News
Religious Life



Sisters from different congregations practice an opening hymn Sept. 2, 2024, before Mass at the Mother of Good Counsel Convent in Chicago. The group gathered for a Labor Day "mini-encuentro" of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the United States. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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Sr. Laura Torres Sanchez said she didn't set out to work as a missionary when she joined the Oblates of Jesus Priest in her native Mexico, rather the mission found her — and so have its challenges. Learning the English language is a challenge, but beyond that, learning the language of youth pulled by secularism in the U.S. demands navigating their digital culture, as well as learning about identity issues faced by children of immigrants who don't feel rooted in the U.S., nor in the country of origin of their parents.

"They're neither from here nor there and they only go looking for God when they need him," an experience different from what she was used to in her native Mexico, she told Global Sisters Report Sept. 1 at the Mother of Good Counsel Convent in Chicago. There she joined more than 40 sisters from various congregations at a Labor Day "mini-encuentro," or encounter, conducted in English and Spanish, of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the U.S., known as AHLMA for its acronym in Spanish.

Women religious gathered at the Felician sisters' convent to talk about how they could be spiritual bread for the communities they serve and for one another. They also discussed the importance of being consumers of that bread as they encounter complex situations as missionaries in the U.S.

"We know that in today's world, there is a hunger for Jesus; that's the bread that we talked about this morning," Felician Sr. Mary Beth Bromer, vicar for religious at the Archdiocese of Chicago, told the group. "There is a hunger, so I continue to encourage you to give of yourselves but also to make sure you fill yourselves with that bread, that you take care of yourselves, that you balance your ministry and your prayer life."

> AHLMA organized a gathering with more than 40 Catholic missionaries from Latin America serving in the U.S. to support them as they adapt to a new language, a new culture, and different ecclesiastical and community structures.

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Sisters at a Labor Day gathering of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the United States pose for a group photo Sept. 2 at Chicago's Mother of Good Counsel Convent. Chicago's Auxiliary Bishop Robert Casey celebrated Mass at the end of the "mini-encuentro" and shared a meal with the sisters. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Sr. Elizabeth Ann Guerrero, AHLMA'S executive director, emphasized the association's goal: to be a place of support for missionary sisters from Latin America serving in the U.S. as they adapt to a new language, a new culture, to different church structures and communities, seeking to understand different groups of women religious, and serving as a bridge between the U.S. and Latin American cultures.

"AHLMA wants to be a bridge to benefit and enrich sisters … Our objective is to accompany Latin American women religious in interior self-knowledge, accepting diversity and fortifying leadership," said Guerrero, a Missionary Catechist of Divine Providence. "Sisters from Latin America, in return, can enrich and be part of the growing reality of multiculturalism of this country."

Sisters seemed comfortable discussing the joys and challenges they face in the U.S. They include working with Catholics in a more secularized society, learning a new language and culture, and seeking education to better serve their communities. They also sometimes face immigration issues of their own as they work with people facing their own immigration obstacles. Some work with pastors who may not be aware of sisters' rights as workers and as non-citizens.

"We need to continue our formation," said Torres, the Mexican missionary. "We need to stick together because we come across some difficulties, including inside the church, with the hierarchy, and, in many instances, the openness and support we need to continue our mission does not exist."

Torres told GSR that while language has been a hurdle, she's also trying to understand the secularism that dominates U.S. culture, which emphasizes the individual instead of a community.

"Even though I'm in a [parish] church that is 100 % Latino, I experience the challenges of inculturation," she said. "It's not the same thing to live out your faith in a place like Mexico and come to a place like here where … the Gospel goes against the culture."

