



## **Don't Forget Us!**

The economic upheaval of the last few months has literally turned our world upside down and we are just beginning to experience the human fallout it is causing. Fast forward to the upcoming Lenten season! As a Catholic priest, deacon, religious, school or parish worker or active volunteer, you are faced with more calls for help than you had ever before seen. Weekly offerings have declined by 25%. Requests to the St. Vincent de Paul Society for short term help have quadrupled. Catholic school enrollment has declined by 15% and it seems there is a new sign up every week in your neighborhood declaring another home as bank-owned and for sale. You are spending innumerable hours every week counseling people and desperately trying to help them find solutions to their plights. Yet, because of your knowledge of the gospels and your own personal spiritual journey, you know in your heart that if you are to truly live as Jesus, you must not forget or let your community forget that the poor everywhere in the world are our brothers and sisters whom we must also serve and assist. But you can barely deal with the daily cries you experience. Where do you turn? What do you do?

Enter "Operation Rice Bowl"! Every Lent most Catholics have experienced those little cardboard boxes that are folded to look somewhat like a bowl. They are the hallmark of the "Operation Rice Bowl" program that richly benefits those who participate here in the U.S. as well as our brothers and sisters in the 99 countries served by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). As the official overseas relief and development arm of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, CRS should hold a special place in the hearts of all U.S. Catholics. Outreach and solidarity with the global poor is an essential component of the gospel call; yet it is more remote and difficult to focus on especially in these uncertain economic times when many in our very own communities are so in need of assistance. Precisely because of this, however, U.S. Catholics in the true spirit of charity and justice need to be ever more vigilant and intentional about the needs of the poor overseas. As it is a given that the economic crisis is global in its effect and we are daily witnessing hardship, imagine what those who had even less to start are experiencing. And this comes on top of a recognized world food crisis, wars, violence and recurring natural disasters. In the face of such overwhelming human need, how can we even begin to grasp our connectedness and somehow in some small way positively reach out and assist?

Well back to that little bowl-like cardboard box! It is really only the tip of the iceberg. The CRS "Operation Rice Bowl" materials are multifaceted and rich in content. In particular those working in Catholic schools and parishes will find something for just about every group and every situation with which they work. Lent is a time of reflection and journey; it is ideal for exploring all aspects of charity and justice – in the home, locally, globally, through the word and in the Eucharistic celebration. "Operation Rice Bowl" seamlessly integrates global awareness and outreach into the daily life of the worshipping community in such a way that it makes a

seemingly daunting chore into one that is simple and relevant. Here is a preview of the available resources for parishes, religious educators, and individuals and families:

- **Home Calendar Guide** – contains personal stories from CRS overseas beneficiaries, Lenten reflections and activities, and recipes of simple meat-less meals from this year's featured countries – Egypt, Philippines, Tanzania, Honduras, and Ghana.
- **Community and Parish Guide** – includes suggestions, activities, and resources to integrate “Operation Rice Bowl” into parish gatherings and services. There are bulletin inserts and announcements, prayer services, intentions, homily notes, hunger banquet suggestions and much more.
- **Educator's Guide** – designed to help Catholic school teachers, catechists, and youth ministers integrate issues of justice and poverty into their Lenten curriculum.

Those using the materials are encouraged to do one simple meal per week with a recipe from one of the featured countries. The savings from these meals are all placed in the “rice bowl” (cardboard box), collected and sent to the diocese. The diocese then keeps 25% for its local charities and sends 75% to CRS for its overseas work.

Every diocese in the U.S. has a designated CRS Diocesan Director in its Chancery or Pastoral Center. In addition, there are 5 CRS U.S. regions each with a few staff. In each region there are also designated priest and deacon CRS Global Fellows who are specially trained and available to come to any parish to preach about the work of CRS at no cost to the parish. CRS is an organization that all of the dioceses, Bishops and U.S. Catholics can truly take pride in. It is world renowned for its international development expertise and its 24 hr. response to world disasters. In addition CRS consistently keeps its administrative expense at between 5% and 6% of its total – one of the lowest of any major charity.

If you have never used “Operation Rice Bowl”, give it a try. If you have used it in the past but haven't recently, try it again – it's better than ever. If you have used it and intend to use it again this Lent, tell others about it. During this worldwide economic downturn, the poor served by CRS not only have an even greater need than ever for assistance, they also need the prayers and the advocacy of their U.S. brothers and sisters. “Operation Rice Bowl” effortlessly lets U.S. Catholics realize that we are all one human family. All of the materials can be viewed at <http://orb.crs.org> . Everything can be ordered free of charge on that site. Most of the materials are available in Spanish. Some resources are also available in Polish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. You can also contact your Catholic Relief Services Diocesan Director through your diocese or a member of the CRS Regional staff through the website.

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