News
EarthBeat



Rise St. James founder Sharon Lavigne stands in front of a chemical plant near her home in St. James Parish, Louisiana. (University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 30, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Sharon Lavigne, a Catholic crusader of environmental justice for her St. James community in Louisiana's notorious "Cancer Alley," will receive this year's prestigious Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame.

Notre Dame announced the selection of Lavigne — a 70-year-old grandmother who has led campaigns against petrochemical plants in her community of St. James Parish, Louisiana — on March 27. Considered one of the highest honors within the U.S. Catholic Church, the Laetare Medal has been awarded annually since 1883. According to the school, it is presented to a Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church and enriched the heritage of humanity."

"Through her tireless activism, Sharon Lavigne has heeded God's call to advocate for the health of her community and the planet — and to help put an end to environmental degradation which so often disproportionately victimizes communities of color," Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame, said in a statement. "In awarding her the Laetare Medal, Notre Dame recognizes her leadership and her courage as a champion of the environment, a voice for the marginalized and a steadfast servant of our creator."

Lavigne, a lifelong parishioner of St. James Catholic Church and the 2021 North American recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, often referred to as the "green" Nobel Prize, will receive the Laetare Medal during commencement ceremonies on campus May 15.




Catholic environmental justice activist Sharon Lavigne at a burial site for enslaved Black people in Louisiana, on the property that Formosa Plastics Group bought to build a petrochemical complex (Courtesy of Goldman Environmental Prize)

In an interview Monday (March 28), Lavigne told EarthBeat it was "a wonderful honor" to be chosen for the medal and expressed surprise at her selection, calling it "special" to receive the same award that in past years was presented to the nation's only Catholic presidents, John F. Kennedy and Joe Biden.

"I'm just overjoyed. And I thank God for it," she said. "I thank God that he's bringing me to people that's helping me win this fight against this gigantic [plastics] plant."

Since 2018, Lavigne and her faith-based, grassroots organization Rise St. James have mobilized their community in southern Louisiana to oppose the construction of multiple plastics manufacturing facilities. The latest fight is against the proposed $9.4 billion, 14-plant Formosa Plastic Group manufacturing complex.

**Related:** Sharon Lavigne's fighting faith on the bayou

St. James Parish is located between New Orleans and Baton Rouge in what's been dubbed "Cancer Alley" due to the elevated cancer rates in the region that is home to more than 150 chemical and industrial complexes, many of which are located in predominantly Black and low-income communities. Lavigne said the dozen petrochemical plants alone in the Fifth District in St. James Parish "are poisoning us," and she is seeking funding to conduct a health study on the impacts of industrial pollution on her community.

"We are trying to save lives," she said. "If you would come to St. James and smell what we smell, you wouldn't want to live here."

"We want to live in our hometown. We love St. James, and we want to stay here," Lavigne said, adding that many lack the finances to move even if they wanted to.

In November, Michael Regan, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, met with Lavigne and other local leaders during an environmental justice listening tour through several southern states. The visit came several months after Hurricane Ida damaged Lavigne's home and others in Louisiana. A year earlier, Lavigne was invited to speak during a Congressional Convening on environmental justice at the U.S. Capitol.

"I've asked God to let me live a long life and explain to the people and continue to try to save our community and to rebuild our community, because industry has taken over," she told EarthBeat. "Industry has taken over so much in our community, and I'm hoping that this award will bring light to what I'm doing."

Advertisement

Over the past year, Lavigne's profile has risen within Catholic circles.

In February, St. Ignatius Loyola Church, the Jesuit parish in Manhattan, presented Lavigne with its own Mary Magdalene award and hosted her as part of its Courageous Women of Faith program.

Along with that, she has been collaborating with the Catholic Climate Covenant, and will speak on April 11 during its "Ecospirituality Nights" series.

Jose Aguto, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, told EarthBeat in an email that Lavigne and her allies have drawn from the strength of God "in this David and Goliath(s) battle" against the petrochemical industry, and praised her courage, conviction and bridge-building.

"Notre Dame's honor recognizes in her this clear conduit of faith embodied and manifest in heart and action. It may also be a clear illustration of the increasing recognition that environmental injustice is an affront to the life and dignity of the human person," he said.

Aguto also encouraged Catholics to support and accompany people like Lavigne in the pursuit of environmental justice "as an integral aspect of our faith."

Lavigne said she continues to seek partnerships with the Catholic Church, both in the Baton Rouge Diocese and beyond its borders. She added she hopes that by receiving the Laetare Medal, more people within the church will learn about what's happening in St. James and perhaps be motivated to join their cause.

"Rise is faith-based, and we want to do what God told us to do. And that's why Rise came about, because of my faith in God," she said. "No one had faith like I had that we could do this. Because I was told we couldn't do it."