Blog

From left: Sr. Jane Wakahiu, head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; Gail DeGeorge, editor of Global Sisters Report; Ursuline Sr. Michele Morek, GSR sister liaison; Benedictine Sr. Helga Leija, sister liaison for Spanish; and Soli Salgado, newly appointed international editor, at the GSR exhibit booth at the 2022 assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in St. Louis, Missouri, in August. (Courtesy of Gail DeGeorge)

by Gail DeGeorge

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I had the worst case of writer's block for this blog celebrating the 10th anniversary of Global Sisters Report. What could I possibly say that I hadn't said since January 2016 when I joined GSR about how important our mission is, how dedicated our staff and freelancers are, how courageous and inspiring we find the sisters we write about? I've explained how we as journalists write about the sisters, and the sisters provide so much spiritual nourishment to us as well as to our readers through the columns they write and the stories they trust us to tell.

On March 8, International Women's Day, I was trying — yet again — to write this blog, when instead I decided to focus on helping our curriculum writer find stories and columns to use for new segments of GSR in the Classroom, including one on Catholic social teaching. I reviewed dozens, probably hundreds, of stories and columns, drawing from our Year in Review lists, our landing page for our e-books and the long list of columns we considered for our upcoming book published in conjunction with Liturgical Press, *Wisdom from the Global Sisterhood: Contemporary Reflections by Catholic Sisters* that will be released in August. (You can pre-order the book now by clicking here.)

As a former catechist for more than a decade at parishes in South Florida and Silver Spring, Maryland, for eighth grade and confirmation classes, I've been passionate since I started at GSR about the opportunity to use our stories and columns to show young people how the sisters live out the Gospel message in so many amazing

ways. In a church hierarchical structure that still too often overlooks them, these interesting and accomplished women serve as important agents of positive social change, and have made their marks in art, literature, music and sports.

I went to pick up something to eat and in the car, one of my favorite Christian musicians, Steven Curtis Chapman, was playing. To my surprise, I found tears streaming down my face. The song playing was "The Great Adventure" and even though it was by a male artist in a country western style that I don't usually listen to, it articulated something that I had struggled to verbalize even after all the years of serving as editor of GSR:

> This is The Great Adventure
>
> Come on, get ready for the ride of your life
>
> Gonna leave long-faced religion
>
> In a cloud of dust behind
>
> And discover all the new horizons
>
> Just waiting to be explored
>
> This is what we were created for.

So many times, sisters have told my colleagues and me — and our readers through their columns and the monthly feature, The Life — that religious life had taken them far beyond what they had ever imagined. Far from being the somber, strict and joyless existence that too many movie tropes and stereotypes portrayed it as, religious life was an amazing adventure, enabling them to enjoy a level of commitment and connection with the people they serve, the local neighborhoods and communities in which they live, and the sisters in their congregations — and often through Global Sisters Report — sisters and associates around the world. They have opportunities to discover new horizons and enjoy a sense of fulfillment and joy that eludes so many people.

I also realized that the lyrics exemplified my own story with Global Sisters Report. If my life had taken different turns, I may well have entered religious life. Instead, I've been blessed to use my experience in the best job and most important mission I've ever had in my journalism career.

Doreen Ajiambo, regional correspondent for Global Sisters Report and Gail DeGeorge, editor of Global Sisters Report, outside GSR's office in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2022 (Courtesy of Gail DeGeorge)

Joining GSR wasn't an easy decision. Yet it was the *only* decision possible because of the number of "God-incidences" — the chance encounters that weren't chance at all, but rather the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or Sophia or Mary, who I have often turned to for help. (I've been a single mother of two sons, now 31 and 28, since they were 7 and 4 years old.) Perhaps it was also the influence of my own "communion of saints" — my mom, grandmothers, aunts and dear friends who have passed on and who I invoke in my daily prayers, particularly in times of major decisions.

I pray the rosary nearly every day and on Sept. 1, 2015, I made a vow while praying. I was an editor on the economy team at Bloomberg News in Washington, D.C. I decided I would ask the human resources department if Bloomberg would allow me to publish the spiritual writing I had done or let me freelance for women religious congregations and organizations. (The company policy was very strict — we could

write for no other publications or have affiliations with any organizations.)

I entered a newsroom in chaos. Bloomberg had decided to "reorganize" 150 very talented editors and reporters in New York and Washington, D.C., out of their jobs. I had excellent reviews and had led team members to groundbreaking and award-winning work, just as I had at the SunSentinel and BusinessWeek. As a long-time business and economic journalist, I think this is one of the underlying flash points in American society: that it doesn't matter how well you do your job or how hard you work, you can be out of a job at a moment's notice.

Colleagues and friends were as shocked as I was. But I also recognized an opportunity: now I could follow my heart. A colleague who I will always treasure for following *his* prompting of the Holy Spirit, wrote a note that I still have taped in my home office: "When God closes a door, he opens a window — contact Caitlin Hendel, she's the CEO and publisher of National Catholic Reporter and she used to be an editor on the economy team at Bloomberg News." (Caitlin has gone on to do other important editing work and Joe Ferullo is now the CEO and publisher of National Catholic Reporter.)

I've often joked that God knows that I need "neon signs" to point me in the right direction. I dropped the interviews I had at Reuters and other publications in Washington that I could have pursued. This was my chance — when you know a prayer is answered, you don't turn it down, even if the way is uncertain and the challenges are many.

