



Supporters of the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID, gather near the U.S. Capitol Feb. 5, to rail against the Trump administration's attempt to dismantle the humanitarian agency. However, the Congressional Research Service raised legal questions Feb. 3 about whether the agency, which helps with job training, education, clean water projects and other humanitarian assistance in more than 100 countries can be dismantled without congressional approval. (NCR/Rhina Guidos)

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The unprecedented cruelty of the Trump administration was on full display with the news that Catholic Relief Services faces massive cuts in staff and programs because of reductions in international aid.

The news emerged in an exclusive by National Catholic Reporter's Brian Roewe and Brian Fraga, who [wrote on Feb. 5](#):

Layoffs have already begun as CRS has been forced to begin shutting down programs funded by USAID, which supplies about half of the Catholic organization's \$1.5 billion budget.

The details were revealed in an email, reviewed by this news organization, sent by CRS president and chief executive officer Sean Callahan to staff on Feb. 3.

Contact NCR if you were affected

NCR is looking to speak to anyone affected by the layoffs and program shutdown from Catholic Relief Services. Please email us at ncr_editor@ncronline.org. We can protect your confidentiality if you request it.

The U.S. was never a nation of angels. But we have aspired to noble ideals no matter how imperfectly lived over our history. We are now in danger of abandoning any pretext to living those ideals. Never before has intentional cruelty and intentional destruction of democratic institutions and norms been wedded as national policy.

Cruelty this truly is, with no other apparent motive than to demean others and to save what amounts to a paltry sum in federal spending. For those of us in the Catholic community, cruelty should be especially alarming. And a call to action.

"To target this tiny portion of the federal budget in such a haphazard and irresponsible way is going to cost people's lives and livelihoods," according to Stephen Colecchi, a former director of the Office of International Justice and Peace for the U.S. bishops. "It is not a thoughtful or humane way to go about treating programs that help the poorest of the poor all over the world."



U.S. President Donald Trump signs an executive order in the Oval Office of the White House, Jan. 23 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Cruelty is the only term that adequately describes the terror coursing through refugee and immigrant communities now living in unremitting fear of the indiscriminate tactics underway. Children who go to our religious education classes and sit in our church pews with their parents can't help but understand the stakes — their parents may be taken from them. Religious congregations of every persuasion and religious leaders across denominations and faiths are spending inordinate time and effort devising clandestine plans to protect immigrants from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids.

The government feels no need to provide details for the arrests and detentions taking place. While boasting increased arrests and detentions, according to The New York Times, "Federal officials declined to share details on where most arrests took place, how many people had criminal backgrounds, or how many were ultimately detained or released. They also declined to say whether people who were not

targeted were also swept up in the enforcement efforts." Secrecy is the method of thugs.

Amid the political storm we're witnessing, we feel the same sense of helplessness against uncontrollable forces, the same wish to know what comes next as do those faced with natural disasters.

For those of us who profess the Catholic faith, there exists a means to get to the core of it all: our more than 130 years of social doctrine. That tradition provides the lens that cuts through the distractions and allows us to focus on what is most essential — the dignity of the human person and the priority to tend to the most vulnerable regardless of race, creed, politics, nationality or place on the globe.

In the current circumstance, it brings clarity to the cruelty. There is no other way to describe what is being done in our name.

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No single initiative — not presumptions about gender or race, not the indiscriminate roundup of people to send back to dangerous circumstances, not the cavalier and cockamamie statements about relocating Palestinians and redeveloping Gaza — captures the breadth and extent of the cruelty as graphically and disturbingly as Trump's executive order to freeze all foreign aid.

The effect of the initial order was immediate, causing a spike in humanitarian crises from starving refugees, to those in extreme poverty needing medical care, to residents of Ukraine dependent on the U.S. aid to make it through the winter as their country continues to fight an unprovoked and dastardly Russian invasion.

That initial disruption was followed up by a gleeful weekend announcement of Elon Musk, an unelected and unaccountable "[brologarch](#)" influencer given shocking and unprecedented authority over U.S. foreign policy. Early that Monday he claimed that Trump intended to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development. Top officials have been fired, the halls have been scrubbed of photos showing its humanitarian work around the globe. In Musk's web of paranoid conspiracy theories, the agency is both Marxist and a "criminal organization."

Musk's characterizations are nonsense based on nothing. His power appears unbounded.

The freeze immediately disrupted the flow of medicine and medical transportation, nursing care, delivery of food, as well as care for orphans and unaccompanied children in scores of countries served by hundreds of nonprofits and religious organizations.

In reality, USAID, which spends about one percent of the federal budget, has long been a source of soft power, saving lives and effecting change for the better around the globe, enhancing the U.S.'s reputation as a reliable partner. That reputation, built over decades, is being razed in days. The aid vacuum created by Trump and his Catholic secretary of state Marco Rubio will quickly be filled by adversaries of the United States, namely China and Russia. Trump will never be able to understand or appreciate the work of USAID because the payoff — in goodwill, preventing disease, projecting American ingenuity in ways that help developing cultures, saving lives of those in desperate need, and, yes, attaining global political power — doesn't show up on a balance sheet.

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The U.S. in the world reflects the personality of the presidency. Before the Trump era, we could rely on democratic institutions and norms to hold individual power and ambition in check. We could be fairly confident that regardless of political party or ideological leanings, a president would attempt to put America's best instincts forward. From the Marshall Plan through eliminating diseases like polio and measles, Guinea worm and diminishing the ravages of HIV, including saving newborns from the disease, we have taken pride in extending generosity and care along with power.

That is all ending. We are becoming the global face of the cruel man currently in the Oval Office. That means we are becoming a nation folded in on ourselves, motivated by retribution and revenge and what we perceive as self-interest to the exclusion of anything else.

We are becoming that voice on the "Access Hollywood" tape asserting that we can do anything we wish because we are famous. We are the felon who avoids serious consequences, the one who inspires an insurrection and escapes prosecution, the

public figure who makes fun of the disabled, demeans anyone who might attempt to hold him to account, who views the U.S. and the rest of the world as a personal fiefdom. We are becoming an international representation of that person in the Oval Office whose need for revenge and retribution is spreading the wreckage of his ambitions far and wide.

It is time to name the result of the chaos for what it is — unbounded cruelty. It is time for complicit Catholics, in particular, to stop aiding and abetting cruelty by asserting that this administration is in any way pro-life. It is not.

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If our religious tradition at all informs our citizenship, then we are being called to witness to it, especially in this extreme moment. Our teaching tells us without qualification that we can not be complicit in intentionally increasing human suffering and fear.

We are not helpless in the face of the chaos.

Contact bishops — [click here for their contacts](#) — and pastors, repeatedly if necessary, urging them to speak out against the chaos. Be in touch with diocesan social justice offices. Find ways to be in solidarity with those most threatened by deportation, especially families that might be torn apart. Send letters and make phone calls to your local and [national representatives](#). Join marches and peaceful protests. Support agencies dedicated to serving the globe's most vulnerable.

Countering cruelty is essential.

Don't be silent.

Related: [Exclusive: Catholic Relief Services lays off staff, cuts programs after USAID shakeup](#)

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)