Columns
Religious Life



Some of the Dominican Sisters during one of the celebrations at the Convent of San Alberto Magno in the North America province (Elia Cárdenas)



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At the end of January, I joined the Leadership Collaborative, an association that fosters transformational and emergent leadership programs for religious life. Being a laywoman offers me a unique perspective that allows me to look at the religious congregational mission for our contemporary world through a different lens.

Through this new optic, I realize that we live in complex modern times when congregations of religious women are declining in numbers in the United States. Nevertheless, some congregations around the globe are thriving, and I am in awe of witnessing how God continuously nurtures dreams in life-changing efforts in our world, church, religious communities, and life journey.

As a lay associate, I joined the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Christian Doctrine, which celebrated its diamond jubilee on Aug. 8, marking 75 years since the congregation's foundation by Dominican Sr. M. Leonor Baqueriza.

This congregation, in faithfulness to its congregational motto to "contemplate and give others what is contemplated," is devoted to evangelizing, catechizing and accompanying families on the peripheries. They do this with a spirit of communion and fraternity that is much needed in our human family today, in response to Pope Francis' invitation to be an outgoing church.

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I was blessed to participate in a special celebration with North America's Province of St. Catherine of Siena community. The celebration filled my heart with faith and reaffirmed my belief in the continuous creative work of God, my personal call to ministry, and my mission in this world.

Some founding sisters, along with many young religious sisters, novices, associates and benefactors, participated in this extraordinary diamond jubilee celebration filled with joy. Witnessing the young sisters' joyful response to their religious vocation is a sign of hope and a proclamation of good news.

While the number of sisters is decreasing in some communities, what I witnessed in this Dominican community gave me hope for the future of religious life and the transition happening in religious communities. I wished the world could have witnessed what I experienced at this celebration and had their hearts filled with God's love and hope for our church.



Young Dominican Sisters of the Province of St. Catherine of Siena in North America on July 8, with the author (Courtesy of Elia Cárdenas)

In the past, during difficult times, I witnessed how the vocation leader was motivated to recruit candidates from small towns in the neighboring state. They informed the young women about their social work at a day care center they established on the peripheries of the border city of Juárez, Mexico, to help prostitutes find alternative jobs because the welfare of their children was the main reason for their profession.

To this day, the Dominican sisters continue to minister at the day care Monday to Friday, so that the mothers of the children can focus on working demanding jobs without worrying about their children's care. Because those mothers cannot contribute financially to support the day care, the sisters, sometimes with the support of the associates, organize fundraising activities in parishes, festivals or the convent to support all the needs of the day care.

Their commitment to this cause exemplifies their response to God's love and missionary call to minister to the little ones — a call within the call.

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I have been able to witness how religious congregations, by embracing their call, embodying the Gospels and mission for the church, leave an inspirational legacy evident in many foundations and ministries. Those ministries include retreat houses, campus ministries, schools, hospitals, housing for the unhoused, care for the elderly, support systems for battered women and their children, shelters for migrants, catechetical programs, and ongoing ministries for children, youth, families and more.

Because of all the love with which these religious communities are transitioning, the richness of their legacy will live on for future generations in our country. Their response serves as an extraordinary example, as many of these congregations, reading the signs of the times and following the inspiration of the Spirit, were invited to create something new.

While some aging religious communities are discerning their future due to aging and diminishing numbers, others have already decided to stop recruiting new members to focus on revitalizing their mission. However, because they are fully aware of the importance of religious life in the church's mission, these religious women have decided to refocus their work beyond recruiting.



Dominican Sisters of the Province of St. Catherine of Siena in North America at a eucharistic celebration with Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas (Elia Cárdenas)

This involves supporting and enabling many laypersons to continue to spread the charisms of their communities and the church's mission around the globe as partners in mission or administrative roles of their ministry groundwork for the continuance of their charism.

St. Teresa of Ávila used to say, "God has no body but ours, no hands to embrace or feet on the ground to walk but ours." Sisters with their own hands and feet were the foundation, the path and the grounds for many others who are now following. Their legacy for our church is breathtaking as we read and hear their many stories of how they gathered in response to God's greater love.

Many or most of them in their founding days were not valued, and they faced many challenges and oppression. They suffered hunger, extreme heat, cold and even rejection. Still, they remained faithful to the Gospel values and are now a magnificent legacy for the universal church.

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Their mission and ministry stories will continue to nurture and inspire many because of their faith and values. In faithfulness to their call, these courageous religious women stand up against prejudice, exclusion, discrimination, inequalities, racism and structural injustices.

I pray that the work these religious congregations have done for centuries within their communities, promoting their unique charisms, will continue to inspire future generations.

All of us, religious and laypeople alike, are invited to continue passing the charism and faith torch as a legacy to our church. How can we do that? By continuing to tell their foundational stories, struggles and responses to God's love, and by extending the invitation to make present his kingdom of love, peace and justice.

God continues to work within religious life and among the people of God. He was, is and will be present in our lives and missions, giving us great hope for our universal church.