News
Social Justice



Sr. Silvia Flores, left, poses Jan. 25 with new students at the Colegio Eucarístico run by the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in San Salvador, El Salvador. Through the Vatican-funded Sowing Seeds of Hope initiative, Catholic schools run by congregations of women religious in El Salvador welcome at-risk children. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

San Salvador, El Salvador — July 25, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Mercedarian Sr. Silvia Flores darted across a street, setting her sight on her target: a woman selling fruit close to a busy street in El Salvador's crowded and bustling capital. But it wasn't fruit Flores was running after.

Instead, she was offering something valuable to the fruit vendor's children: an education.

A Vatican initiative called Sowing Seeds of Hope, inaugurated in late 2023 but set into motion in early 2024, offers free tuition at Catholic K-12 schools to a growing number of children in vulnerable situations in El Salvador, where poverty, migration and imprisonment are on the rise.

The Conference of Religious of El Salvador, or CONFRES, where Flores is the secretary general, was tasked with putting the initiative into practice. Flores also serves as the program's national coordinator.

Almost two dozen women's congregations, including Franciscans and Carmelite Sisters of St. Joseph, have stepped up to participate, she said. Flores' congregation, the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, which administers the Catholic Colegio Eucarístico school in downtown San Salvador, was one of the first to sign up.

"This wasn't a situation foreign to us," Sr. Yanira Cruz, principal of the school, told Global Sisters Report in a Jan. 25 interview. That day, four new qualifying students showed up at the school's doorstep, thanks to the efforts of sisters like Flores taking to the streets in search of pupils.

> 'We have children excluded from the fundamental right to life and deprived of education, access to health care, food, medicine and security.'
> —Sr. Genoveva Henríquez Membreño
>
> Tweet this



Sr. Silvia Flores, left, introduces a new student to Sr. Rosa Lopez Olivar, Jan. 25 at the Colegio Eucarístico run by the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in San Salvador, El Salvador. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"The neighborhood around our school is a place with many people experiencing vulnerability," Flores said. "There's drug addiction, prostitution, you can spot children at the stoplights offering to clean the car windows for money, that type of thing, selling fruits or anything they can find from their baskets," what is known as the "informal economy."

Near the vendors' baskets, quite often you'll see children, said the sisters. They are the ones helping their mothers or guardians, securing change and watching the merchandise as adults scurry to take their goods to passing cars, vans or buses, hoping to make enough so they can all eat that day.

With families facing hunger, money for education often takes a backseat.

So, when the sisters told the moms, aunts and others caring for minors and working in their neighborhood's informal economy about the free tuition, they couldn't believe the opportunity. In addition to tuition, qualifying students can participate in free extracurricular activities such as music, sports or art, Cruz said. Through the initiative, pupils who need it also receive free psychological, nutritional, medical or spiritual help.

But it's not a blessing all can benefit from, even if they qualify.

"One of the women told me, 'Mother, you can take the little ones, but the older boy has to stay so he can help [sell merchandise],' " Cruz recalled.

Overwhelmed, some parents decide to leave the country altogether, leaving children behind, sometimes in the care of a family member or a friend — oftentimes for good, Flores said.

Child abandonments in the past contributed to the rise of gangs in El Salvador, Flores said. And today, church officials like Archbishop Luigi Roberto Cona, apostolic nuncio to El Salvador, worry about what a new generation of children separated from their parents could mean for the country.



Sr. Rosa Lopez Olivar talks to a new group of students Jan. 25 at the Colegio Eucarístico run by the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in San Salvador, El Salvador. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"As citizens, we cannot fail to recognize that the high levels of abandonment and neglect may represent a real social emergency with the risk of becoming a new and more violent form of organized crime," Cona said Dec. 7, 2023, announcing the Vatican-funded initiative to church officials as well as members of Salvadoran organizations and civil society.

He said that while the church had opened the doors to its schools, there was much work ahead and asked Salvadorans of means and other organizations to show solidarity with the poor and help economically so that more children could participate.

"These children and youth are our children because they are God's children and Salvadoran citizens," he said. "How can we eat and enjoy ourselves knowing that in our communities there are children and youth who do not manage to eat well even once a day? Who don't receive proper medical attention, who have dropped out of school, working odd jobs, who live on the street at the mercy of violence and delinquency?

"How can we enjoy our seemingly perfect lives when there are children and young people who do not enjoy the care of a family and do not receive love and tenderness, living on the margins, excluded from our ecclesial and civil communities?"

Sr. Genoveva Henríquez Membreño, of the Sisters of Nazareth and president of CONFRES, said at the initiative's inauguration that people who work with the poor in the country often see the human cost of that lack of solidarity. Helping the initiative, she said, was an invitation to build the new face of the church in El Salvador, following in the footsteps of St. Oscar Romero, who challenged the church to work for the benefit of the poor and excluded. Yet little has changed since his death, she said.

"We see lots of children in garbage dumps, picking up discarded things, looking for something to eat or to wear, becoming themselves part of a human trash heap, and there's no feeling of solidarity on our part," she said. "There are solutions, but will is lacking."

> 'The memory of those people who simply approached them will undoubtedly be a testimony and the most credible catechesis we can pronounce, and it will remain in their hearts.'
> —Archbishop Luigi Roberto Cona
>
> Tweet this



Sr. Silvia Flores talks to a woman selling fruit Jan. 25 to see if she has any children who could be a good fit in a new program at the Colegio Eucarístico run by the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in San Salvador, El Salvador. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

About half of El Salvador's population lives in poverty and the income of the richest 10% of the population is almost 50 times higher than that of the poorest 10%.

The consequences of inequalities past and present already cost the country in a profound way, she said.

"There are more than 100,000 children affected by abandonment, post-pandemic family disintegration, migration, the state of exception," she said, referring to a government crackdown that has led to the imprisonment of almost 80,000 Salvadorans. "We have children excluded from the fundamental right to life and deprived of education, access to health care, food, medicine and security."

So far, 1,652 children throughout El Salvador have benefited from the initiative, Flores told GSR June 19. That includes a little boy named Sebastián, who told GSR he wanted to go to school to become "a paleontologist, a movie director, an astronaut, a singer … and a doctor, because I like taking care of people."

Mercedarian Sr. Rosa Esperanza Lopez Oliva welcomed him with a new group of pupils, giving words of encouragement as each entered the school.

There is no better testimony than a smile and concrete actions to show children that someone cares for them, said Cona, the Vatican ambassador.

"It will help them to grow, perceiving that someone loves them and acts for their good," he said. "The memory of those people who simply approached them will undoubtedly be a testimony and the most credible catechesis we can pronounce, and it will remain in their hearts."

This article was originally published in Spanish July 15, 2024.