



Special Report

Placing Social Science Research at the Service of the Church in the United States Since 1964

Special Report on International Women Religious in the United States

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The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has published recent studies that provide insight into trends of religious life in the United States over the last 20 to 30 years. These studies highlight trends of international women religious arriving in the 19th and 20th century as well as those arriving late 20th to the 21st century.

Currently, the United States has slightly over 44,000 women religious and at least 4,000 international sisters. The name “international women religious” refers to two categories of sisters. First, there are women religious who have joined a U.S. religious institute after coming from abroad. The second category covers women religious who joined a religious institute outside the United States before arriving.

This Special Report presents characteristics of international women religious in the United States over the last 20–30 years: their ages, where they come from, their ministries, vocations, and formation in the United States, and their reasons for coming.

Currently, there are international religious institutes present in 110 arch/dioceses and eparchies, notably including Baltimore, Brooklyn, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Galveston-Houston, Kansas City Kansas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland Oregon, San Antonio, and Washington (Do & Gaunt, 2019).

Much research has documented the decline in vocations in the United States. Berrelleza, et al., (2014) observe that “decline alone does not capture the full picture and the full narrative of religious institutes of women cannot

rely on generalizations but requires nuance” (p.7). This report explores the present narrative and recent trends of international women religious in the United States.



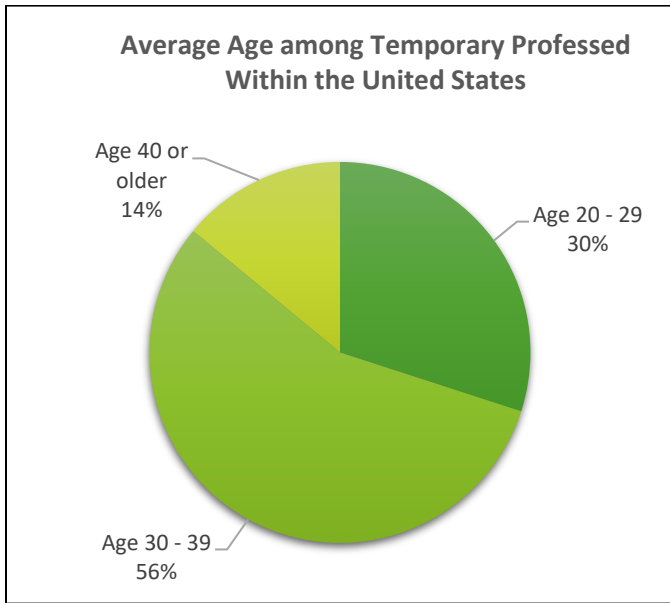
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Key Findings

- There are at least 4,000 international women religious in the United States.
- There are two types of international women religious: those joining religious life in congregations founded in the United States and those arriving from congregations founded outside of the U.S.
- The international women religious tend to be younger than the average age of women religious in U.S.-based institutes.
- The most common ministry for international sisters is in parish ministries.
- Many international women religious are in the United States in pursuit of an education.

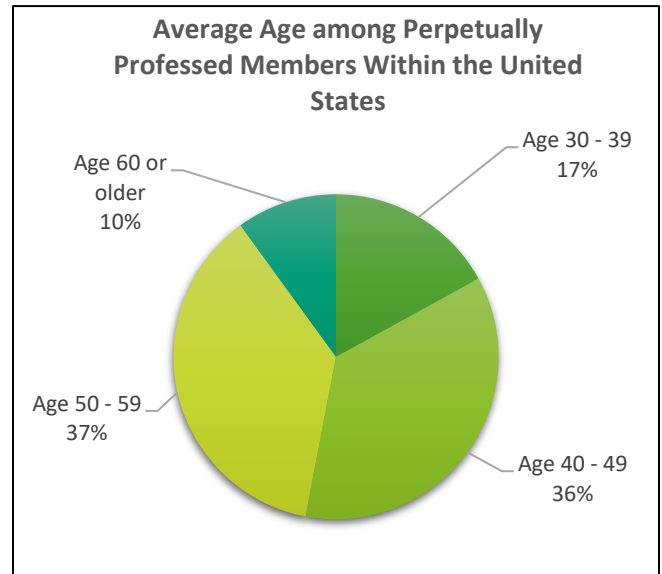
AGE, VOCATIONS, AND FORMATION

The average age among international sisters arriving in the United States is younger than that of sisters in U.S.-based religious institutes. A recent CARA study surveyed more than 500 religious institutes founded outside the United States that have established mission communities here since 1965 (Do & Gaunt, 2019; Johnson et al., 2014). In these international institutes, 30% reported that the average age of their temporary professed is 20 to 29, 56% reported the temporary professed average is 30 to 39 and 14% report the average age of their temporary professed as 40 or older.



