

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



A woman carries home her rations of wheat, yellow split peas and cooking oil following a distribution of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) food in a rural area of Ethiopia's Oromia region Feb. 9, 2019. (OSV News/Courtesy of CRS/Will Baxter)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 4, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Catholics, like Vice President JD Vance, who criticize Pope Francis for being too political, claim they long for the days of Pope John Paul II. But the truth is, they did not listen to John Paul when he challenged their political views.

When John Paul celebrated Mass in Yankee Stadium in New York on Oct. 2, 1979, he [preached](#) on the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus.

The rich man was "dressed in purple and linen and feasted splendidly every day. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table" (Luke 16:19 ff).

Both men died, with Lazarus going to heaven and the rich man going to hell.

John Paul looked out over the crowd of well-fed Americans and said, "The rich man was condemned because he did not pay attention to the other man. Because he failed to take notice of Lazarus, the person who sat at his door and who longed to eat the scraps from his table."

John Paul then translated the parable "into contemporary terms — in terms of economy and politics, in terms of all human rights, in terms of relations between the 'first', 'second' and 'third world.'"

"We cannot stand idly by when thousands of human beings are dying of hunger," he said. "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom, if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

The message was clear: America, you are the rich man. You must care for the Lazaruses at your door.

When rich men like President Donald Trump and Elon Musk close the United States Agency for International Development and eliminate foreign assistance programs, they are ignoring Lazarus. They are consigning him and millions like him to starvation. They are abandoning refugees who have fled persecution, wars and famine. They are stopping medical care for the sick. They are allowing plagues like Ebola, monkeypox and HIV/AIDS to spread unchecked.

This will be devastating to poor countries, but it will also hurt America.

Advertisement

We will lose respect among allies and lose friends among those we help. Desperate refugees will turn to radical leaders like ISIS, or they will try to immigrate to the U.S. or Europe. Nor will plagues respect borders if we do not help control them where they start.

John Paul also cited the account of the Last Judgment as found in Saint Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was away from home and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come and comfort me," (Mt 25 :42-43).

Trump and Musk claim cutting foreign aid will help them balance the federal budget, but foreign aid is only [1.2% of annual federal spending](#), and much of this money is spent in the U.S. on agricultural products. Buying from farmers closer to those in need would be more efficient since the food would not have to be shipped long distances, but it would alienate American farmers who would lose these sales. Now, those farmers have their aid threatened as well. Conservative Christians, including the Catholic bishops, allied themselves with Republicans because overturning Roe v. Wade was their preeminent priority. Once this was accomplished, Trump became more pro-choice, saying he will leave abortion to the states and supporting federal funding for IVF.

Was overturning Roe worth the cost? The actual impact on the number of abortions is unclear. Abortion supporters have won almost every referendum on state ballots

since Roe was overturned. Abortions continue at high numbers.

Trump, Musk and Vance are not only rejecting the teachings of Francis, they are rejecting the teachings of John Paul. They are rejecting the teachings of Jesus.

Christian leaders need to be prophetic like Francis, John Paul and Jesus in calling us to be Good Samaritans to those who need help.

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