



Roman Catholic  
**Diocese of Las Cruces**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Fearless Catholic Nun Honored for a Lifetime of Service on the Frontlines  
Catholic Extension's 2018-2019 Lumen Christi Award to honor a missionary sister  
who has spent her life serving the vulnerable in the U.S. and around the globe.**

CHICAGO (Nov. 19, 2018) - Sister Marie-Paule Willem, FMM, has spent a lifetime promoting the dignity of individuals and families. She is 85 years old and speaks five languages. As a little girl growing up in Belgium, she survived Nazi occupation. She was expelled from South America while advocating for social justice amidst a brutal regime. Currently, she serves women in detention and leads a growing parish along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Catholic Extension has selected Sister Willem to receive the 2018-2019 Lumen Christi Award, the highest honor bestowed on a missionary working in the United States. This Chicago-based papal society raises funds to help build faith communities in poor and isolated Catholic dioceses.

Working across many countries, Sister Willem has been serving the poor for more than 60 years. She believes strong families are the foundation of the Church and society.

Currently, Sister Marie-Paule is serving in the Diocese of Las Cruces as the parish life coordinator of St. Joseph's Parish in Fairacres, New Mexico.

### **International roots**

Born into a large, Catholic family in the city of Bruges, Belgium, Sister Willem has early memories of World War II and the Nazi invasion, fleeing with her family as the bombs fell around them. They were eventually liberated by Allied forces. At age 23, she joined the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, who serve where the need is greatest and where no one else wants to go, among the poorest and most forgotten.

She ministered in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay in the 1970's during times of military dictatorships and political upheaval. She was part of the Church's advocacy and social justice efforts to help the condemned, who were put in outdoor "corrals" and left to starve. For her mission, she risked her life, received death threats and was ousted from the region.

Still wanting to work with the poor but knowing she could not return to Latin America, she found an opportunity in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

### Southwest missionary

In 1980 Sister Willem joined her community in Roma, Texas, a border town, and became director of religious education for a parish. She led bilingual programs in catechesis for children and worked with incarcerated women at a detention center. She then moved to the Diocese of Las Cruces in New Mexico to serve migrant farmworkers and immigrants-keeping families together, safe and close to the Church.

Five years ago, at age 80, she became pastoral administrator at San José Mission Church in Doña Ana County, a tiny picturesque mission that is nestled into a working-class neighborhood. There were only a handful of parishioners and no full-time pastor.

"When I arrived, it was so sad here," Sister Willem said. "The buildings were falling apart, and no one seemed to care."

She rolled up her sleeves and got to work, walking around the neighborhood, telling people about the parish and asking what they needed.

She started building up the community and the church itself - the liturgy, the buildings, the ministries and the grounds, which are now full of gardens. The parish hall was recently remodeled, and the church received updating. Today the parish has more than 200 families who are actively engaged, with about 35 people attending Mass on Saturday and nearly 100 on Sunday.

"Sister Marie-Paule has turned the parish around," said Irma Chavez May, a parishioner. "The church was in bad shape, and few people came. It is beautiful now and so many attend Mass, it's hard to find parking on Sunday."

"She came with a vision, enthusiasm and a passion for the Church," said Irma's husband, Robert. "She has gotten everyone involved and keeps us connected. If she wasn't here, this parish would likely have closed," he said.

## Serving the imprisoned

Sister Willem believes God's love can heal all wounds, even the deepest ones. This conviction allows her to be a transformative presence in the Doña Ana Detention Center where she serves about 60 women facing some of life's worst situations.

She gathers weekly with these women, and using poetry and heartfelt meditation, helps them find hope, dignity and self-confidence.

Additionally, she works with immigrants, tutoring them, teaching them English and helping them prepare for citizenship.

Susan Roberts, director of development, foundation and stewardship for the diocese said, "Sister Marie-Paule is an international icon, shepherding people wherever she goes. She easily wins people's trust and has no fear because God is with her."

## A shining light

In a neighborhood without street lights, you only see the cross illuminated on top of the church. The light of the cross draws people to San José just as much as Sister Willem's radiant smile and steadfast commitment.

The Lumen Christi Award honors an individual or group working in one of America's mission dioceses who demonstrates how the power of faith can transform lives and communities. Nominated by her bishop, Sister Willem was one of 47 inspirational nominees this year and one of eight finalists.

"Sister Marie-Paule teaches us that war, persecution and suffering cannot extinguish the light of Christ," said Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension. "Most importantly, she shows by her example how ordinary people can become the light of Christ that brilliantly shines for others."

With her advancing age, Sister Willem is preparing her parish for when she retires, although she shows no signs of slowing down. Her secret to motivating people and allowing them to carry her work forward is simple: "First I do it. People see me, and I say, 'Can you help me do it?' Then I step aside, and they do it," she said.

With her boundless energy, dynamic spirit, compassion and above all - unbridled courage - Sister Willem represents the best of the Catholic Church.

As the Lumen Christi recipient, Sister Willem and her diocese will share in a \$50,000 grant. To learn more about the Lumen Christi Award and about the mission of Catholic Extension, visit [www.catholicextension.org](http://www.catholicextension.org).

## **About the Diocese of Las Cruces**

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces was founded in 1982 and encompasses the counties of Dona Ana, Eddy, Grant, Hidalgo, Lea, Luna, Otero, Sierra, Lincoln, and Chavez counties in New Mexico. The diocese serves over 234,550 Catholics through 47 parishes, 44 missions, and 6 Catholic schools.