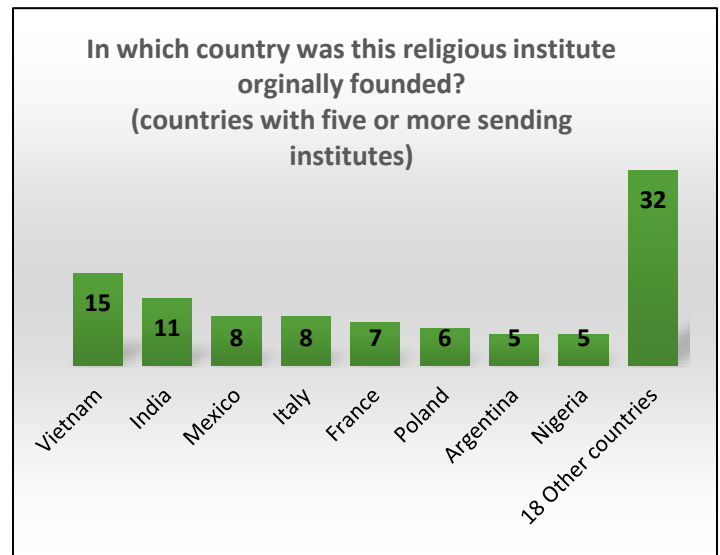
Among the perpetually professed members, 17% of international religious institutes report an average age of 39 years or younger, 36% report an average of 40 to 49, 37% report an average of 50 to 59 and 10% report an average age of 60 in their U.S. community or province.

The arrival of international women religious has a two-fold effect of revitalizing religious institutes in the United States as well as contributing to the universal Church. As such, the presence of international sisters is not “a replacement or a competition between the local and international congregations, but the new move towards a global sisterhood” (Johnson et al., 2019). This global sisterhood in some part addresses the decline in vocations in the United States and responds to the needs of the Church as one family in mission.



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Unlike the former generations of international sisters, who came mainly from Europe in the 19th century, many of the new generation of international sisters come from Asia, primarily from religious institutes founded in Vietnam and India. This is a notable shift from the 19th century, when the sending congregations were mainly from Europe with the majority coming from Ireland, France, and Germany.



In the 21st century, Irish institutes no longer send members, but there are still institutes from Italy, France, and Poland serving in the United States. Other emerging



groups that were not present before are from Africa, South America, and Oceania.

the signs of time and the needs of the world, to go out to new lands for the sake of the Kingdom.

COMPARISON OF STATISTICS IN HOME COUNTRIES

The *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* counts religious institutes in each country, reporting both contemplative monastic communities and apostolic institutes. This table illustrates the sizable numbers of religious institutes from these sending countries.

Home Country	Contemplative	Apostolic
Viet Nam	13	504
India	59	11,985
Mexico	239	2,616
Italy	489	6,570
France	197	2,356
Poland	79	2,209
Argentina	48	1,096
Nigeria	11	777

Source: *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* (2017)

Berrelleza et al., (2014) posits that probably one day the United States will itself become the mission territory of religious institutes coming from other countries (p.6). The migration of these international institutes could contribute to a similar flourishing of religious life in the United States. The international sisters, who are younger on average, bring new energy to older communities and serve as a witness to religious life which contributes to religious vocations (Johnson, et al., 2019; p. 160-4).

MINISTRY

By aligning their ministry with parish work as a priority area, international sisters and their institutes are creating new patterns of diversity and a much-needed intercultural relationship for collaboration and effectiveness not only in community living but for the Church mission as well. Their presence in pastoral work and serving the poor in the community brings newness of life and hope.

This response to serve is a manifestation of their primary calling as vowed religious, which transcends boundaries and cultures of all kinds being sensitive to

What are the primary ministries of your U.S. community/province?

Percentage of institutes responding

	%
Parish ministry e.g., religious education, youth ministry)	62
Hospital/health care ministry	37
Education (teaching and administration)	35
Social service ministry	29
Others	28
Ministry to our ethnic/cultural group	23
Contemplative Ministry	14
Diocesan ministry (e.g., vicar for religious, chancellor)	10

*Percentages add to more than 100% as communities/provinces could claim more than one primary ministry.

