

Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J., champion of immigrants, to receive Notre Dame's 2018 Laetare Medal

by Amanda Skofstad [\[link:/news/authors/amanda-skofstad/\]](/news/authors/amanda-skofstad/)

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Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J.

Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J., executive director of [Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley](http://www.catholiccharitiesrgv.org/Home.aspx) [\[link:http://www.catholiccharitiesrgv.org/Home.aspx\]](http://www.catholiccharitiesrgv.org/Home.aspx) and longtime advocate for immigrants and refugees, will receive the University of Notre Dame's 2018 [Laetare Medal](http://laetare.nd.edu/) [\[link:http://laetare.nd.edu/\]](http://laetare.nd.edu/) — the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics — at Notre Dame's 173rd University [Commencement Ceremony](http://commencement.nd.edu/) [\[link:http://commencement.nd.edu/\]](http://commencement.nd.edu/) on May 20 (Sunday).

“Jesus said, ‘when I was a stranger, you invited me in.’ Sister Norma Pimentel has given her life to welcoming Christ in the immigrant and refugee,” said [Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.](http://president.nd.edu/about-the-president/)

[\[link:http://president.nd.edu/about-the-president/\]](http://president.nd.edu/about-the-president/) “In awarding her the Laetare Medal, Notre Dame celebrates her witness of seeking and generously serving Christ in the most vulnerable.”

Sister Pimentel, a religious sister of the Missionaries of Jesus, has overseen the charitable arm of the Diocese of Brownsville (Texas) since 2008, providing a range of services that includes emergency food and shelter, housing assistance, clinical counseling and pregnancy care to all four counties in the Rio Grande Valley. She was instrumental in organizing local response to the 2014 surge of Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States. This included helping to establish the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas.

In 2015, Pope Francis recognized and thanked Sister Pimentel personally for her work with immigrants in a virtual town hall meeting that was featured on ABC's "20/20."

[\[link:http://abcnews.go.com/2020/video/texas-nun-norma-pimentel-words-33547897\]](http://abcnews.go.com/2020/video/texas-nun-norma-pimentel-words-33547897).” Also in 2015, she was named one of “Our Sunday Visitor’s” 2015 Catholics of the Year and won a nomination for “Texan of the Year.”

In response to learning she had been named the 2018 Laetare Medalist, Sister Pimentel said: “I am truly honored to receive this award. This year’s Laetare Medal brings forth the cries of the suffering for the world to hear. I would like to thank the University of Notre Dame for this recognition and for being a voice for immigrants in our midst.”



Herself the daughter of Mexican immigrants, Sister Pimentel grew up crossing back and forth from Brownsville to Matamoros, Mexico, to be with family on both sides of the border. It was while her parents were awaiting response from U.S. authorities on their application for residency that Sister Pimentel’s mother gave birth to her in Texas.

In her reflection on immigrants in “[A Pope Francis Lexicon](https://litpress.org/Products/E4545/A-Pope-Francis-Lexicon) [\[link:https://litpress.org/Products/E4545/A-Pope-Francis-Lexicon\]](https://litpress.org/Products/E4545/A-Pope-Francis-Lexicon),” Sister Pimentel wrote: “I am a U.S. citizen by *chiripa* — sheer chance. I grew up *entre dos fronteras*, enjoying life in two countries, Mexico and the United States.”

Sister Pimentel received a bachelor of fine arts degree from Pan American University, a master’s degree in theology from St. Mary’s University and a master’s degree in counseling psychology from Loyola University Chicago.

Sister Pimentel said some of her most formative and pivotal experiences took place shortly after she professed final vows with the Missionaries of Jesus. Border patrol agents would bring immigrant families to the sisters’ convent, often late at night. Sister Pimentel said Sister Juliana Garcia, her religious superior at the time, “would immediately prepare a room to welcome the family when they arrived. The mother and her children would become part of our community family for about a week or so, and I quickly learned the importance of living out our faith by how we welcome and protect those who need us.”

For Sister Pimentel, the call to compassion to those in need extends to all Christians—and results in radical transformation.

“Scripture comes to life and our faith becomes flesh,” she said. “It is not until you find yourself in front of the face of the immigrant child or mother that you will understand this. It is a moment of realizing we are all one human family.”

The Laetare (pronounced lay-TAH-ray) Medal is so named because its recipient is announced each year in celebration of Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent on the Church calendar. “Laetare,” the Latin word for “rejoice,” is the first word in the entrance antiphon of the Mass that Sunday, which ritually anticipates the celebration of Easter. The medal bears the Latin inscription, “Magna est veritas et praevallebit” (“Truth is mighty, and it shall prevail”).

Established at Notre Dame in 1883, the Laetare Medal was conceived as an American counterpart of the Golden Rose, a papal honor that antedates the 11th century. The medal has been awarded annually at Notre Dame to a Catholic “whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church and enriched the heritage of humanity.”

Previous recipients of the Laetare Medal include Civil War Gen. William Rosecrans, operatic tenor John McCormack, President John F. Kennedy, Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, novelist Walker Percy, Vice President Joe Biden, Speaker of the House John Boehner, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, labor activist Monsignor George G. Higgins, jazz composer Dave Brubeck, singer Aaron Neville and actor Martin Sheen.

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