News



A collage featuring the seven finalists who have been nominated for the 2023-2024 Lumen Christi Award. Clockwise from top are Maria-Cruz Gray, Fr. Olin Pierre-Louis, Br. Dale Mooney, Carmen Alicia Rodriguez Echevarria, the St. Maria Eufrasia Home, and Sr. Catherine Nagl. The Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great are in the center. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Extension)

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Catholic Extension has announced seven finalists for its 2023-2024 Lumen Christi Award, and two of those named told OSV News they're both surprised and encouraged.

The award is the highest honor bestowed by the Chicago-based nonprofit, which since 1905 has supported Catholic faith communities in the nation's poorest regions.

Taking its name from the Latin words for "light of Christ," the Lumen Christi Award affirms those who radiate and reveal Christ's love where they serve. The seven finalists will receive $10,000 for their ministries, with $25,000 to be given to the ultimate recipient — who will be selected in the fall — and an additional $25,000 to go to the awardee's nominating diocese.

The seven finalists, who represent ministries across the country, "all reach out to people who are in great need," said Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension.

While they minister to "those who are victims of disasters, war, violence, and societal exclusion" — deeply traumatizing experiences to human dignity — the finalists "have stepped up to help restore the humanity of those they serve and help them reclaim their full potential," he said.

The finalists, chosen from 41 nominees, represent a broad swathe of social outreach and educational ministries throughout the U.S.

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Basilian Sr. Joann Sosler told OSV News she was "shocked" that her order, one of the seven finalists, had been nominated by Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia.

"This has never happened to us before," she said, speaking by telephone from her office at the order's Jesus, Lover of Humanity Province in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania.

Yet the Basilian Sisters — who have communities in the U.S. and the order's native Ukraine, as well as Argentina, Croatia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia — have become known for their tireless efforts to aid Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons, amid Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Located less than 40 miles from the war's front lines, the Basilian monastery in Zaporizhzhia has sheltered women, children and battle-weary soldiers, while the sisters regularly travel to villages in combat zones to bring food, water, clothing and other supplies. The Jenkintown sisters have worked closely with arriving Ukrainians as they adjust to life in the U.S., providing both material, educational, cultural and spiritual support.

Finalist Sr. Catherine Nagl, founder of The Family of the Good Shepherd ministry in Grand Island, Nebraska, told OSV News she was grateful for the Diocese of Grand Island's nomination, which she hoped would help "grow her ministry" to children in need of foster care.

Nagl admitted she was "uncomfortable with recognition at first," but came to see it as "an acknowledgment of God's work."

The award nomination also calls attention to the critical need for "good, steady (foster) parents" who are "willing to stick with it and (be) there for the kids," she said.

"I'm hopeful it will (attract) some volunteers, and possibly people who feel called to religious life and like this work," she added.

LaSallian Christian Br. Dale Mooney was endorsed by the Diocese of Helena, Montana, for his leadership as president of the De La Salle Blackfeet School, which educates students in grades four through eight on the Blackfeet Nation reservation. In a region where less than 50% graduate from high school, Mooney and his team have fostered academic success through building students' self-esteem, cultural identity, competence and faith, while instilling in them a sensitivity to the poor and the sanctity of all life.

Finalist María-Cruz Gray was nominated by the Diocese of Salt Lake City for her 24 years of service as director of Hispanic ministry, which serves approximately 200,000 Hispanic Catholics throughout Utah. Gray has traveled the state extensively to reach the faithful not only in urban but in rural areas, where many work in difficult, dangerous agricultural and mining jobs, and where parishes often lack resident priests. A focus of her mission has been to identify and nurture committed lay ecclesiastical ministers throughout the diocese.

The other three finalists are based in Puerto Rico.

- Haitian-born Fr. Olin Pierre-Louis, nominated by the Archdiocese of San Juan, has been assisting Haitian refugees fleeing extreme violence, corruption and political instability in their island nation, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Although weekly collections are meager at the historic San Mateo de Cangrejos Parish, where Pierre-Louis is pastor, migrants receive shelter and food, echoing the welcome the parish once gave to men and women freed from slavery. The priest also personally ferries the parish van to Haiti twice a month to deliver food, clothing and essentials, hoping to deter his fellow Haitians from undertaking the dangerous open water crossing.
- Carmen Alicia Rodríguez Echevarría, principal of Inmaculada Concepción School in Guayanilla, was nominated by the Diocese of Ponce for more than doubling her school's enrollment over the past three years — after a 2020 earthquake collapsed the parish church and destroyed half the school building. While ensuring high academic standards in the classroom, Rodríguez Echevarría has also made tuition affordable to families still reeling financially from a number of economic downturns and natural disasters Puerto Rico has experienced in recent years.
- The Diocese of Arecibo nominated St. María Eufrasia Home (Hogar de Santa María Eufrasia) in Arecibo. Founded in the mid-1980s and rebuilt in 2001, the

home ministers to girls in crisis pregnancies, many due to abuse or assault, with clients as young as 11 years old. Having decided on their own to see their pregnancies through, more than 1,000 girls under age 18, and their babies, have received care from the home, including shelter, health services, counseling, tutoring and career support.

Regardless of the scope or location of the finalists' ministries, the Lumen Christi Award gives "hope for the kingdom of the Lord," said Sosler. "There are a lot of terrible things going on (in the world), but you can also look at the other side and see the wonderful things — the work of God."