hope to our global family. This Jubilee year coincides with a realignment of U.S. international assistance to ensure that all programs make the U.S. safer, stronger, and more prosperous. As Congress considers how to accomplish these priorities, we welcome the opportunity to share a Catholic, pro-life vision for U.S. international assistance.

The State’s Moral Responsibility to Care for Life and Dignity

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that charity is an “indispensable expression of [the Church’s] very being.” The Catholic Church has a moral responsibility to respond to our neighbors in need; additionally, we are called to take an expansive view of our global family. Pope Benedict remarks that “Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of ‘neighbor’ is now universalized, yet it remains concrete.” CRS lives out this teaching by working alongside more than 1,700 local partners to promote the life and dignity of vulnerable families in over 100 countries around the world. Catholic teaching has long held that governments, alongside the Church, must play a key role in promoting human life and dignity. In

his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis asserts that states should be “present and active” and “primarily concerned with individuals and the common good.” The Church encourages governments to pursue the common good as it applies to *all* members of our global family, as reflected in Pope Paul VI’s writings that “economically advanced nations have a very grave obligation to help developing peoples.”

Given the shared responsibility of Church institutions and states to promote human life and dignity, our Catholic vision for U.S. international assistance rests on strong partnerships between the U.S. government and the U.S. Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XVI affirmed the value of cooperation between state and Church agencies, noting how it has “borne fruit” and increased the effectiveness of humanitarian endeavors. We recognize that U.S. international assistance is not solely charity. It is a strategic investment that has a profound impact on human life, dignity, and global stability. CRS stands ready to build on our history of successful collaboration with the U.S. government and appreciates Congressional efforts to facilitate continued partnership in FY26.

Catholic Principles to Guide International Assistance

Human Dignity and Integral Human Development: The Church declares that every human life is sacred and possesses **inherent dignity**, derived not from individual actions but from our creation in the image of God. CRS’ work to support the inherent dignity of each person is guided by the concept of **Integral Human Development**: that true development extends beyond economic or material progress to include spiritual, cultural, and environmental dimensions. A Catholic approach to international assistance, based on the sanctity of all human life, requires a robust commitment to humanitarian response. The Catholic Church and U.S. government have a shared interest in supporting families who face destabilizing conflict, displacement, hunger, and natural disasters. A safer, more peaceful world does not come from defense or diplomacy alone, but by ensuring that people are not forced to act out of desperation. In Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo, CRS provides lifesaving food assistance to keep families from resorting to early child marriage, recruitment by gangs, and forced migration to survive. Going forward, the United States must continue to fund work that promotes peace and protects the inherent human dignity of families in emergencies, whether manmade or natural.

In accordance with the Church’s teachings on Integral Human Development, CRS urges the U.S. government to not only fund programs that meet emergency needs but also support families to rise above poverty. U.S. interests and moral interests converge around development programs that help farmers increase yields, communities improve their potable water infrastructure, vendors expand their markets, and children achieve basic education. These programs allow our global family to thrive, create shared prosperity and establish the United States as a valuable partner to do so.

When carried out with intention and consistency, development assistance achieves significant results. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the Shared Future program in Iraq, a 7-year effort to support the sustainable return of religious and ethnic minorities who fled formerly ISIS-controlled areas. CRS and local partners have provided business development support for returnees and worked with communities to ensure that groups of different backgrounds have the tools and space to rebuild trust. Over time, the project’s activities increased residents’ intention to stay in their villages from 70% to 92%, ultimately advancing stability. Regrettably, the program was terminated as it sought to solidify these gains in its final year of operation. Congress must continue

to invest in development programs that are committed to Integral Human Development because they foster stable communities for a safer world and a more secure United States.

Solidarity: The principle of **solidarity** is rooted in *ordo amoris*, which teaches that love for God must be followed by love for one’s neighbor. The Church emphasizes that solidarity extends beyond personal responsibility to encompass the duties of states; John Paul XXIII wrote that “[t]he solidarity which binds all men together as members of a common family makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery, and poverty of other nations.” CRS embodies the principle of solidarity by advancing the global common good and supporting families in poorer nations. Historically, international assistance initiatives have created parallel systems in countries rather than integrating with local structures. True solidarity requires deeper collaboration across civil society, governments, and both the public and private sectors. In Ethiopia, for example, CRS’ U.S.-funded poverty-reduction programming aligns with the existing national safety net and public works program. To achieve lasting impact, the U.S. government must fund international assistance programs that are grounded in authentic partnerships with local communities, organizations, private sector and governments.

