News
Religious Life



Latin American sisters attend classes in New York in November 2022. (Courtesy of Maryud Milena Cortés Restrepo)



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After completing her first studies on missiology in her home country of Colombia, Sr. Maryud Milena Cortés Restrepo, Missionary Servants of the Divine Spirit, arrived in the United States in 2014 to continue her education, thanks to a U.S.-Latin American Sister Exchange program that favors mission and academic formation.

"I came to Michigan as a participant in the exchange program to study, to learn about the culture of this country and to mission with the Hispanic population in the Diocese of Kalamazoo," Cortés told Global Sisters Report.

Cortés was part of the first generation of this five-year program, but since 2020, she has been working for Catholic Extension and is responsible for pastoral and educational accompaniment for the sisters participating in this exchange. The initiative is sponsored by the papal foundation Catholic Extension in collaboration with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. (Global Sisters Report also receives funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.)

"One of the main objectives of this program is to provide education and leadership tools to religious women," Cortés said. "We want an evangelization experience to flourish through the sisters for our Hispanic brothers and sisters in the country."

"By forming a religious sister, we will form a great number of people with an evangelization that gives reason for our vocation."

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Since its start in 2014, this initiative has designed and sponsored a special study program in Spanish that has benefited more than 60 Latin American exchange sisters, who are sent to work in different mission dioceses in the U.S.

In addition, Catholic Extension also has opened its grants and scholarships to dozens of Hispanic sisters who were already based in the U.S. because of their ministry.

"Over the years and thanks to participation in different events, we realized that right here there are many Latin American sisters who seek to study and be trained to better serve in their ministries," Cortés said.

In October, this program will receive and sponsor the studies and the mission ministry of at least 30 Latin American religious exchange students and another 25

sisters already residing in the United States.

During the academic year, the Latin American religious receive their education both virtually and in person at St. Mary's University of Minnesota, where they can complete their bachelor's or master's degree in integrative studies and pastoral services. They participate in ministerial and formation meetings along with exclusively designed courses that can be held in different parts of the country or even abroad; the last course focused on human relations and ministry and was held in Rome April 24-May 4.

"Thanks to this program, I have had the opportunity to visit Rome, but also the southern border, Minnesota and New York," said Sr. María Elena Méndez Ochoa, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of Guadalupe of the Holy Spirit, who is studying for her master's. "Knowing these realities up close gives me another vision of the country, the Hispanic community and their difficult situations. It helps me prepare myself to serve them."



Latin American sisters on student trip to Rome in April 2023 (Courtesy of Maryud Milena Cortés Restrepo)

Investing funds and resources in training Hispanic ministry leaders in the U.S. means investing in a church that suffers but has great hope, opportunities and leadership, Cortés said.

"We believe in the strong leadership that religious women's life has in Hispanic and minority communities," Cortés said. "Where sisters serve, they are seen as confidants, counselors and friends. That's why we want to give them the resources that they need to be able to give a reason for their own faith, while also being able to respond to current realities."

Cortés, who also has a doctorate in psychology, said that Catholic Extension has a caring team of professionals who offer an integral formation to the sisters. They are given an academic and apostolic experience, and at the same time they are provided with psychological and spiritual accompaniment.

"We don't just focus on academic courses, we offer an intercultural experience, mission, human formation and networking with the various female congregations," Cortés said.

Gabriela Ramírez, who exercises her pastoral ministry in the state of Alabama, began the master's program in 2021 and was grateful to Catholic Extension. "This opens the opportunity for not only the seminaries to receive funds for professional training of its students but also the women religious," she said.

"The most valuable thing from this experience has been that I am more aware of the contribution we as women are making to the church."

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