REASONS FOR COMING

FOR MISSION AND THE GOOD OF THE CHURCH

Some international institutes explain their presence in the United States as follows: “all of our sisters are Polish, because our charism is to work with the Polish people; we don’t accept other vocations because it would not work in our mission” (Johnson, et al., 2019). Other international sisters are in the United States by belonging to an international institute. These international sisters view themselves as fulfilling their mission to share the same faith they received more than a century ago, having themselves been evangelized by missionaries from the west (Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017).

ORGANIZED PASTORAL MINISTRY

One group of twelve religious institutes from six countries from Latin America have come to serve low-income Spanish-speaking immigrant communities through a five-year pastoral program. The sisters are provided with leadership skills training that is useful both in the United States and back in their home countries when they return to continue the missions there (Johnson, et al, 2019).

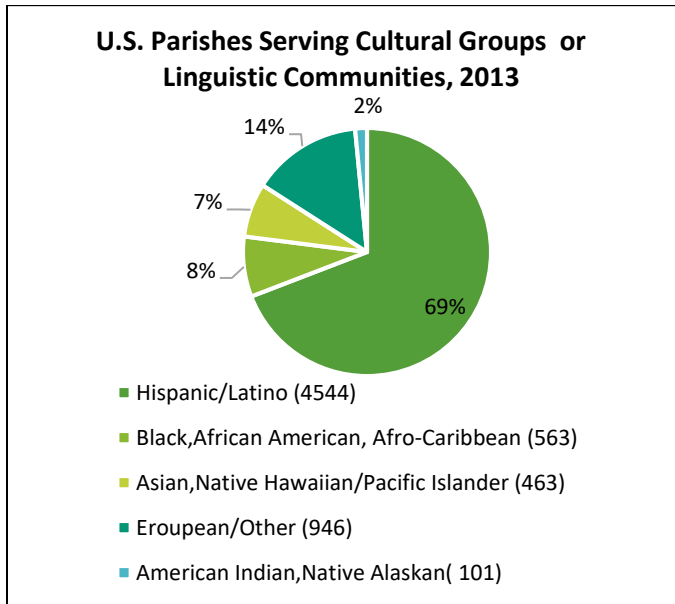


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Vietnamese sisters - Students at Sisters of Our Lady of Charity Convent in Green Bay, Wisconsin.



Source: (Do & Gaunt, 2019)

International sisters are involved in the provision of pastoral services through parish work, healthcare services, and social services. Their ministry is also an opportunity for international sisters to be part of the global sisterhood in service to the Church and the world.

EDUCATIONAL PURSUIT

Many international sisters have come to the United States in pursuit of higher education. Most of these international sisters from the new generation are from countries that lack the financial stability to provide them with opportunities for higher education. This lack of credentials not only impacts the women’s religious institutes negatively, but their ministries as well (Ngundo & Wiggins 2017).

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In the context of developing continents such as Africa, many religious sisters come from families challenged by poverty and are in religious communities whose development is constrained by lack of funds (Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017). For a continent already afflicted by poverty it is challenging to think of fighting poverty with poverty, therefore the need to go for higher education. Another respondent from India responding to the question of why they have come said *“one thing was that we needed the income, but it was also for the mission. Our congregation wanted us to begin a mission here also to earn some money”* (Johnson, et al., 2019).

RECIPROCAL OPPORTUNITIES

Many women’s religious institutes in the United States today view their engagement with international institutes as a fulfilment of their own missionary work for the world by sharing educational opportunities with members from those countries (Johnson, et al., 2019).



One in ten international sisters in the United States are students at U.S. colleges and universities (p.143). Colleges that provide scholarships and assistance to these sisters view their presence as strengthening the Catholic identity and mission of the school (p.153-4).



Little Sisters of St. Francis [LSOSF] serving in Binghamton, New York and Scranton, Pennsylvania.

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Johnson et al., (2019) posit that the increase of vocations in other parts of the world like Africa and Asian provinces may help international communities not only in the U.S. but in other parts of the world to preserve the Institutes' charism for the future. One respondent highlights that *"because we are not getting more vocations here in the United States – I mean for my congregation, so I feel that sisters coming from Africa are also contributing somehow to that for my congregation to go on, to move ahead"* (P.176). Such members come by their affiliation with their international institutes (Berrelleza, et al., 2014). Others come in response to the missionary spirit of the Church in line with their diverse charisms.

CHALLENGES

A common thread among challenges experienced by the former generations as well as new generations of international women religious is culture shock and language barrier. One sister from the new generation said *"I thought I knew English. But when I came here, the difficulty was [that] the diction was different, and I was not*

understood, and I did not understand them" (Johnson, et al., 2019).

