



Gayle M. Benson, right, a prominent philanthropist and the owner of both the NFL's New Orleans Saints and NBA's New Orleans Pelicans, receives the Faith & Culture Award from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association during CNEWA's annual Healing & Hope Gala in New York City Dec. 9, 2024. (OSV News/courtesy of CNEWA)

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The owner of two New Orleans professional sports teams has been recognized by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association for her "unwavering commitment to her Catholic faith," as well as "her outstanding contributions to the promotion of human dignity."

Gayle Benson — owner and CEO of the NFL's New Orleans Saints, and owner and governor of the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans — was presented with CNEWA's Faith & Culture Award at a Dec. 9 gala in New York.

During the gala, Archbishop Gabriele G. Caccia, the Vatican's permanent observer to the United Nations in New York, was recognized as CNEWA's guest of honor. The organization described him as "a constant voice for peace, justice and hope."

Founded by Pope Pius XI in 1926, CNEWA — an initiative of the Holy See — works through and with the Eastern churches to provide humanitarian and spiritual support in the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe. Among its activities are providing aid to displaced families; ensuring health care for the most vulnerable; assisting in efforts to care for the marginalized, especially children, elderly and those with special needs; funding church-run initiatives preventing trafficking and programs that rehabilitate, counsel and heal survivors; and supporting the education and formation of priests, religious sisters and lay leaders.

In a media release, CNEWA said its Faith & Culture Award recognizes individuals "who have demonstrated extraordinary efforts to uphold and promote the values of faith, culture and human dignity."

Benson has for several years been an active philanthropist, with a particular passion for Catholic causes, owing to her deeply held Catholic faith. In 2018, she took over leading both the Saints and the Pelicans after the passing of her husband, billionaire Tom Benson.

In a June interview with the U.K.-based Catholic Herald, Benson — a New Orleans native, product of Catholic schools and regular Mass attendee — described the importance of her faith in surmounting adversity at a number of points in her life.

CNEWA noted that through the Gayle & Tom Benson Charitable Foundation, "she has supported a wide range of initiatives, including education, health care and social justice, with a focus on uplifting marginalized communities locally and globally.

"Her faith and presence in the Catholic Church have been a source of inspiration for her lifelong dedication to helping others, always seeking to serve those in need with compassion and generosity," said CNEWA.

"We are proud to present Gayle Benson with this award as a reflection of her profound impact on communities both here and abroad," said Msgr. Peter I. Vaccari, president of CNEWA. "Her faith-driven approach to service, her dedication to empowering the most vulnerable, and her deep commitment to the church are all qualities that resonate with the core mission of CNEWA."

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"I am deeply humbled to be recognized by CNEWA," Benson said in receiving the honor. "The organization's work to protect the dignity of every individual is truly remarkable, and it's a privilege to collaborate with others who share this vision.

"I have always believed that we are called to serve others, and that to whom much is given, much is expected," she said. "This award reflects the power of faith and service in making a positive difference in the world."

Earlier this year, CNEWA also honored Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia with its Faith & Culture Award June 21, 2024, at the Catholic Media Conference in Atlanta. Gudziak was recognized for "his passionate commitment to the God-given dignity and rights of the human person as an advocate and defender and for championing the integral role of faith in culture."

Previous recipients of the Faith & Culture Award have also included Carl A. Anderson, former Supreme Knight of the Knight of Columbus; retired Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, New York; and John J. Studzinski, co-founder of the Arise Foundation, which fights human trafficking and helps survivors of trafficking.