Columns
Migration



Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants Fall 2023 cohort participants share a meal with the Missionaries of the Eucharist in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. (Tracey Horan)



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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report launches a new series, "Welcoming the Stranger," which takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. The series will feature sisters and organizations networking to better serve those crossing borders, global migration trends and the topic of immigration in the upcoming U.S. presidential election.*



One thing I love about vowed women religious, and that inspired me to join their ranks myself, is our ability to read and respond to the signs of the times when it matters.

In recent years, when humanitarian groups receiving families in migration have been stretched and in need of reinforcements, they reached out to sisters for support. The response was generous and swift. We showed up in soup kitchens, clothing sorting rooms and shelters to support building welcome across the U.S.-Mexico border. As my inbox was filled with growing email chains of sisters' responses, so my chest welled with hope and gratitude.

Even so, as I browsed through these generous responses, an uneasiness surfaced in me. I remembered the words of Dom Hélder Câmara: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Catholic social teaching reminds us that there are two feet of love: direct service and social justice. Yet it can be easy for us to become one-sided and lean into what is

concrete and seemingly solvable while we leave big questions about systemic change up to someone above our paygrade.

Related: Sisters at our best: Cookies and cardboard tables at the US-Mexico border

I wondered what would happen if we brought together these direct service experiences with intentional education and training to equip these faithful women to make change beyond their stint at the border. What would happen if we invited passionate, committed sisters from different places and congregations to have a common experience that could root them in a sense of global sisterhood and then launch them into powerful advocacy and transformative grassroots conversations in their home communities upon return?

After the pandemic, as my colleagues and I began welcoming visitors and volunteers back to the Kino Border Initiative, the seeds of these questions began to bear fruit. The Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants program was born with the support of the Hilton Foundation.

Since its inception in March 2022, we have welcomed 20 sisters from 16 congregations based across the U.S. and Mexico. Sisters have served food, helped with intake and handed out clothes to newcomers at the Kino Border Initiative migrant aid center. They have also participated in desert hikes, educational activities and training in effective advocacy and narrative change.

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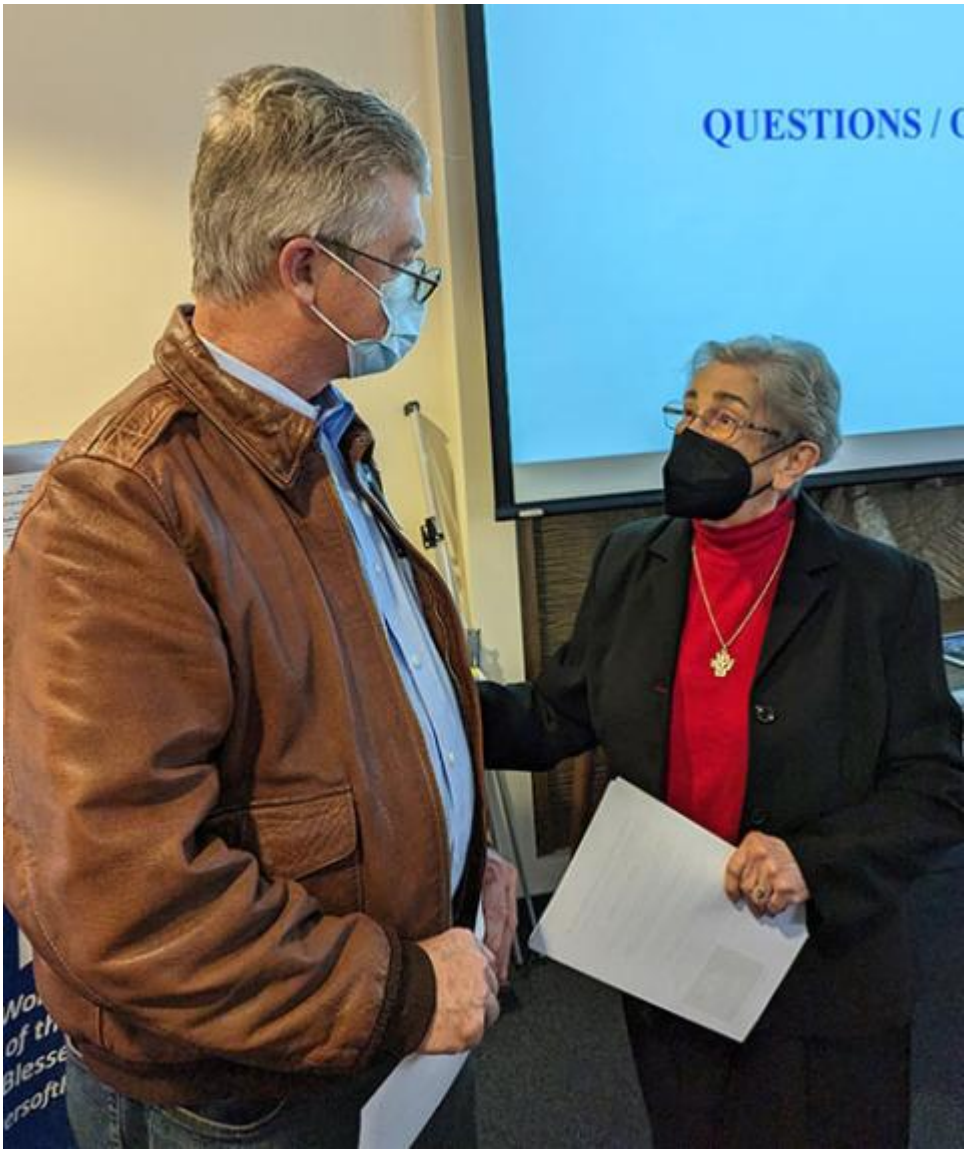
Less than two years since we welcomed our first official participant in Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants, the impact of these women religious has been impressive.