Among those entering international institutes founded in the United States and those from institutes outside the United States, navigating the cultural context takes different forms (Johnson, et al., 2019; Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017). For instance, international women religious exhibit a tendency to cling to their cultures and view the people in United States as lacking in evangelization (Johnson, et al., 2019). Sisters from home countries with more communal cultures and social practices may find it a challenge to adjust to a fast-paced individualistic culture.

Another challenge is infrastructure, where some have experienced poor housing: *"I know a group of sisters that were invited to an old convent where the heater system is not working. There are too many things to be fixed in that place"* (Johnson et al., 2019 p.93).

Other challenges common to all generations of international sisters arise from cultural differences, from the practice of religious life in their home countries, where life in United States was seen to be more secular than spiritual for the arriving members. One sister of the new generation said *"in my school I observed that most of them do not pray and I know there are children who do not go to Church. They don't know how to pray, so I spend time teaching them how to pray even before I start my lesson."*

Former generations of international sisters reported conflicts between the sending institutes and the sisters who settled after arriving in the United States or who sometimes broke ties with their original institutes to work under the jurisdiction of the inviting U.S. bishops. It is too early to know if this will be the experience of international sisters in the new generation.

Immigration laws have become more stringent in more recent years compared to the 19th or 20th centuries when international sisters came to the United States. The efforts to improve the homeland security scrutinizes everyone arriving in the United States without exemption. Therefore, while the need to serve diverse immigrant communities continues to grow in parishes, there may



not be enough international sisters compared to the past, arriving to meet the pastoral needs of the faithful at a time of decline in vocations in religious life in the United States.

BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES

EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

One international sister said, *“I think the greatest contribution that the international sisters make is their openness and presence. Once people see her, like this person is thinking ‘oh we are not just Americans, somebody else is here.”* (Johnson, et al., 2019 p.170). This conscious awareness of the other in the community helps to blend new life and ideas.

SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

Most religious communities and institutions of higher learning in the United States have aligned their mission to the social teachings of the Church and to the call of the Pope to help those in need (John XXIII, 1963). In ways consistent with its nature as a University, a Catholic University will contribute to the Church's work of evangelization.” –*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (cf. MfM p. 156)

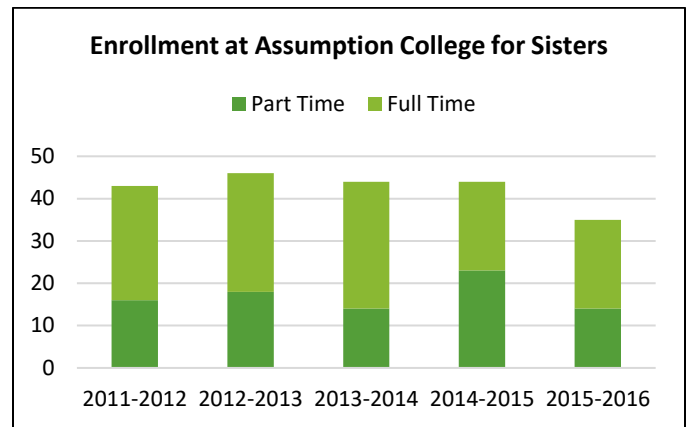
“Then, too, the Catholics of the wealthier States are doing all they can to increase the effectiveness of the social and economic work that is being done for the poorer nations. We would give Our special approval to the increasing assistance they are giving, in all sorts of ways, to African and Asian students scattered throughout the universities of Europe and America; and to the care that is being devoted to the training of those persons who are prepared to go to the less wealthy areas in order to engage in work of technical and professional nature.” – *Mater et Magistra*.

Some of the colleges providing education to international sisters that participated in the recent study (Johnson, et al., 2019) were Felician College (New Jersey), Assumption College (New Jersey), Boston College (Massachusetts), and Divine Word College (Iowa). By sharing their educational resources with international religious, Catholic universities act to fulfil the appeals of

both *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and *Mater et Magistra* by contributing to the Church’s work of evangelization and the development of other countries. Among the colleges that were interviewed, most cited either Saint John XXIII or Saint John Paul II, who called for the well-to-do nations to support the poorer nations (p.159).

BENEFITS TO COLLEGES

Data from one of the above-mentioned colleges exemplifies how this mission has been carried out in the last few years.



