

New Orleans Catholics Raise \$1 Million in 24 Hours

Big (Catholic) Money in the Big Easy: A record-making \$1.3 million was donated through the archdiocese's #iGiveCatholic campaign for Giving Tuesday, making it the most successful Catholic crowdfunding event to date.

BY PETER JESSERER SMITH
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NEW ORLEANS — Catholics in the Archdiocese of New Orleans came to crowdfund for their ministries; they saw they had only 24 hours for Giving Tuesday; and they conquered where others failed, raising a cool record-making \$1.3 million.

"I just sat in amazement," said Angie Thomas, executive director of the [Woman's New Life Center](#). The pro-life women's medical center was part of the archdiocese's groundbreaking [#iGiveCatholic crowdfunding campaign](#) for its parishes, schools and nonprofits on Giving Tuesday, starting on midnight Dec 1. By the stroke of midnight on Dec. 2, the Woman's New Life Center had raised the most money from donations — out of all the participating Catholic [ministries listed](#) on the campaign's [iGiveCatholic.org](#) site — in the 24-hour period: \$417,010.



Thomas explained her ministry had already launched a \$1.8-million campaign to build a third pro-life women's clinic next door to a Planned Parenthood abortion facility under construction in New Orleans. They saw the first-of-its-kind Catholic day of giving as an opportunity to connect with new donors, particularly young people.

"We're now pretty close to our goal," she said. The new center will compete directly with Planned Parenthood by providing women life-affirming well-woman care, professional counseling for unplanned pregnancies, fertility care and even abortion-pill reversal procedures.

"People want to have a positive alternative to the horrors going on in this world today," Thomas said. "This project represents that — a positive approach and alternative, and people were ready to give."

Groundbreaking Success

The #iGiveCatholic campaign was the [first online giving day by Catholics](#) for the works of the Catholic Church in the history of the United States.

It was organized by the Catholic Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to managing the finances of the archdiocese and its affiliated organizations, as a 24-hour Giving Tuesday online crowdfunding effort at [iGiveCatholic.org](#).

The archdiocese's goal was to raise \$500,000 — all tax-deductible — to support the work of more than 100 schools, ministries, parishes and other charitable organizations affiliated with the Archdiocese of New Orleans that signed onto the #iGiveCatholic campaign.

Throughout Giving Tuesday, donors flocked to the [iGiveCatholic.org](#) home page and clicked the specific ministries listed there to make their donations. By the afternoon, the archdiocese had met its target. By the evening, the amount was racing toward the million-dollar mark. When the clock finally struck midnight on Dec. 2, the #iGiveCatholic campaign closed, having brought in 2,867 approved credit-card donations totaling \$1,357,270.68.

"When presented the opportunity, people really do respond," Cory Howat, the archdiocese's director of stewardship and development, told the Register.

Howat said there was an "overall sense of gratitude" in the archdiocese. They had been on "pins and needles" when Giving Tuesday arrived, wondering whether their efforts, including advertising throughout the archdiocese with traditional and modern media, from billboards to social media, would pay off. But the feeling gave way to euphoria as the donations kept steadily climbing.

"It was crazy; we were just laughing about how God is good," he said.

The largest single gift was \$100,000 from a donor-advised fund, and there were a number of other five-figure gifts as

well, according to Charlie Heim, executive director of the Catholic Foundation.

"We're very pleased by the number of gifts," Heim told the Register, adding that the fact that the goal was nearly tripled was "overwhelming." After 8am, consistently more than 100 donations came in per hour.

Friendly Competition

The #iGiveCatholic campaign also invited a spirit of friendly competition. The archdiocese wanted to target and create relationships with people who have not given to Catholic institutions before, particularly with the younger generation. So ministries had an incentive to spread the word, as more than **\$25,000 in bonus prize money** for the top three ministries in each category — parishes, schools and nonprofits — was at stake.

"None of us knew what to expect," said Father Robert Cooper, pastor of **St. Benilde Catholic Church**, a parish of 800 families, which was raising money for its elementary school that serves more than 300 students.

But Tuesday's day of Catholic giving, he said, had all the anticipation of election night, waiting for the returns to come in.

Throughout the day, St. Benilde's vied with St. Paul School and St. Anne School on the campaign's leaderboard for first place in the number of donations. At times during the day, St. Paul's seemed close to overtaking St. Benilde's; however, St. Benilde School took the top spot, with 197 donations, leading St. Paul's by 21 donations.

Father Cooper added that updates were given on Twitter and Facebook every half hour, rallying people to give. Because they raised \$21,000 right before the campaign closed, they obtained an extra \$20,000, thanks to a matching grant from the Whitman Family Foundation.

The funds raised will go toward classroom improvement, including new furniture and new technology.

Father Cooper said that in the four weeks before the #iGiveCatholic campaign on Giving Tuesday, emails, social media and text messages — along with some print media — got the message out that it was a day for sacrificial giving in gratitude for the gift of Catholic education.

"Those were part of the success of our campaign," he said.

"We'll probably start getting the word out even earlier next year."

Stand-Out Philanthropic Success

The #iGiveCatholic crowdfunding campaign was groundbreaking for a Catholic diocese using the Internet-based fundraising tool. The Internet is a chronicle of Catholic crowdfunding campaigns that began with fanfare and flopped. But the #iGiveCatholic campaign towers over even the success stories, with its \$1.35-million haul.

"I've not heard anything like that," said Anthony Pienta, an expert on Catholic philanthropy at the **Philanthropy Roundtable**, a nonprofit based in the metropolitan D.C. area dedicated to promoting philanthropic excellence. Pienta is acting director of the K-12 giving program for the organization, which produced the "**Catholic School Renaissance**" guidebook for generating donor investment in Catholic education.

"That's a major success, especially in the area of New Orleans," he added, noting that its metropolitan area does not have a reputation for a major concentration of wealth, as Washington or Boston do.

However, Pienta said that a note of caution is in order: Successful crowdfunding is "not as easy as a plug-and-play," where one sets up a website, makes an announcement and hopes for the best. It requires a serious investment into advertising and getting the word out well in advance to really actualize its potential.

"You've got to be really smart about it," he said, adding that local factors also have to be taken into account when applying the lessons to another locale. "But I think people really have to study what New Orleans did."

Drawing Lessons for 2016

The Catholic Foundation is still crunching the data and drawing conclusions that will make next year's #iGiveCatholic campaign even more successful.

Heim said some key lessons already emerged: Donors really responded to ministries that went an extra step to show what their gifts would specifically accomplish. Another key factor behind the most successful participating ministries was the level of dedication each one put in getting the word out to supporters and generating excitement.

"We're putting some of those ideas together, and we're going to have a little 'conclave' [in January] and get everybody's feedback about what was good, where we can improve and so forth," he said. "But for the first year, I couldn't be happier for the organizations that participated."

Cory Howat added that he has already been contacted by pastors who did not participate this year but are now convinced by the results.

More importantly, he said the archdiocese is looking forward to sharing its knowledge with other dioceses — some of which have already contacted them — about how they can take advantage of the iGiveCatholic.org platform, which has the feature of guaranteeing donors that 100% of their donations will go to support approved Catholic ministries.

Howat said, “We’re really excited that this could be an opportunity to help Catholic giving in the U.S.”

Peter Jesserer Smith is a Register staff reporter.

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