News
Migration



A Missionary Sister of Charity offers food to a group of homeless people, including some migrants April 1 in Coronado, Costa Rica. Faced with a wave of migrants passing through the country, the sisters have joined other religious congregations responding to the needs of the temporary population. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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In the masses of migrants Scalabrinian Sr. María Angélica Tiralle has seen pass through Costa Rica over the past 10 years, she has seen the "people of Israel," she said.

"It is the same people of Israel looking for the promised land," Tiralle said about the thousands of migrants she has helped, along with other women religious in Costa Rica, as they pass through or stay in the country.

Long thought of as one of the most stable nations in Central America, Costa Rica has opened its doors and hearts to people seeking relief during historic periods of instability in other nations, something that is reflected in the diversity of people from neighboring — and not-so-neighboring — countries who now reside in San José, its capital.

However, in recent years, Costa Rica has become a place where itinerant flows of people fleeing growing economic and political crises in Latin America mingle. While some stay, others go.

More and more, in its streets and towns, masses of migrants from countries such as Haiti and Venezuela gather to take a short break before continuing on their way to the United States. There are also migrants from Nicaragua escaping the political repression of their country or seeking means of subsistence unavailable in their homeland.



Scalabrinian Sr. María Angélica Tiralle helps a migrant couple fill out documents at the Church of Our Lady of Mercy in San José, Costa Rica, April 2. The charism of the religious order to which the sister belongs is focused in supporting migrants. (GSR Photo/Rhina Guidos)

With the ongoing arrival of migrants, religious sisters from various congregations in Costa Rica have felt the need to respond to the growing phenomenon of immigration, even if their charism is not directly rooted in serving migrants. Since 2015, waves of migrants, some waves bigger than others, have arrived in the country in numbers never seen before, Tiralle said.

"First it was the Cubans in 2015, then, in 2016, the Haitians, then the Nicaraguans came, and last year, the wave of Venezuelans, which was an impressive migration," Tiralle told Global Sisters Report.

In 2022, many of them were part of the 250,000 migrants who crossed — and survived — the dangerous jungle that connects South and Central America, known as the Darien Gap. It was a record number, according to figures from the government of Panama, which has also reported that, in the first months of 2023, more than 100,000 people have crossed it.

Last year, many of them arrived in Costa Rica: some hungry, some with children, barefoot, some in a state of shock, and others disheveled. But by then, the sisters already had experience serving masses of people. In 2018, after the economic crisis that broke out in Venezuela, the streets of the Costa Rican capital began to fill with migrants like never before. Some set up tents on the streets. With signs, they asked for food and money to continue their journey; others sold candy to make some profit to support themselves.



Sr. Verónica Cortez Méndez waits, along with other women religious, at the door of the office of the migrant ministry of the Archdiocese of San José, Costa Rica, March 30. The Carmelite missionary sister is part of a group that has helped women

religious tend to the waves of migrants passing through the Central American nation. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"When we saw this, we said: 'We have to respond,' and one day, we went all over San José distributing bags of food," recalled Sr. Verónica Cortez Méndez, a Carmelite Missionary who had worked with Tiralle in a network of religious sisters, combating human trafficking. "It was Sister Angélica. ... A spark was ignited in her," Cortez said.

Tiralle began to interview migrants on the streets to see what they needed and communicated it to the other congregations, who looked for ways to help, Cortez said.

"We decided to join forces," explained Tiralle, referring to the religious congregations that offered to help, including the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Missionary Sisters of Charity, and several Carmelite and Franciscan communities, among others.

Sr. Doribel Matamoros said that although the work of the Sisters of Charity of Santa Ana, of which she is a member, focuses on schools and homes for the elderly, pastoral outreach is part of their charism, which is why they joined the mission of helping migrants.



Sr. Doribel Matamoros, of the Sisters of Charity of Santa Ana, poses for a photo at her convent in Llorente de Tibas, near San José, Costa Rica, March 29. The community, whose charism focuses on schools and homes for the elderly, also has helped other women religious respond to an increasing number of migrants passing through Costa Rica. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"I feel that since our charism is so broad, we were able to attend to all their needs: from providing food and spiritual care to providing psychological support," Tiralle said, adding that the Scalabrinian community has also become involved in a national response to migration as part of civil society groups. She is a member of the Permanent Forum on Migrant and Refugee Population in Costa Rica.

Like other religious sisters, her work with migrants has led her to become familiar with immigration procedures and laws, learning about the possibilities that Costa Rica offers for migrants, how to obtain refugee status, and what to do to ensure that a person who arrives in the country feels protected and recovers his or her dignity, she said.

The sisters' work helps people like Elquin Lozano, a Colombian immigrant who was on one of San José's main streets March 31 with his wife and three children, including the youngest, María Angel, who is just 2 years old.

Lozano recounted that he fled his country due to the economic situation, seeking, with his wife, to support the family; however, he did not imagine how difficult it would be. The people who guided them through the jungle told them to bring food for two days, but the journey lasted 13.

"We almost died of hunger," Lozano told GSR.

One of his daughters came out of the jungle traumatized after seeing a Haitian woman drown in the waters of a swollen river; sometimes, his daughter claims to still see the woman. And she was not the only dead person they saw along the way.

