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EarthBeat

Damage caused by the Aug. 10, 2026, earthquake at the community home of Sr. Cristina Ángel Castro, in the Guacarí area, 10 km from Pereira, Colombia. (Courtesy of Cristina Ángel Castro)

Ángel Alberto Morillo

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Translated by Sr. Magda Bennásar

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An apocalyptic image has remained etched in Sr. Cristina Ángel Castro's memory ever since Aug. 10, when she experienced firsthand the magnitude 7.4 earthquake that shook Colombia. That morning, she was in downtown Pereira — the capital of Risaralda and one of the hardest-hit cities — picking up some medication.

Once evacuated from the pharmacy, the nun of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary "had never experienced anything like it," she admits. Amid the chaos, she saw buildings collapse like a house of cards, heard cries of despair, and explosions everywhere that "sounded like bombs."

Castro, president of the Pereira chapter of the Colombian Conference of Religious, was near the iconic Our Lady of Fatima Parish on 30 de Agosto Avenue. She looked toward the church's tower — "I was certain that the Lord was inside" — and she began to pray.

The earthquake, which occurred at 7:34 a.m. with its epicenter in San José del Palmar, in the department of Chocó, was classified by the Colombian Geological Service as the strongest earthquake recorded in Colombia so far in the 21st century.

"It's indescribable to witness so much destruction." Sr. Cristina Ángel Castro said of her experience of the earthquake in downtown Pereira, Colombia, on Aug. 10, 2026. (Courtesy of Cristina Ángel Castro)

As of Aug. 31, the earthquake had left 331 dead, 4,505 injured, 136 missing, and 449,442 people affected, according to the National Unit for Disaster Risk

Management.

After the violent tremor — which lasted more than a minute and a half — uncertainty and pandemonium set in, with no cell service and a massive cloud of dust in the air. In the midst of it all, the nun wanted to call her sisters in the community, but she couldn't reach them.

Another worry gnawed at her: how she would get home. There was no transportation, just chaos, with the streets blocked by debris and fallen trees. Cut off from communication and disoriented, she thought about the long distance she would have to travel to her home in the Guacarí neighborhood — about a three-hour walk.

Suddenly she heard the voices of a family she ministers calling for her. That call in the midst of the emergency — "Sister, sister!" — was, she maintains, the voice of God telling her, "Trust." She spent most of the day with them at their home, until their granddaughter eventually took her to her community.

Castro gave thanks to God for life as she gazed upon the city in ruins. "It's indescribable to witness so much destruction," she said, and in her heart, she entrusted to the Virgin Mary those who had lost everything.

An initial assessment

It took 24 hours to come to terms with the trauma, when Castro returned to an "unusual normality" — an oxymoron with which she herself sums up her 28 years of consecrated life.

She resumed her duties for the Colombian Conference of Religious — a role she has held for seven years — and as delegate for consecrated life in this jurisdiction, a position to which she was appointed a year ago by the bishop of Pereira, Nelson Jair Cardona.

Structures damaged by the earthquake in Colombia on Aug. 10, 2026, near the pharmacy in Pereira where Sr. Cristina Ángel Castro was picking up medication. (Courtesy of Cristina Ángel Castro)

With a clearer picture of the earthquake's extent, Castro began visiting other communities of sisters, starting with the Conceptionists, who live in a cloistered

community. "Their convent has sustained damage, and we're looking into what we can do to support them," she said.

The nun has written to the bishop to keep him informed through the WhatsApp group she created to coordinate aid efforts. She has also reached out to several other religious communities, such as the Sisters of St. Peter Claver, who run a nursing home that was severely damaged. "Their situation is complicated. They sent us audio messages, and, thank God, people began sending them aid," she said.

A report issued by the Unified Command Post, dated Aug. 16, listed 95 dead, 259 injured and 251 missing in Pereira. Regarding property damage, it recorded the total collapse of 66 buildings and damage to 60 schools and seven health centers.

Castro hopes to continue communicating by phone with the congregations and thanks God that "no nuns have been reported dead as a result of the earthquake." In addition, she is continuing to compile a systematic assessment of the damage and needs, for which she is in constant contact with the national Colombian Conference of Religious. For now, she is in communication with Juan Carlos Buitrago, director of the Colombian Food Bank, to continue channeling aid to the religious communities.

