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In partnership with the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Catholic Medical Mission Board administers COVID-19 vaccinations in South Sudan. CMMB provides medical and development aid to communities affected by poverty and unequal access to health care. (CNS/Courtesy of CMMB)



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During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, my daughter, an emergency room physician in Ann Arbor, Michigan, told me something that has stuck with me ever since.

"This disease takes who it wants when it wants," she said as she grappled with the sheer volume of loss. It was an apt recounting of the horrors she and others faced as COVID-19 case numbers swelled to unimaginable rates. How amazing, then, that as we enter the pandemic's third year, the availability of vaccines, medical therapeutics and widespread testing have given us hope.

In fact, with spring upon us, many Americans are experiencing a rebirth, with case levels and hospitalizations [decreasing in some areas](#) and many communities loosening safety protocols.

Meanwhile, the pandemic continues to impact vulnerable communities in many other parts of the world. Take, for example, a country like Yemen, where an [astounding 18%](#) of people infected with COVID-19 die from the disease. Or the island nation of [Tonga](#), which is struggling to contain an omicron outbreak. Or the many other countries worldwide struggling to contain COVID-19, even as we enter a new phase of the pandemic in the United States.

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Why do we see such disparities between COVID-19 outcomes here and abroad? As a board member for Catholic Relief Services, or CRS, the international charity of the U.S. Catholic Church, I've found myself considering this question as I've learned about the vast and growing needs of our brothers and sisters in other countries. Less than 15% of people in low-income countries have received at least one vaccine dose.

Comparatively, the U.S. has vaccinated about 65% of its population with one dose. Countries like Canada and Italy have even higher single-dose vaccine rates, at 81% and 79%, respectively. The reasons behind this disparity are varied. Challenges have

included vaccine hoarding, supply chain issues and the fact that most low-income countries lack the resources to handle large-scale vaccine rollouts.

Further complicating the picture is the fact that the last two years have seen the growth of global shadow pandemics like hunger and poverty. COVID-19 has threatened food systems and social safety nets in every corner of the globe. The World Bank estimates that 100 million more people are living on less than \$2 dollars a day because of the pandemic, increasing the global poverty rate while rolling back years of progress toward lessening inequality.

Even in my own state of Michigan, tens of thousands of families continue to live paycheck to paycheck, struggling to put food on the table amidst soaring inflation. In these communities, a return to pre-pandemic norms is all but impossible.

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As we contemplate these sobering realities, it's worth remembering that we're all children of the same God. As such, and in the spirit of Lent, we must be asking ourselves what Jesus would call us to do at this time of great need. We can take our cues directly from the Bible: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Beyond our Catholic values as inspiration for action, we could also consider the practical reasons for addressing these issues. If the last two years have taught us anything, it's that we're all interconnected. And as we've seen with the rapid spread of the omicron variant, the virus disregards man-made borders. Therefore, we're all at risk should we fail to protect entire populations via vaccines and related support.

The good news is that we don't have to stand on the sidelines as vulnerable communities suffer. In fact, there are many things we, as Americans and as Catholics, can do to stand in solidarity with those here and abroad. We can [raise our voices with our members of Congress by calling or writing to them](#) to express support for vaccine equity and for programs that fight the scourges of hunger and poverty. We can also [donate](#) to organizations like CRS, which are supporting many countries as they rebound from the virus and its devastating consequences. Lastly, we can pray that with proper efforts, the pandemic will finally end everywhere.

As Catholics, we are called by Christ to promote vaccine equity — and to spread the word, encouraging others to do the same. Everyone should have access to the tools that give them the best opportunities for fulfilling their God-given potential. With

Easter coming soon, there is no better time to act than now.