Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



In front, Sr. Maite Fernández; middle row, from left to right, is Nelson Gorosito, Diego Rodríguez, Mercedes Robles, Zoe Lazarte Fernández, Noelia Salto and Diego Abregú; and back row, from left, is Luis Prado, Sr. Ángela María Tomei and Nadia Romano (Courtesy of Maite Fernández)



Maite Fernández

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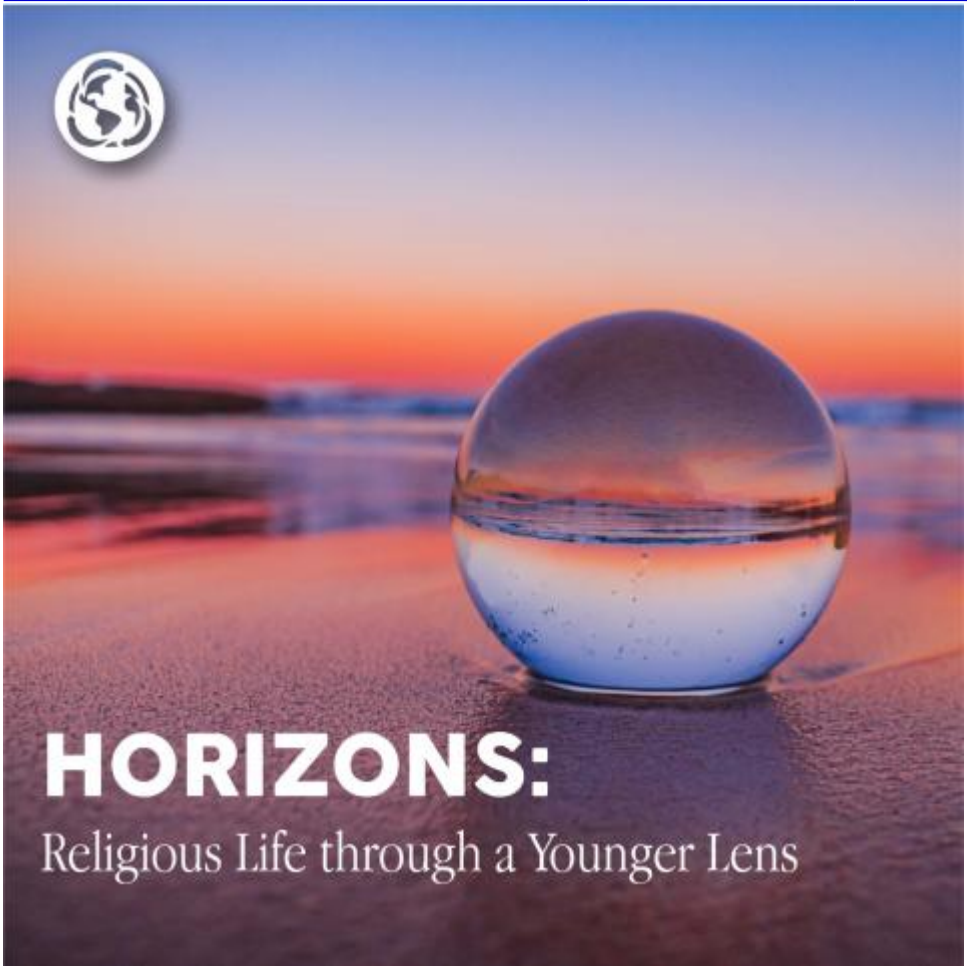
Translated by Helga Leija

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On the morning of Jan. 30, under a scorching sun nearing 104°F, we began a new evangelizing mission. Thirty-eight missionaries from Santiago del Estero and the city of Córdoba, Argentina, arrived at a modest rural school that would be our home for ten days. Waiting for us there was a community that welcomed us with immense hearts, overflowing with joy and emotion.

I must admit that, at the time, we didn't fully grasp the depth of that welcome, but we received it with gratitude. From the very first moment, we felt that God wanted

us there, sharing life with them.

In Argentina, January and February — summer vacation months — are often filled with missions organized by parish groups, religious congregations, diocesan movements, and others. These are opportunities to reach more remote areas, where Mass and other church celebrations aren't held as frequently as in cities, where there is a greater presence of priests and pastoral workers.

These experiences vary depending on the people being reached and each group's mission style. Yet one thing is always the same at the end of each mission: the weariness — but it's a special kind of weariness, one inhabited by God. It makes everything worth it, and it carries a unique flavor. What a gift it is to feel that.

