



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Aug. 21, 2025**

Media Contact: Laura Bowman

[lbowman@catholicextension.org](mailto:lbowman@catholicextension.org)

512.913.6624

## **Catholic Extension Society's 2025-2026 Lumen Christi Award Finalists Announced**

Chicago, IL — [Catholic Extension Society](https://www.catholicextension.org) has selected eight finalists for the 2025-2026 [Lumen Christi Award](#), the organization's highest honor given to those who radiate and reveal the light of Christ present in the communities they serve.

This year's eight finalists were chosen from among [41 nominees](#) submitted by bishops from [Extension dioceses](#), recognizing the incredible work of people and institutions from their regions. From these finalists, one national recipient will be announced this fall.

"This year's Lumen Christi Award finalists are ordinary people doing extraordinary things in the name of their faith and on behalf of the Catholic Church," Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension Society, said. "Their stories are a reminder to us of the hope and transformation the Church brings into communities throughout America every day."

Award finalists receive \$15,000 to support and enhance their ministry. Among the finalists, the Lumen Christi Award recipient will ultimately be selected and given a \$100,000 award, split between the honoree and their nominating diocese. The award recipient will be chosen from these finalists and announced in the fall.

The 2025-2026 Lumen Christi Award finalists include:

### **Sister Teresa Frawley, OSF | Diocese of Cheyenne, Wyoming**

Sister Teresa Frawley, OSF, hails from County Clare in the west of Ireland. But for the last 40 years she has served the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming—which spans 2.2 million acres. Upon arriving, Sister Teresa quickly learned that a staggering number of people on the reservation were lost to drug overdoses and suicides. Her ministry would start there, in the place of grief, seeking hope.

She developed a funeral vigil prayer service that incorporates drumming and hair-cutting bereavement ceremonies that are so important to the people as they process pain. She also leads the Rosary at wakes, helps with funeral arrangements, and conducts memorial services on the 1-year anniversary of the funeral—a common tradition in Native American communities.

The 81-year-old Sister Teresa has a resilience that mirrors the resolve of the people she serves. And after many years on the reservation, she was given the great honor of the name, “Eagle Wing Woman.” The eagle is revered in Native communities because it is the creature that flies the highest and is closest to the Creator.

### **Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas | Diocese of El Paso, Texas**

A native of El Paso, Texas, Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas felt inspired to create a lay ministry formation program for his diocese. At that time there was little ministry education available to lay leaders and volunteers. But that all changed after Msgr. Bañuelas established the Tepeyac Institute in 1989.

Twelve hundred people participated in the first classes offered. 37 years later, 72,000 people have participated in the Tepeyac Institute’s formation programs. Further, almost 100 percent of El Paso’s parishes have sent their parishioners to Tepeyac. Every parish in El Paso has ministers that have been trained by Tepeyac.

What is remarkable is that the Tepeyac Institute was not even Monsignor’s day job. He served as pastor to two of El Paso’s largest parishes, St. Pius X and St. Mark the Evangelist. 7,200 people attended mass at St. Mark’s every weekend. Msgr. Bañuelas’ Sunday homilies were recorded and the transcripts distributed after Mass.

By the time Msgr. Bañuelas retired as pastor (he prefers the term “refinement” instead of “retirement”) over 65 ministries were in full swing, a powerful example of the “priesthood of the laity.” Msgr. Bañuelas didn’t just teach the theory of lay involvement—he put into practice everything he taught. He is the pastor who inspired 72,000 lay leaders.

### **Christina Kihn | Diocese of Gaylord, Michigan**

Christina Kihn’s own experience with homelessness brought her to work as the director of the Center of Charity, a ministry of All Saints Parish in Alpena, Michigan, serving low-income and homeless members of the community. Homelessness in Alpena has quietly intensified in recent years and is particularly challenging in the dead of winter with its below freezing temperatures. The Center of Charity is a welcoming haven for all to feel safe and dignified.

The ministry offers temporary lodging, meals, essential resources, case management and connections to social, mental and substance abuse services. Kihn leads a team of 153 volunteers. This large-scale operation impacts thousands of lives annually.

In partnership with local organizations, Kihn was able to help one homeless man struggling with strokes and seizures secure housing and essential household items.

She says she “motivates people through empathy and kindness and with a can-do attitude. Make sure that we’re a team, we’re there for them and that they know that God’s there for them.”

Through her example, The Center of Charity has become an indispensable ministry that is strengthening the social fabric of Alpena.

### **Didier Aur | Diocese of Memphis, Tennessee**

After overcoming challenges with dyslexia as a child, Didier Aur has gone on to have a 37-year career as a leader in Catholic education. He is currently the principal at St. Ann's Catholic School in Bartlett, Tennessee. Seven years ago, the school faced closure. But since Aur took over, enrollment has doubled.

What's more, in 2022 he started the Erika Center at St. Ann Catholic School, which educates 20 students with dyslexia each year. This fall, he plans to expand this operation to double the center's enrollment.

Aur has led multiple schools across the Diocese of Memphis in his nearly 40 years working in Catholic education. And at each stop, he has helped children reach new milestones in their education. He did so by taking a missionary approach that doesn't turn people away but rather goes out and finds more ways to help.

Aur has certainly put this into place now at St. Ann's, especially in his efforts in providing resources to assist even more children with dyslexia.