Subsidiarity: Human dignity requires that people have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and communities. The principle of **subsidiarity** ensures a balanced relationship between government and civil society, requiring governments to support—not replace—families, communities, and organizations in solving local challenges. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity emphasizes that those closest to a challenge best understand how to address it.

The Church recognizes that aid is most effective when led by local organizations, including Church structures. CRS is a leader in strengthening local capacity, investing in partnerships with faith-based and community-based organizations, particularly in Latin America and West and Central Africa. CRS’ concerted efforts to support local Church partners in Latin America have enabled 24 faith-based organizations to access \$84 million in U.S. humanitarian funding, enabling life-saving assistance to reach over 284,000 people. Monitoring data from locally-led emergency responses across five countries in Central and South America showed that the percentage of households able to meet their basic food needs increased from 16% to 71%. Unfortunately, some of the awards designed to support these efforts were terminated. The U.S. must fund similar efforts to equip community organizations, especially faith partners, with the tools to drive their own development.

The Importance of Shared Values: In Pope John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, he warns about international aid being used by wealthier nations to impose their values on other countries, at the expense of “time-honored traditions and customs.” We ask Congress to ensure that international assistance is used to advance universal values shared by donor and recipient countries, and assert that the pro-life principles underpinning a Catholic vision—inherent human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity—are found across major religious and cultural traditions.

Living out these Principles in our International Assistance

Given the vision for international aid that Catholic teaching provides, CRS urges Congress to:

Reinforce humanitarian response capacities: We ask Congress for a robust allocation to the **International Disaster Assistance** account, which provides aid to families in emergencies, stems

instability, and protects the dignity of our brothers and sisters living amid conflicts and natural disasters. We also ask Congress to prioritize the **Migration and Refugee Assistance** account, which supports displaced individuals and helps them return home or settle in safer locations.

Invest in development programming and poverty reduction: Development programming, funded through the **Development Assistance** account and the **Economic Support Fund**, promotes long-term improvements in food security, water security, literacy, and care for creation. This work is the difference between aid dependence and self-reliance and helps communities avoid needing emergency assistance in the future. We urge Congress to further advance shared prosperity with contributions to the **World Bank's International Development Association**, which provides financing to low-income countries that are experiencing high debt burdens and cannot invest in growth. The international debt crisis seriously constrains development in many countries.

Build on the legacy of U.S. global health programs: The U.S.'s track record on global health issues demonstrates what is possible when we embrace our responsibility as an economically advanced nation in an interconnected world. Funding for the **Global Health Programs** account supports some of the most successful foreign policy programs in U.S. history, including PEPFAR, as well as efforts to eliminate infectious diseases before they reach our shores. The Catholic Church has principled concerns about certain health activities we find inconsistent with Catholic teaching, including artificial family planning, and have long advocated for maintaining the Helms Amendment. Nevertheless, we support strong funding for morally-appropriate Global Health Programs given the scale at which they advance the dignity and well-being of our collective family, including Americans. Over time, responses to global health challenges should build resilient health capacity and systems that can respond to all diseases and health conditions.

Fund mechanisms that bolster the private sector and strengthen government institutions: In line with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, international assistance goes further when it is complemented by a thriving private sector and strong government institutions. We ask Congress to robustly fund the **U.S. International Development Finance Corporation**, which promotes private investment in low-income countries, and the **Millennium Challenge Corporation**, which incentivizes good governance while partnering with countries to address critical infrastructure needs. Congress must leverage these agencies to create supportive environments for the most vulnerable families who are working to secure dignified lives for their families. These agencies must be better coordinated with other U.S. humanitarian and development assistance.

Ensure mechanisms to translate funds into effective programs: Congress must see to it that any U.S. agencies managing international assistance have professional expertise and the capacity to deliver timely assistance. The U.S. government should showcase American innovation to ensure that Americans and vulnerable families everywhere enjoy the fruits of peace and prosperity.

We reiterate our thanks for the opportunity to share a Catholic, pro-life vision for U.S. international assistance – one which identifies the state as an indispensable partner to live out American values towards common purpose. CRS looks forward to continued engagement with our government partners, and appreciates Congress' efforts to create a safer, stronger, more prosperous America and a more peaceful, stable world.