

Notre Dame News

Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, to receive 2024 Laetare Medal

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👤 [Carrie Gates](#)



Claire Babineaux-Fontenot (photo by Barbara Johnston/University of Notre Dame)

Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, the chief executive officer of [Feeding America](#), will receive the University of Notre Dame's 2024 [Laetare Medal](#) — the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics — at Notre Dame's 179th [University Commencement Ceremony](#) on May 19 (Sunday).

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.

“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,” said Notre Dame President [Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.](#) “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.”

Prior to joining Feeding America, Babineaux-Fontenot was executive vice president of finance and global treasurer at Walmart — the culmination of 13 years on Walmart’s leadership team and a career spanning three decades of increasingly high-profile leadership positions in government, law firms and private corporations.

However, in 2015, she felt strongly that she was being 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. “I truly did not feel afraid, and I am so grateful for that guidance. I just trusted that He would take me to where He wanted me to be.”

Hunger is a cause that has always been close to Babineaux-Fontenot’s heart. 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 — many of whom had faced neglect, abuse and food insecurity before joining their home.

Serving as CEO of Feeding America feels like a full-circle moment for her, she said.

In the last six years, Babineaux-Fontenot has led the organization through a number of challenges, including navigating a global pandemic and the ensuing increase in food insecurity. Under her direction, Feeding America became the nation’s largest charitable organization in 2022, according to Forbes, and the network distributed 5.3 billion meals in 2023.

But there is still much work to do, said Babineaux-Fontenot.

“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.”

Babineaux-Fontenot is ready to continue the fight. She and her team at Feeding America are seeking new ways to address food insecurity and championing new legislation in Congress. They recently announced a partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services to explore the link between food insecurity and health outcomes.

“Success for Feeding America is having a place at the table in thriving communities where people are creating solutions for themselves,” she said, “and an America where no one — no one — has to wonder where their next meal is going to come from, or the one after that or the one after that.

“That’s my vision, and it’s all possible. These are not pipe dreams.”

Babineaux-Fontenot holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette; a Juris Doctor from Southern University Law Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and a Master of Laws in taxation from Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas. In 2020, she was named one of the world’s 100 most influential people by Time magazine and was featured in the 2022 Forbes “50 over 50” list.

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 praevalerebit” (“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 and Speaker of the House John Boehner

(awarded jointly), Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, labor activist Monsignor George G. Higgins, jazz composer Dave Brubeck, singer Aaron Neville and actor Martin Sheen.

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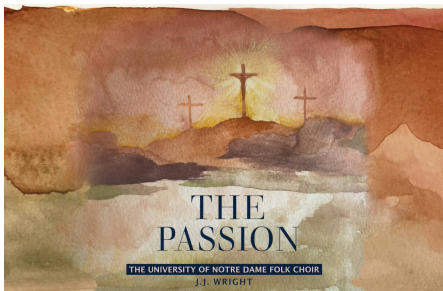
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