



# Special Report

Placing social science research at the service of the Church in the United States since 1964

## Trends in the Life and Ministry of Religious Sisters in Latin America

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In 2018, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) examined data on women religious in Latin America to develop a deeper understanding of the trends affecting the status of religious sisters in this region.<sup>1</sup> While scholars have studied the decline in numbers that women religious in the United States have faced over the past half-century, little scholarship has been produced about the trends confronting sisters in Latin America, and none has carefully examined the numbers in an effort to understand the situation of various categories of vowed life throughout the different nations in this region. Doing so adds another dimension to the overall understanding of women's religious life in the region and indicates certain areas of growth that may defy conventional assumptions about the trends in religious life.

CARA compiled data from annual volumes of the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church (Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae, or ASE)*, which is produced by the Central Statistics Office of the Church. The *ASE* reports data collected from chancery offices of the ecclesiastical jurisdictions across the globe. This CARA Special Report explores some of the trends affecting Latin American nations, to understand and compare avenues of growth within religious life alongside areas of decline. The report provides a quantitative sketch of women's vowed life in Latin America that illuminates various nuances in the trajectories affecting the region's women religious.



Nuns take a stroll in Cholula, Mexico (Courtesy Marcela Taboada, *National Geographic*).

### OVERALL: SISTERS IN LATIN AMERICA

Since 1980, the *ASE* has reported the total number of women religious—both those having made their temporary and perpetual profession of vows—for each nation. The figures for the Church worldwide underscore concerns about overall declines in the numbers of women religious. The global total of women religious has decreased by almost a third between 1980 and 2016, declining from 960,991 to 659,445 women. An examination of the trends in individual Latin American countries—particularly those in mainland Central America—indicates that the declines for the region are typically not as steep as those confronting the rest of the world. In fact, Catholic sisters in several Latin American countries experienced growth in numbers over the past three and a half decades.

<sup>1</sup> See appendix for an explanation of the definition of Latin America utilized in this study.

<b>Total Professed Sisters in Latin America, 1980 and 2016</b>				
	<b>1980</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Net difference</b>	<b>Change in %</b>
Argentina	12,446	7,227	-5,219	-42
Bolivia	1,682	2,369	687	41
Brazil	37,024	27,561	-9,463	-26
Chile	5,088	3,876	-1,212	-24
Colombia	17,654	13,551	-4,103	-23
Ecuador	4,151	4,652	501	12
Paraguay	932	1,163	231	25
Peru	4,732	5,493	761	16
Uruguay	1,621	720	-901	-56
Venezuela	4,345	2,850	-1,495	-34
<b>South America</b>	<b>89,936</b>	<b>69,552</b>	<b>-20,384</b>	<b>-23</b>
Belize	80	57	-23	-29
Costa Rica	867	939	72	8
El Salvador	836	1,676	840	100
Guatemala	1,191	2,592	1,401	118
Honduras	359	830	471	131
Mexico	25,598	25,914	316	1
Nicaragua	692	938	246	36
Panama	457	455	-2	0
<b>Mainland Central America</b>	<b>30,080</b>	<b>33,401</b>	<b>3,321</b>	<b>11</b>

There is a long and rich history—nearly half a millennium long—of women religious in the Latin American region (Socolow, 2015). Nuns first began arriving in Spanish America cities within a few decades of their founding. In the first century of colonization, the number and size of convents multiplied throughout the New World, as having daughters enter religious life demonstrated the piety and elite status of a family, while simultaneously providing a financially stable future at a cost lower than that of marriage to a wealthy man. Convents generally stabilized in population between the middle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and thereafter began to decline gradually in numbers. What was once a gradual decline has become, in some countries, quite steep.

**South America**

South America generally follows the global trend of declines in the number of women religious, although the overall trends in the continent are less severe than those confronting the Church worldwide. While the global total of professed women religious declined by

about a third between 1980 and 2016, the total for South America declined by a more modest 23% over the same period, from 89,936 to 69,552. Its constituent countries, however, have experienced a wide range of trends that are obscured when examining only the total figures for the continent. Though a majority of South American countries have seen declines, some are within a few percentage points of the continental average, as in Brazil, Chile, and Columbia. Other countries have experienced growth over these decades. Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru have all seen an increase in women religious, and Bolivia’s figures have increased by more than two-fifths.