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Global Sisters Report started publishing on April 22, 2014. Sr. Joyce Meyer, who had been the executive director of the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, which makes small grants to support sisters' projects and has traveled to more than 56 countries, and Tom Fox, then-publisher and CEO of National Catholic Reporter, had laid a solid foundation for this new venture focusing on Catholic sisters. More details on that history are in the video about Global Sisters Report, produced with the help of Sr. Judy Zielinski.

Mary Lou Nolan, the former features editor at The Kansas City Star, had come out of retirement to direct the planning and implementation of Global Sisters Report and

served as its first editor. She, along with Dan Stockman and Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, the first reporters, laid a solid foundation for GSR to pursue important and timely issues. The two Vatican investigations of Catholic sisters in the U.S. made for a tense backdrop to GSR's debut, but it also helped boost our initial readership.

Under Nolan's leadership and that of then-NCR editor Dennis Coday, GSR developed its coverage in Africa and the U.S. and struck a partnership with Matters India. Jose Kavi and his team have been invaluable in GSR's international reach, since India has the largest number of Catholic sisters in the world.

Since I came on board, the GSR team and I have been focused on three key strategies. These are the same key points that I laid out when I interviewed for the GSR editor position in December 2015, albeit with some elaboration as opportunities presented themselves.

1) Continue the excellent, award-winning journalism that is a hallmark of NCR and has also been paramount in my journalism career. Our most ambitious series, "Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas," continues to be recognized as innovative, groundbreaking journalism, garnering global and national attention. Consisting of 40 stories by journalists and columns by sisters, this series underscores the courage of Catholic sisters in regions beset by war, terrorism and gang violence, and their efforts to build peace and foster reconciliation.

From left, top row: Lviv, Ukraine (Gregg Brekke); Perechyn, Ukraine (Courtesy of Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great); Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo (Stephano Kambale).
Middle row: Vukovar, Croatia (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger); Myanmar (Courtesy of Sister Florence); South Sudan (Courtesy of Scholasticah Nganda).
Bottom row: Port-au-Prince, Haiti (OSV News/Reuters/Ralph Tedy Erol); Makeni, Sierra Leone (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo); Negombo, Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria).

2) Extend the "brand." That's the phrase in the business parlance that I was steeped in for much of my career. At Global Sisters Report, that has meant introducing features that play to our core strengths of producing excellent journalism and fostering connection in order to extend our mission: to be a dynamic online community that reports on and gives voice to women religious around the world. The operative words in that mission statement are "dynamic" and "gives voice." In the past decade, we have introduced several new features:

- Community News: Submit news about your own Catholic women's religious congregation, community or organization by filling out this form.
- Sustainable Development Goals: See how the ministries of Catholic sisters take on an even larger scope and impact by helping to fulfill the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals.
- Honoring Sisters Killed in Service: We paid tribute to sisters killed in Africa since 1990. Once we secure additional funding for this specific project, we will continue this project to include sisters in Asia, Oceania and the Americas.
- Special Series E-Books: We've produced more than a half-dozen e-books based on our special series as well as collections gathered for Advent. Look for our most recent addition based on the "Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas " series.
- GSR in the Classroom: We will be adding three new segments to the eight segments already available. The three are based on our series about sisters helping those who are homeless or have inadequate housing, the "Hope Amid Turmoil" series and Catholic social teaching. Look for those by early June. We plan to add a Spanish version soon, and will have more lessons to draw from from sisters' ministries and congregations in Latin America, now that we have Global Sisters Report en español.
- Wisdom Wednesdays: This innovative digital feature is already very popular. It's also been introduced into our Spanish edition.
- We're focused on two series this year, Welcoming the Stranger, and Evolving Religious Life, both quite topical and of high reader interest. Look for continuing installments for those two series, marked by special logos.

3) Publish in languages other than English. We officially launched Global Sisters Report en español on May 1, 2023. This was a long-sought goal for GSR and one I identified in my interview with Tom Fox and others as key to GSR's international reach. I had covered Cuba, the Caribbean and parts of Latin America for BusinessWeek and am conversant in Spanish. It took three years of planning, with implementation delayed six months because of the pandemic. It is not intended to be a "mirror" of the English-language site. For that, readers can use the Google Translate button (which translates Global Sisters Report into 12 languages).

In this 2023 video, Global Sisters Report announced the May 1 launch of GSR en español, a Spanish-language edition of the website with an emphasis on Catholic sisters in Latin America and Spain. (YouTube/NCRonline)

Already the website is attracting more sister columnists and freelancers who write for us originally in Spanish, which has been one of our key goals. We select several stories and columns to translate into English. We also translate stories and columns from English into Spanish to fulfill the mission of global connection. The team of freelance translators is headed by Sr. Helga Leija, editor of our sisters' columns and also a professionally trained translator.

We've also translated short "explainer" videos into Spanish along with English subtitles. Leija, along with international editor Soli Salgado, Latin America regional correspondent Rhina Guidos, managing editor Stephanie Yeagle and contract editors Alirio Rodiguez and Jesus Leyva, have done an amazing job handling the volume of stories and columns — greater than we had originally projected — and the sophisticated planning needed to pull off this "minor miracle" week after week.

We also want to publicly thank Sr. Magda Bennásar. It was her column publicly hoping that GSR would publish in Spanish that helped us cross the first hurdle: showing that there was enough interest to start — and hopefully sustain — a Spanish version of GSR. Working for GSR has been — and continues to be — a great adventure! I can't wait to see what the next 10 years brings!

Related: My experience with Global Sisters Report
This story appears in the **GSR at 10 Years** feature series. View the full series.