Source: Assumption College for Sisters website

For example, Assumption College for Sisters in Denville, New Jersey, was started with the goal to educate religious sisters in the United States. Today, many international sisters enroll at the college. The Sisters of Christian Charity who sponsor the school view this service as reciprocal to their missionary work even without leaving their country. As one Provincial Council member shared, *“we are not a missionary community, but it is an opportunity for us to be missionaries in a unique way”* (Johnson, et al., 2019 p.157).

REVITALIZATIONS OF COMMUNITIES AND CHARISMS

Informed by the view of the Pope, one college administrator said, *“We do it because we are committed to the Church in the Third World countries.”* From a different college, the sponsoring community of sisters say that their theme is *“Teach the Sisters, touch the world”* (Johnson, et al., 2019 p.157). Many colleges report satisfaction



with their ability to educate international sisters and extoll the benefits of shared community life. International student sisters also provide mentorship to other students in their colleges and have a strong work ethic.

International sisters who live with another religious congregation in the United States report higher satisfaction as well as an appreciation of spiritual growth nurtured by the receiving congregations. The receiving institutes, too, feel the support of international sisters in their midst and are cognizant of their willingness to help whenever needed.

International women religious continue to manifest the richness of diverse charisms and continuity of the mission of the Church to the ends of the world. Even though there are challenges such as subtle differences in the charisms of international and U.S. congregations, the trend is more toward creating a global sisterhood enriching the Church with a strong workforce worldwide.

RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS

There are two official leadership associations of women religious institutes in the United States, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR). Institutes of international women religious arriving in the U.S. do not belong to either association. However, some international religious institutes have come together to form associations that can meet their needs.

Some of the conferences that are affiliated with different groups of international women religious include:

- National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC). Membership here is open to all sisters of African descent, with current membership including African-American, African and Caribbean-Islander sisters.
- The African Conference of Catholic Clergy and Religious in the United States (ACCCRUS).
- The Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters/Asociacion de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en America (AHLMA).
- Formation Support for Vietnam (FSVN).

The circumstances and situations are different for arriving institutes as they do not own property that can ensure their sustainability and stability in the context of the United States. The arriving institutes might not be intended to own property and institutions in the United States as their goal is to provide service through organized structures already in existence without re-inventing the wheel. As it is, the global community is moving more toward creating partnerships and collaboration to provide needed services. This is more cost effective and more sustainable in terms of providing personnel for ministry than starting new ministries. However, International sisters need to understand the structure and rules of engagement, how to navigate the system in a diverse cultural context, policies, education system, healthcare, among other dimensions. Continued goodwill among receiving congregations or institutions will go a long way in supporting the arriving congregations to carry on the ministries as one family in mission.



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CONCLUSIONS

Global sisterhood is the common thread between the old and new generations of international women religious in the United States, responding to the pastoral needs of the Church as a primary goal. Data from respondents to a February 2019 survey reveals that U.S. religious life is on a continuum; it will not die out despite decline in the number of vocations or aging of members.

Research has also shown that the average age of arriving members from international institutes is much younger



than that of members of U.S.-based institutes. This portrays a ray of hope that in the face of declining numbers among U.S.-based religious institutes, religious life will continue to be visible and the mission activity in the Church is made possible by the complementary presence of international sisters. Many of them arrive in pursuit of education and others are recruited purposefully for a specific ministry in the United States. A majority have come for the traditional reasons: to provide pastoral services in parishes, schools, and healthcare.

Every international sister or international institute goes through a curve of transition, which includes the highs and lows of entering a new culture. Some of these challenges include adjusting to cultural diversity, religious worship, dress code, socio-economic status, and different political ideologies.

For instance, the topic of a religious habit and veil forms a part of the discussions throughout the research. It is one of the nuanced characteristics of adaptation, by the presence of international religious institutes in different parts of the world. Do & Gaunt (2019) found that nine in ten international institutes (91%) require that members always wear their religious habit.

Pastoral needs among various immigrant communities remains a standing need because majority of the international sisters (62%) are visible in parish ministries (Do & Gaunt, 2019). Sensitivity to new cultural contexts and diverse groups of people and ways of doing things call for the attention of both the arriving and receiving parties. A willingness to let go of preconceived ideas and judgment will enhance cordial relationships and interdependence among religious communities.

Johnson et al., (2019) observe that “as international sisters create new structures and new channels within existing organizations, their contribution also has the potential to both complement and clash with existing paradigms” (p.142). The realization of such potential threats to the universal solidarity and interdependence in mission, attracts cultural/religious humility and tolerance. This leaves the Church vested with the responsibility to create dialogical “models to listen and to learn from those who are new” and the same to those who are new (Johnson, et al., 2019 p.142).

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