News
Social Justice



Sr. Francisca Ngozi Uti speaks at the 2024 Opus Prize ceremony Nov. 14 at Santa Clara University in California, where Uti's organization was awarded $1 million. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)



by Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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A sister who founded an organization to promote the social, legal and political equality of women in Nigeria has been awarded the $1 million Opus Prize.

Sr. Francisca Ngozi Uti, a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, was named the 2024 Opus Prize Laureate Nov. 14 in a ceremony at California's Santa Clara University, which partnered with the Minnesota-based Opus Prize Foundation.

The prize is an annual honor for unsung social entrepreneurs who operate from a faith tradition and find innovative ways to address persistent social challenges. Uti, who said she grew up "in a time when the girl child's education was often dismissed as unworthy," started the Centre for Women Studies and Intervention, a sponsored ministry of her congregation, 25 years ago.

"I accept this award on behalf of all the women, girls and men who have partnered with us to bring about positive change in their lives and communities," Uti said, according to a press release. "I remember especially the women and girls who have endured hardship, and are now striving to rebuild their lives."

Opus Prize officials said the Centre for Women Studies and Intervention has helped more than 1 million women and girls through more than 100 projects in four Nigerian states, including the addition of 20 women in traditionally male-only councils; the ending of female genital cutting in Nwang in Cross River State; and notable increases in the number of girls enrolled in schools across the country.

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Uti and 15 other center workers spend extended periods, often years, working with communities that have ingrained norms for often-unlawful practices like genital mutilation, underage marriage, or lack of education for girls. They work with community members and leaders to examine the origins behind the traditions, educate them on the negative impact of policies, and train them on issues like legal rights or skill-building.

Two other finalists for the honor — Jesuit Fr. Zachariah Presutti, founder of the Thrive for Life Prison Project in the United States, and Bianca and Cătălin Albu of Jesuit Refugee Service Romania — each received $100,000 for their organizations.

Each year, the Opus Prize Foundation partners with a different Catholic university for the yearlong process that leads to the awarding of the $1.2 million in prizes.

"Sr. Ngozi teaches us all the transformative power of relationships, trust, and the fundamental right of every human being to be afforded kindness, dignity, and opportunity," said Santa Clara University President Julie Sullivan in the release.

"She and the two other finalists have brought a powerful model of hope and resilience to our university community, and we have been profoundly touched by the Opus Prize experience."

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