> "So let us dare to keep building an open church — a church that goes out to meet everyone, without stinginess or prejudice. Let us be a Church that accompanies and listens, that embraces pain and receives life as it comes."
> —Sr. Maite Fernández
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Nélida, Sol Leiva and Sofía Abregú (who took the photo), with one of the families they visited (Sofía Abregú)

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The missionary group "Annunciata Cocchetti" poses with Fr. Gustavo Orellana, moments before leaving the community of Media Naranja on Feb. 8, 2025 (Courtesy of Maite Fernández)

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In one of the classrooms equipped as a chapel, the missionaries and those who attended the school could pray and share moments of fraternity before Jesus in the Eucharist. The image features a meeting with children in which Jesus was spoken of as the light in our lives. (Courtesy of Belén Heredia)

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  On Feb. 2, 2025, during the Mass for the Day of Consecrated Life, the renewal of consecration was celebrated. From left to right are Father Gustavo, Sister Nathalie, Sister Rosa Graça, Sister Angela Maria, Mercedes, a consecrated laywoman of the charismatic family, Sr. Catalina Zanotti, Sister Maite and Sister Nélida. (Courtesy of Maite Fernández)

Our group, Annunciata Cocchetti, prepared with enthusiasm and hope. As with any new experience, we had our questions and expectations, but also a deep desire to share Jesus, accompanied by a sort of spiritual urgency to do it well.

Our first step was to get to know the community's context and real needs. We couldn't offer what wasn't needed. In addition to formation and prayer, we also took care of material resources and fundraising to cover expenses. We pooled our ideas and got creative to prepare the workshops. All of this taught us to trust, for the Lord's providence always met us on the way.

At the heart of it all was the personal call to mission, which flows from an encounter with Jesus. That call bears fruit when we respond in community, guided by our

charism: to enliven life through Gospel friendship — sharing faith through closeness, listening, and the joy of the Gospel.

As Sisters of St. Dorothy of Cemmo, we had the grace of accompanying this wonderfully diverse group: young and adult laypeople, families, a consecrated laywoman, and us, the sisters. What an invaluable richness! We were deeply grateful to feel part of this great family that follows Jesus through the charism of Annunciata Cocchetti.

Our mission took place in Media Naranja, a rural town named for the shape of its territory. It's located about 15 kilometers from the city of Cruz del Eje. This is an agricultural area where many residents work harvesting watermelon, squash, melon, potatoes and tomatoes — a life of sacrifice, even for the young, whose lives are often limited by a lack of opportunities.

Media Naranja is connected by a main road to the city and to other small towns in similar situations. Faith there is lived openly and vibrantly. It is expressed through lively popular devotions, especially to the Virgin Mary in her various titles, and to saints — especially Fr. Jose Gabriel del Rosario Brochero, the beloved saint of Córdoba. These expressions bring people into a deeply personal relationship with Jesus.

A constant concern, both in our church and in many places around the world, is rethinking the role and vocation of the laity. Vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life have declined in many contexts, making it essential for laypeople to take on a leading role in the life of the church. We need laypeople to recognize themselves as builders of community, knowing that the lay vocation is the foundation of every call God gives us through baptism. From that vocation, all others emerge. This conviction was one of the guiding principles of our mission.

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On Jan. 30, 2025, the sisters who accompanied the mission arrived in Media Naranja, together with the mother general, the mother vicar and a delegate. From left to right: Sr. Felisa Coronel, delegate for Latin America; Sr. Nélida Crivelli; Mother Vicar Elvira Zanini; Sr. Maite Fernández; Sr. Nathalie Lubungu Kitumbu; Mother General Margherita Penucchini; and Sr. Ángela María Tomei, welcomed by members of the community. (Courtesy of Gustavo Orellana)

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On Feb. 2, 2025, Sunday Mass was celebrated at Our Lady of Luján Parish, in Media Naranja, with the participation of the missionaries, members of the community and Fr. Gustavo Orellana. During the celebration, the Day of Consecrated Life was also commemorated. (Courtesy of Luis Prado)

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The group of missionaries moves early in the morning to the parish of Our Lady of Luján, located several blocks away from the Martín Güemes school — where they stayed and carried out afternoon activities — to participate in the Sunday Mass on Feb. 2, 2025. (Courtesy of Luis Prado)

Under the motto "Called and Sent to Enliven Life as Pilgrims of Hope," we approached families and every person the Lord placed in our path and entrusted to us. We did so inspired by the invitation of Pope Francis, who in this Jubilee Year urged us to live out hope and spread it to our sisters and brothers.

As often happens with the things of God, we received more than we gave. The Lord is never outdone in generosity. When we give of ourselves without holding back, good and unimaginable things happen. We felt like the servants in the Gospel to whom their master entrusted talents — and those talents bore fruit. This experience was not only ours as missionaries; it was also that of the community members, who

felt part of something that went beyond what we had planned — because Jesus led us where he wanted.

How much good we could do if we lived as missionaries all 365 days of the year! How much we need to reconnect and let go of the excess baggage that keeps us from what really matters! A song we often heard there reminded us that mission is a way of life. And we truly believe it. Absolutely.

So let us dare to keep building an open church — a church that goes out to meet everyone, without stinginess or prejudice. Let us be a church that accompanies and listens, that embraces pain and receives life as it comes. Let us be a joyful church, with room for everyone in their uniqueness — where the message of Jesus sets our course, moves our feet, burns in our hearts, and unsettles us in the face of injustice.

At the end of those ten days in that blessed place, we returned tired — yes — but it was a weariness inhabited by God. That tiredness was soaked in smiles and tears, wrapped in the faces and lives of people of all ages and sizes. We came back full. And with open hearts, we're already looking forward to the next time.