From the nursing home

Cali, Colombia's third-largest city, located in the western part of the country, also suffered the devastation of the earthquake. A report from the mayor's office dated Aug. 23 indicated 153 dead, 1,657 injured, 34 missing and 88 rescued. Alejandro Eder, the city's mayor, told Caracol Radio that rebuilding Cali will take three years and require an investment of 10 trillion Colombian pesos (US$3.19 billion).

Amid this situation, the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Poor went viral on social media. Since 1993, the nuns have run "Mi Casa," a nursing home located in the San Fernando neighborhood, south of the capital.

Sr. Paula Andrea Naranjo, a member of this community, recounted the moments of panic they experienced with the 68 elderly residents. It was 7:34 a.m. They were celebrating Mass when the earthquake began. Alarms and screams interrupted the service. "The tremor was felt very strongly," Naranjo said. Everyone was on the second floor.

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"There's a huge plaque in the chapel that fell down, but one of the staff members managed to pull one of the residents out of the way," she recounted. Miraculously, none of the residents was injured.

After the building shook violently, Naranjo was able to take shelter with some of the elderly residents at a fountain near the courtyard that they use as a meeting place. "On my knees, I begged God to save us," she says. In those terrifying seconds, she felt they were going to die, but within 20 minutes, with the help of other sisters and staff members, they managed to evacuate the elderly residents.

The nun has no doubt that God's hand was at work there. The arduous task of getting bedridden and wheelchair-using residents downstairs in such a short time — and with the threat of aftershocks — was, for her, a divine feat and, of course, also "an earthly effort" on the part of the staff.

The building was left uninhabitable: There are walls on the verge of collapsing at the slightest touch, and the second floor sustained the most damage.

While everyone was recovering from the shock, the sisters were on their own that first day. "The shock was total," Naranjo recounted, because the congregation in Cali "has only three active members" and the others "are in wheelchairs." The nun felt utterly helpless. That day, the Missionaries of Charity, founded by St. Teresa of Calcutta, brought them lunch.

Sr. Paula Andrea Naranjo accompanies one of the residents of the Little Sisters of the Poor's nursing home in Cali, which was affected by the Aug. 10, 2026, earthquake in Colombia. (Courtesy of Paula Andrea Naranjo)

After the story went viral on social media and appeared on national television, expressions of solidarity began to pour in. The Little Sisters of the Poor had taken

the elderly under their protection in the theater area — the only habitable zone at the time — when volunteers showed up. "My goodness!" Naranjo exclaimed upon seeing that her parish priest, the Effetá group, the Eudist Fathers, and people from the neighborhood had come to clear away the debris.

Aid and prayers began pouring in from all over Cali and the country, because in the midst of these circumstances, "no one has remained indifferent." In the days that followed, they began transferring the residents of Mi Casa to other nursing homes. This has been the most painful part for Naranjo and her congregation.

Hope that does not disappoint

Naranjo said that it would be premature to speak of a complete closure of the nursing home or of reconstruction. She prefers to wait for a more thorough structural assessment, though she admits that some walls were crumbling, even several days after the earthquake. It is a latent risk.

The nun expresses her heartfelt gratitude for the aid received. "Because we no longer have any elderly residents here," she says with a lump in her throat. The Little Sisters of the Poor plan to stay a few more days to look after what remains "with the protection of God and a security guard."

What they do need is money to fund comprehensive habitability studies for the Mi Casa nursing home in Cali.

They are also paying close attention to the guidelines they receive from headquarters in France, where their mother general, María del Monte Auxiliadora, is closely monitoring the situation. Naranjo emphasized that they cannot speak of reconstruction so as "not to mislead anyone."

How will the sisters in Cali recover from this setback? Naranjo took a deep breath and said, "Each day has its own concerns." She added that they will be attentive to what the Holy Spirit is asking of them at this time through their superiors.

A long silence interrupts the conversation. In her 20 years as a consecrated sister, she had never before entered "such a desert." Naranjo wept; she felt her "soul breaking in two" at the realization that they will never again see the "grandparents" they cared for so well and to whom they gave "love for so many years."

The 68 elderly residents have been dispersed throughout the country. Naranjo will treasure those moments of service and dedication in her heart, because in each of those "grandparents" she found the face of Christ. Though life changed in just two minutes, the Little Sisters of the Poor know very well that, despite the uncertainty, "hope does not disappoint."

Related: Desperate after earthquake, Colombia nuns turn to social media to ask for help

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