But even after all they have been through, Lozano is grateful: "We owe a lot to God. We are alive because of God. Many families that were with us in the Darien [jungle] died, and we came out as a complete family."



Elquin Lozano protects one of his daughters from the sun with an umbrella March 31 in downtown San José, Costa Rica. The Colombian migrant and his family passed through the dangerous Darién jungle looking for a better economic future in another country and are hoping to settle in Costa Rica. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

His dream is to get documents to stay legally in Costa Rica, and then find a house, job, food and peace, he said.

"We are Colombians from the countryside," he said, adding: "We will keep fighting."

'Whatever it takes'

However, many others continue on another route, heading north.

Sometimes it is difficult for the sisters to communicate to the migrants the risks they face heading north — which are just as dangerous as those in the Darien Gap — despite the attempts of those who make it clear to them.

"Venezuelans are passing through, and they have their minds made up: They are going to the United States, whatever it takes," said Hazel María Jiménez Eduarte, a consecrated laywoman associated with the Missionary Sisters of Charity. "One tells them: 'Look, you're going with children; it's better to stay here,' " she said.

Jiménez has been involved with the response of the religious community to the migrants who have arrived in Costa Rica, but she also is part of the migrant ministry of her parish in Guadalupe, a city near San José.

The Missionaries of Charity, even though their focus is to operate homes for the elderly, also contributed by preparing food and providing groceries when waves of migrants arrived in Costa Rica, Jimenez said.

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At the home for the elderly they operate, they have had to care for people between the ages of 70 and 80 "who have no homeland," Jiménez said.

Some say they know where they were born even though they have no documents to prove it, but with the help of religious communities in Costa Rica, they have been able to obtain proof of their nationality, which assures them a migratory status — something not everyone has, Jimenez explained. But it is something that "generates expenses" for a religious community that is poor by nature, she said.

Raising funds to finance the assistance that women religious provide to migrants has not been easy. Some organizations worldwide still have an idea of a "self-sustaining" Costa Rica, Tiralle said. But in reality, there is a great need, and every day, with the waves of migrants that arrive, more resources are needed.

At the recent Davos Forum in January, President Rodrigo Chaves said that Costa Rica needs support "to continue being equally generous" with those who pass through its land, as the migratory phenomenon that affects the country costs between $200 million to $300 million annually.

'I'm not here by choice'

On March 31, far from the halls of power that often decide the future of migrants, Andreína González, a 24-year-old Venezuelan mother, was with her 10-month-old daughter, Yulianis, outside a business along "the boulevard," the Central Avenue of

San José, where it's easy to spot migrants waiting for alms.

"We are in a horrible economic crisis," González said, referring to Venezuela, adding: "It is not what it used to be. So what else could we do? Emigrate to another country."



Andreína González, of Venezuela, plays with her 10-month-old daughter, Yulianis, in downtown San José, Costa Rica, March 31. Like many Venezuelan migrants, González traveled through Costa Rica in March with two children, hoping to make into the United States, fleeing the economic situation in her native country. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Like other fellow Venezuelans, she decided to head to the United States despite the danger because, for her family, staying in her country meant that "if you eat in the morning, you don't eat in the afternoon."

She regrets leaving a daughter in Venezuela, but because the girl has a medical condition known as "crystal bones" disease, she was not going to survive the chaotic and dangerous journey, González said.

While crossing the Darien Gap, the family lost their food and shoes in the chaos, but they all survived eight days with donations from Haitian families, she said. Despite the adversities, their path was paved with generosity. In Panama, people gave them clothes for the children, as well as food and money to keep going.

"I go in the name of God. Let me pass through," she said. "I'm not here by choice. I'm here because I need to feed my children."

Stories like González's are recorded in notebooks where Tiralle documents some of the stories of people seeking help whom she has met in her ministry.

Like the people of Israel, they all seek a better future, Tiralle said. Some of the people she has met have found the promised land in Costa Rica. From time to time, she visits them at an empowerment project on the outskirts of San José, where they are integrated into Costa Rican communities and teach new migrants how to sew clothes or bake bread, something that helps them earn a living.



Scalabrinian Sr. María Angélica Tiralle, wearing a blue sweater on the left, participates in a Palm Sunday procession along with migrants from the Church of Our Lady of Mercy in San José, Costa Rica, April 2. The charism of the religious order to which the sister belongs focuses on supporting migrants. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

But sometimes, the sister mentions other families, the ones that decided to continue the journey north.

One family migrating used to send her photos via WhatsApp of the places they were passing through. The last time she heard from them, they had arrived in Mexico. Sometimes she helped them from afar, giving them information about shelters on the route or simply words of encouragement. But one day, before crossing the border, the communication stopped. She never heard from them again.

Tiralle said that she has learned a lot from the faith of those who migrate. Some, despite the difficulty of the journey, especially through the Darien jungle, travel with

a Bible and refuse to leave it behind, she said.

Sometimes, Tiralle said, it's painful to say goodbye to them, thinking of the possible dangers ahead. She mentioned the March news about the death of at least 38 migrants who died after a fire broke out in a detention center in Mexico.

"It makes you want to say: 'God, why? Why is this happening? Why do these things have to happen to humanity?' But you have to be strong," she said. "You have to be strong and listen to the person and know how to help. That's what's important."