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Mercy Sr. Rosemary Connelly in February (OSV News photo/University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

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Mercy Sr. Rosemary Connelly, former executive director of Misericordia and lifelong advocate for individuals with developmental disabilities, will receive the University of Notre Dame's 2023 Laetare Medal, the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics.

It will be presented at the university's 178th commencement ceremony May 21 at Notre Dame Stadium.

The announcement was made March 19, Laetare Sunday, which is the fourth Sunday of Lent. The medal has been given to Catholic leaders since 1883.

"With her characteristic tenacity, grace and genius, Sister Rosemary has ensured that the residents of Misericordia — as wonderful children of God — have the quality of life and opportunities they deserve," said Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame. "We are inspired by her vision, her leadership and her compassion and are honored to bestow the Laetare Medal on her."

When Connelly came to Misericordia as executive director in 1969, the nonprofit on Chicago's South Side provided a home and custodial care for children with disabilities from birth to age 6. Though the children were well cared for, they did not have access to educational and enrichment activities — as was typical at the time.

Connelly, however, believed the children were capable of more and deserved a higher quality of life. She began seeking out special education programming for them and when she found that nothing yet existed, she developed her own.

Today, the Misericordia community has expanded to include a 37-acre campus on Chicago's North Side serving more than 600 children and adult residents, with more than 1,200 staff members and thousands of volunteers, as well as an outreach program that offers assistance to more than 140 additional families.

"It is considered a benchmark in compassionate care for individuals with disabilities, offering a wide range of vocational training and educational, social, recreational, medical and therapy opportunities," said the Notre Dame news release on the 2023 Laetare Medal recipient.

Connelly said she has felt God's presence at every turn.

"I always felt that God was with me, that God really took care of me. He even spoiled me by always making sure the right people were in the right place at the right time,"

she said in a statement. "And I don't think that's accidental. The Lord has been more than gracious to me. So I'm thankful to God that we have a Misericordia. It's a place where the children are respected and loved and the staff is very committed to them."

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A native Chicagoan, Connelly was one of six children born to Irish immigrant parents. She joined the Sisters of Mercy at age 19 and taught in several Chicago archdiocesan schools while continuing to pursue her own education. She earned a bachelor's degree in social science from St. Xavier University in 1959, a master's in sociology from St. Louis University in 1966 and a master's in social work from Loyola University Chicago in 1969.

Connelly has received nine honorary degrees — including one from Notre Dame in 1997 — and numerous awards and honors, including the Order of Lincoln Medallion, Illinois' highest award for lifelong outstanding achievements; the Illinois Entrepreneur of the Year Award from Ernst & Young; and a Caring Institute award, naming her one of the most caring people in America.

Now 92, she has recently transitioned from her role as executive director to chairwoman of the board of the Misericordia Foundation, which focuses on fundraising efforts, and continues to spend as much time as she can working with the Misericordia community.

"What motivates me? I think the fact that I'm surrounded by wonderful people, including the staff and especially the residents here," Connelly said. "They challenge us to be our best. They're loving. They live life beautifully. And they can be models for us all."

The Laetare (pronounced lay-TAH-ray) Medal is so named because its recipient is announced each year in celebration of Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent on the Church calendar. "Laetare," the Latin word for "rejoice," is the first word in the entrance antiphon of the Mass that Sunday, which ritually anticipates the celebration of Easter. The medal bears the Latin inscription, "Magna est veritas et praevalebit" ("Truth is mighty, and it shall prevail").

Established at Notre Dame in 1883, the Laetare Medal was conceived as an American counterpart of the Golden Rose, a papal honor that antedates the 11th century. The medal has been awarded annually at Notre Dame to a Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church and enriched the heritage of humanity."

Previous recipients of the Laetare Medal include Civil War Gen. William Rosecrans, operatic tenor John McCormack, President John F. Kennedy, Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, novelist Walker Percy, then-Vice President Joe Biden and House Speaker John Boehner (awarded jointly), Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, labor activist Msgr. George Higgins, jazz composer Dave Brubeck, singer Aaron Neville, and actor Martin Sheen.

The three most recent recipients are Kathleen McChesney, a former FBI executive assistant director and the first person to lead the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection (2020); Carla Harris, a celebrated gospel singer and a leading U.S. financial executive (2021); and Sharon Lavigne, an environmental justice activist (2022).