

Catholic Relief Services revamps Rice Bowl initiative

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

Twitter: @ReviewWiering

A longtime Lenten staple, Operation Rice Bowl has undergone a makeover.

Catholic Relief Services announced Oct. 16 that it has changed the name and design of the 38-year-old program from “Operation Rice Bowl” to “CRS Rice Bowl.”

The news was timed to correspond with World Hunger Day, as well as World Food Day.

CRS CEO Carolyn Woo expects the change to increase program engagement, she said during a press conference. A new design calls new attention to the program and its role in Lent, she said.

“We hope that more people will pick up the Rice Bowl,” she said. “Only one of the three objectives is about donations. The rest of it is really to sensitize people to the meaning of Lent and to engage in prayer and sacrifice beyond donations.”

Participants are encouraged to eat one simple meal a week and donate funds to CRS for its hunger-relief work. Based in Baltimore, CRS has long supplied cardboard “bowls” to schools and parishes for collecting the funds, as well as simple recipes inspired by the countries it serves.

CRS also provides educational materials to help Catholics better understand the issue of hunger, the agency’s work and the people it helps.

“Through prayer, sacrifice and donations, the CRS Rice Bowl enables our actions to make a difference in the life and the wellbeing of others,” Woo said.

About 870 million people go to bed hungry every night, Woo said. Most live in rural areas. CRS is working to improve farming techniques, has organized communities savings and loans groups, and offers disaster relief, which includes food and water.

“The lack of food is a threat to all aspects of society. The lack of food will hurt society at its core,” Woo said. “It can promote conflict, open the door to diseases, shut the door on education, and erase productivity and add fuel to a cycle of poverty.”

About 9 million people die from starvation each year, Woo said.

“We know the problem is big, and CRS’ commitment is equally big,” she said.

CRS Rice Bowl has raised \$8 million annually in the past two years. Of the funds, 75 percent goes to CRS overseas programs, and 25 percent stays in the diocese it was raised for hunger-relief efforts. In past years, almost 13,000 parishes and schools have been involved in CRS Rice Bowl.

CRS Rice Bowl’s name change also comes with a new tag line – “For Lent, For Life – What You Give Up for Lent Changes Lives” – and a redesigned interactive website with materials in English and Spanish.

“Sometimes there is a sense that the Rice Bowl is only for children. A lot of our redesign is to break away from that perception,” Woo said.

Woo said the program also ties in with the Year of Faith, which Pope Benedict XVI ushered in Oct. 11.

“The CRS Rice Bowl is actually a program that allows us to live our faith and allows us to engage our families, our parishioners, other people to talk about this faith, and understand what this faith calls us to do,” she said.

Woo also announced that the agency is committing \$150 million of the organization’s private funds over three years to agriculture food and nutrition programs. The pledge is part of a \$1 billion commitment by members of InterAction, a non-profit agency alliance fighting hunger.

Woo must do more than commit funding; it must also find new solutions for hunger issues, she said, citing its efforts to help people to create year-round gardens and connect farmers to export markets through improved crop quality.

CRS is the international humanitarian arm of the U.S. Catholic community and works in about 98 countries in the world.

Copyright (c) Oct. 16, 2012 CatholicReview.org