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Houston — February 28, 2020
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Catholic Extension has honored Jesuit Father Antonio "T.J." Martinez posthumously with its 2020 Spirit of Francis Award for his leadership and commitment to education for disadvantaged children.

The Spirit of Francis Award recognizes an individual who has made a significant impact on the Catholic Church's mission in America through their service or philanthropy. Catholic Extension will accompany Martinez's award with a grant to go toward Texas education.

More than 200 people gathered to celebrate the life and ministry of the late priest at Extension's fourth annual award dinner in Houston Feb. 20.

Martinez was "a man of faith, hope, vision, great compassion and love who had the power to transform lives," said Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension. "He was a leader who impacted everyone he knew in such a genuine, compassionate, life-giving, beautiful way, and we are honored to celebrate him tonight."

Fr. Martinez, who died November 2014 after a seven-month battle with stomach cancer, is remembered across Houston for his energetic compassion for his students and his love of learning.

Raised in Brownsville, Texas, he entered the Jesuit seminary after receiving a bachelor's degree in political science with honors from Boston College. During his studies for the priesthood, he earned five graduate degrees including a University of

Texas law degree and a school leadership degree from Harvard University.

Martinez returned to Texas to establish the newest Jesuit high school in the country — Cristo Rey Jesuit College Prep — an innovative high school that combines a rigorous college prep program that exclusively serves economically challenged children.

It opened in August 2009. Like other schools in the Jesuits' Cristo Rey Network, students help pay for their tuition through a work-study program.

As founding president, Martinez rapidly grew the student population and partnered with 150 blue-ribbon corporations to provide student employment. Under the priest's leadership, 100% of his first graduating class was accepted into college and earned millions of dollars in scholarships.

Catholic Extension raises and distributes funds to support U.S. mission dioceses, many of which are rural, cover a large geographic area, and have limited personnel and pastoral resources. It has been supporting the work and ministries of these mission dioceses since its founding in 1905.

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