> 'Our objective is to accompany Latin American women religious in interior self-knowledge, accepting diversity and fortifying leadership.'
> —Sr. Elizabeth Guerrero
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Sr. Maria de Jesus Bringas, left, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, and Sr. Elizabeth Ann Guerrero, a Missionary Catechist of Divine Providence, take part in an icebreaker Sept. 2 at the Mother of Good Counsel Convent in Chicago during a meeting of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the U.S. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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Sr. Laura Torres Sánchez, of the Oblates of Jesus the Priest, speaks to other sisters gathered in Chicago Sept. 2 for a meeting of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the United States about challenges missionary women religious face, including immigration obstacles, as they serve outside their country of origin. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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Sr. Maddy Takyala, of the Daughters of Mary Bannabikira, prays at the Mother of Good Counsel Convent in Chicago at a Sept. 2 gathering of the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the United States. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

'We come across some difficulties, including inside the church, with the hierarchy, and, in many instances, the openness and support we need to continue our mission does not exist.'
—Sr. Laura Torres Sanchez

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She has also faced the uncertainty that many religious workers face getting a religious visa or other permit that allows them to stay in the country to serve as missionaries. Torres said she received her U.S. residency two months ago, but for a

long time she wasn't sure the government would grant her permission to stay. Immigration hurdles, in some cases, stop missionaries from carrying out long-term evangelization projects because they're not sure they'll be able to see them through, she said.

Another sister shared a story about a group of women religious brought to the U.S. to serve in a parish. Even though they worked around the clock without taking days off, they were told that they "weren't measuring up." Their contract was not renewed and they felt abandoned by the diocese that brought them, she said.

Some U.S. sisters wanted more contact and to learn from the missionary women. They told the missionaries they had rights, and they talked about resources that might help them. That's a lot of what AHLMA organizers were seeking: to help sisters connect with one another.

"We are not alone and we are here to support another, to continue to be bread to be shared, to be bread for one another," Sr. Maria de Jesus Bringas, of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, said.

"Elizabeth [Guerrero], her presentation, had a strong sense of sharing, and we may need to get that message to many other sisters. We are countercultural. Look at us: On a day when we're not supposed to work (Labor Day), we're here working," Bringas said, to a room full of laughter.

Latin American missionary sisters have met for such encounters every other year since 2008, Guerrero said, and over time they have "widened the tent" to include women religious of Latin American descent born in the U.S. and sisters from Latin America who have been in the U.S. for a long time. This year, the group invited a group of missionary sisters from Uganda serving in Chicago as well as many sisters from the U.S.

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Guerrero said AHLMA has been a bridge introducing newly arrived sisters from Latin America to organizations such as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Mexican American Catholic College in San Antonio, Texas, and Catholic Extension. The organizations help with education and formation that benefit the women's pastoral work. This year's encounter, she told GSR, was a "return to the roots," since the first encounter took place in Illinois, This year also included Missionary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Joan McGlinchey, who along with Sr. Ana Gabriela Castro, of the Missionary Guadalupanas of the Holy Spirit, founded the effort that became AHLMA.

Keeping track of itinerant sisters is not easy, as they may come and go from the country or from state to state, Guerrero said, but AHLMA hopes to have a representative at each U.S. diocese to better serve missionary sisters. The organization has more than 300 members from 63 congregations in approximately 60 U.S. dioceses, Guerrero said.

Although sisters love their congregations, many communities based in the U.S. have European roots, and from time to time, some Latina sisters feel "the call of their roots," she said.

"Even though many congregations are open to different cultures, they may have one or two, who are of a different culture … they may feel lonely even though they love their sisters," Guerrero said. "Some have told me, 'The only time I can dance is when I come to AHLMA meetings' … Some sisters celebrate in different ways — and we're not criticizing that — but those that come, come to be fortified in different ways."

Mariachis played as the sisters shared a meal at the end of their meeting. English words mixed into Spanish and back to English. Some danced and one took up the microphone to sing along with the musicians. The sisters from Uganda, too, joined in the dance.

"These are spaces we're trying to open," Guerrero said. "Because of the structure of consecrated life, we tend to walk toward certain paths. We work. We don't have time so it's difficult to connect, but here, we're all in the same room, at the same table, sharing the identity of who we are, not what we do. This moves us toward a global sisterhood.

"We can't continue to live isolated from one another, or for 'my congregation,' " she continued. "We have to get to know one another, not just across the 50 states but to cross those boundaries."

This story was originally published in Spanish Sept. 16, 2024.