News



Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, seen in an undated photo, is the recipient of the University of Notre Dame's 2024 Laetare Medal, the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics. The university announced the honor March 10 and it will be presented at the university's 179th commencement ceremony May 19. (OSV News/Barbara Johnston, University of Notre Dame)

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Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, has been named the recipient of the University of Notre Dame's 2024 Laetare Medal, the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics.

It will be presented at the university's 179th commencement ceremony May 19 at Notre Dame Stadium.

The honor was announced March 10, Laetare Sunday, which is the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The Laetare (pronounced lay-TAH-ray) Medal has been given to Catholic leaders since 1883.

"Claire Babineaux-Fontenot has devoted herself to answering Christ's call to feed the hungry and care for those who are most vulnerable, and in doing so has created a network that sustains millions of Americans every day," Holy Cross Father John I. Jenkins, Notre Dame's president, said in a statement.

Feeding America, a national network of more than 200 food banks and 60,000 charitable and faith-based partners, works to rescue, store and distribute food to more than 49 million people facing hunger each year. It also conducts research on food insecurity and potential solutions.

"Under her visionary leadership, Feeding America has become a beacon of hope not only to the individuals and families it serves, but for all who share her vision of eliminating food insecurity in this country," Jenkins said.

Babineaux-Fontenot joined Feeding America in 2015. At the time she was executive vice president of finance and global treasurer at Walmart and a member of its leadership team for 13 years. But she felt called by God to a higher purpose. "I knew that there was someplace I was being guided to, and I knew it was going to require faith and confidence in Him," she said in a statement.

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Feeding America's CEO since 2018, Babineaux-Fontenot has led the organization through several challenges, "including navigating a global pandemic and the

ensuing increase in food insecurity," said a Notre Dame news release.

In 2022, Feeding America became the nation's largest charitable organization, according to Forbes, and the network distributed 5.3 billion meals in 2023.

"Over 10 million children are food insecure here, in the richest country in the history of civilization," she said. "That means we need to continue to get the word out. We should help people to understand that the game isn't over. Notre Dame knows a thing or two about football, right? You don't leave the field before the game is over. The game's not over with hunger."

Feeding America recently announced a partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services to explore the link between food insecurity and health outcomes.

Babineaux-Fontenot, who has a law degree and a master of laws degree in taxation, spent 30 years in leadership positions in government, at law firms and with private corporations before joining Feeding America. She was named one of Time's "100 Most Influential People of 2020" and was featured in the 2022 Forbes "50 over 50" list.

Growing up in Opelousas, Louisiana, she was one of 108 siblings. "Through a combination of birth, adoption and fostering, her parents built a large and loving family and worked tirelessly to help children in need," according to Notre Dame's news release.

Previous recipients of the Laetare Medal include President John F. Kennedy, Catholic Worker Movement co-founder Dorothy Day, then-Vice President Joe Biden and House Speaker John Boehner (awarded jointly), Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, labor activist Msgr. George G. Higgins, jazz composer Dave Brubeck, singer Aaron Neville and actor Martin Sheen.

Last year's recipient was Mercy Sister Rosemary Connelly, former executive director of Misericordia and lifelong advocate for individuals with developmental disabilities.