"When you get a child who gets a piece of paper and they can't read, and by the time they go through the dyslexia center they can't wait to read—it's incredible," Aur said. "Their self-esteem goes from no self-esteem to where 'I'm loving this,' and those students come to school with a smile on their face; that's the neatest thing."

### **Father Melvin Diaz and Carmen Alicia Rodríguez Echevarría | Diocese of Ponce, Puerto Rico**

Immaculate Conception Church in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico, collapsed from the earthquakes that devastated Puerto Rico in January 2020. They didn't have time to even take down the Christmas decorations. The church walls collapsed on part of the parish school. Then in 2022 Hurricane Fiona roared in, took what remained of the church roof and deposited it next to a white tent used for the Eucharist and a temporary school lunchroom.

Father Melvin Diaz, pastor of Immaculate Conception, and Ms. Carmen Alicia Rodríguez Echevarría, parish school principal, refused to give up. Together they decided that this church would take on a new mission and new purpose in their devastated community, and it would begin with reviving their school.

Immaculate Conception School's enrollment had dwindled to only 90 students. Many local people had left the area after the earthquakes. But thanks to the relentless efforts of Principal Rodríguez and Father Diaz, enrollment is now at 229.

Even though the church building is wrecked, what is rising now needs no brick or mortar. Immaculate Conception's foundation is rock solid and stronger than ever. Father Diaz, Rodríguez and the parishioners and students at Immaculate Conception have withstood the twin calamities of hurricanes and earthquakes. But as a community, they are infinitely more powerful.

### **Father Rafael García Molina | Archdiocese of San Juan, Puerto Rico**

Father Rafael García Molina is pastor of Santa Luisa de Marillac in San Juan, located next door to over 600 residents of a low-income housing complex. He is spearheading a program that is elevating this entire community socially and economically.

The program pays residents within the low-income housing community to cook, clean, provide childcare and otherwise care for their neighbors in need, such as the elderly, disabled and single mothers. This arrangement builds community, trust and fellowship, while also providing jobs for many of the residents.

"They have this sense that they work for God," Father Molina said.

Father Molina says he is not here to "fix" the residents. Rather, the relationship is reciprocal. He believes these neighbors are bringing the face of God to his parish and the wider community.

Additionally, under Father Molina's example of grace, care and love, a growing number of families began to embrace their faith actively since his arrival two years ago. The church is now bustling with 23 energetic parish groups. "Charity doesn't have a creed," Father Molina said. "But in doing it we see God."

### **Sister Anne Francioni, SSND | Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Missouri**

Sister Anne Francioni, SSND, RN, MA, began Whole Kids Outreach (WKO) in 1999. The ministry serves 11 counties in southeastern Missouri, covering 80,080 square miles.

As a result of the complexities of rural poverty that exist in the vast, Missouri Ozarks, the families WKO serves are those that experience higher than state averages for food insecurity, substantiated child abuse, inadequate prenatal care, teenage pregnancy, infant mortality rates and preventable child hospitalization.

But because of Sister Anne's resourcefulness and the services provided by WKO, the statistics that support the turnaround for many families in WKO's various programs are incredible. For example, there's an astoundingly high rate of infant mortality in the 11 counties served by WKO. Families not served by WKO are eight times more likely to experience infant mortality than those participating in their programs. That means hundreds of children have enjoyed the gift of life, which otherwise would have been cut short, thanks to WKO's ministry.

The most impactful part of WKO is its flagship program of home visits. Families experience genuine concern from the staff and are offered tangible support when needed. It is the power of those relationships that fosters families' knowledge and skills to achieve substantial improvement in their well-being. Now in its 26th year, WKO has served over 20,000 families.

### **Deacon Tony Underwood | Diocese of Tucson, Arizona**

Deacon Tony Underwood is the pastoral administrator of St. Patrick Church in Bisbee, Arizona, a former mining town that has experienced economic decline. He previously worked for 23 years in the aerospace industry developing defense systems. He felt a calling to the diaconate and was ordained in 2003.

He keeps the church's physical doors open every day from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. so the Church can go out to the people that are hurting, and so the people that are hurting can more easily find their way to the Church.

This includes those seeking help from the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which operates out of the church. This ministry provides ready-to-eat meals each week, as well as food supplies, hygiene products, clothing and utility bill or other financial assistance.

Additionally, St. Patrick is located across the street from the county courthouse. The quiet of the church is the perfect place for distressed families awaiting court verdicts to come and pray for their intercessions. "To me that's extremely important, to make God accessible to them," said Deacon Underwood.

He also manages St. Michael Mission located 10 miles away in the tiny village of Naco. Originally built by Catholic Extension Society in 1939, it had fallen into disrepair. In 2013, Deacon Underwood worked with a parishioner to complete a \$180,000 restoration to save the church.

Learn more about this year's Lumen Christi finalists' unique stories [here](#).

###

**About Catholic Extension Society:** Founded in 1905, Catholic Extension Society works in solidarity with people to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities among the poor in the poorest regions of America. For more information visit [www.catholicextension.org](http://www.catholicextension.org); follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/catholicextension](https://facebook.com/catholicextension) or on X, formerly known as Twitter, at [@CathExtension](https://twitter.com/CathExtension).