As we've kept in touch with graduates of the program, we hear sisters share about giving presentations to their congregations, associates, sponsored institutions and friends. Sisters have put their narrative training to good use in articles published on their congregation websites, holiday updates to friends and family, and letters to the editor.

Sisters are building infrastructure to welcome migrant families at their own motherhouses. One sister has even become certified to accompany newly arriving

families in their legal processes as an accredited representative.

Perhaps my favorite graduate update came from Sr. Yliana Hernandez, a sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She left the program on fire and within a couple of weeks had prepared a presentation she would offer to several different audiences, including administrators of Catholic schools in New York.



Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sr. Yliana Hernandez with her state representative, Chris Eachus, in New York (Tracey Horan)

She personally invited her newly elected assemblyman to one presentation, where he thanked her for her work and shared that he had been unaware of the challenges people seeking asylum were facing under the Biden administration. After seeing her

presentation, he committed to write to the Biden administration to urge it to expand legal pathways for families seeking protection. I have no doubt that the fiery, 5-foot-tall Sister Yliana held him to that commitment.

We recently welcomed Sr. Eileen McKenzie, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, to the Kino Border Initiative team to support sisters who have spent time with us at the border as they continue to foster transformational conversations and other projects to facilitate welcoming newcomers in their communities.

In January, we held our first virtual gathering of graduates of the Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants program to launch phase two of this initiative. The screen lit up with energy as sisters from the same cohorts greeted one another, some made new connections and others shared resources and updates.

Later this year, we will make mini-grants available to graduates so that they can continue their commitment to the work of welcome. This is all part of our vision to ensure that sisters' experiences go beyond the month they spend with us in Nogales, Mexico.

Our work balancing the two feet of love and building pathways toward real sustainable welcome for newcomers in the U.S. is far from over. As challenges continue to surface, like recent efforts to codify restrictions on asylum seekers, the call grows for people of faith to equip ourselves to be effective, compassionate and creative change makers.

We are invited both to be present in places of upheaval and, as Pope Francis has invited us, to be "good Catholics" who "meddle in politics" for the sake of a broader, systemic response.

We invite Catholic sisters to be a part of this experience. Join the Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants program. Fall 2024 cohorts are open! All expenses paid thanks to the generosity of the Hilton Foundation. For more information and application email volunteer@kinoborderinitiative.org.

This story appears in the **Welcoming the Stranger** feature series. View the full series.