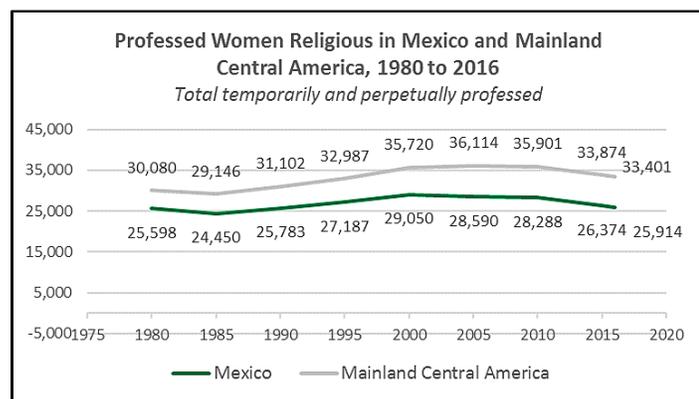
Women religious in Uruguay, however, have declined at a more serious rate, falling by 2016 to less than half of their 1,621 sisters in 1980. By many of the measures considered in this study, Uruguay is an outlier. Its numbers of women religious in various categories have declined more severely than in the rest of the region. The Uruguayan government has long distanced itself from religion and secularization has accelerated in

recent decades. In 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that 37% of Uruguayans said they are atheist, agnostic, or religiously unaffiliated.

**Mainland Central America**

Mainland Central America has experienced growth in women religious since 1980. The total number of professed women religious has increased by more than a tenth during that period, from 30,080 to 33,401 in 2016. However, the total for the region peaked in 2003 with 36,402 women religious. Even though the number of women religious has experienced a downturn since 2003, the 2016 figure is still higher than in 1980.

When examining figures for mainland Central America, it is helpful to consider totals for the region in light of the overwhelming influence that Mexico, with its sheer size, has over average figures for the subcontinent. Because Mexico is such a populous nation—and home to more Catholics than any other country in the world aside from Brazil—its numbers often overpower the regional averages for mainland Central America. This may obscure alternative trends affecting the region. In 2016, nearly three-quarters of the region’s 151 million Catholics resided in Mexico.



Mexico had just 1% more women religious in 2016 than it did 1980. This stability camouflages the growth that smaller Central American nations have experienced throughout the time period. Moreover, the declines since the early 2000s among the total regional figures are almost exclusively attributed to Mexico. Half of the nations in mainland Central

America recorded sizable increases in the numbers of professed women religious over the three and a half decades examined. The number of sisters more than doubled in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; the latter reported an increase from 359 to 830. Nicaragua also experienced a comparatively modest growth of about one-third

**RELIGIOUS LIFE: INTERNAL DISTINCTIONS**

These national and regional trends among women religious are interesting in their own right, but there is more to be learned from the data. While canon law distinguishes religious life from the clerical state and from the lay state, there are also internal distinctions within religious life that have developed over the centuries. Examining trends among the different internal distinctions of religious life allows for a richer understanding of the situation of women’s vowed life in Latin America. This Special Report focuses on three categories of sisters created by CARA from these internal distinctions: nuns in monasteries, apostolic-pontifical right sisters, and apostolic-diocesan right sisters.

**Contemplative Religious Life: Nuns in Monasteries**

The oldest form of religious life for women was that of contemplatives living within a monastery, cloistered from the world and spending their days in prayer. Gradually, some of these communities also took on ministries outside the monastery walls, such as teaching or nursing, with members returning to the monastery at the end of the day. The ASE reports these as “autonomous houses,” governed by a local superior, such as an abbess or a prioress. These are institutes of pontifical right; that is, they have been erected by the Apostolic See or approved through a formal decree. These houses are home to communities of monastic life, and will be referred to as “monasteries” throughout this Special Report. While they are on the decline worldwide and in South America, several Central American nations have recently experienced growth in monastic life.



**Apostolic Religious Life**

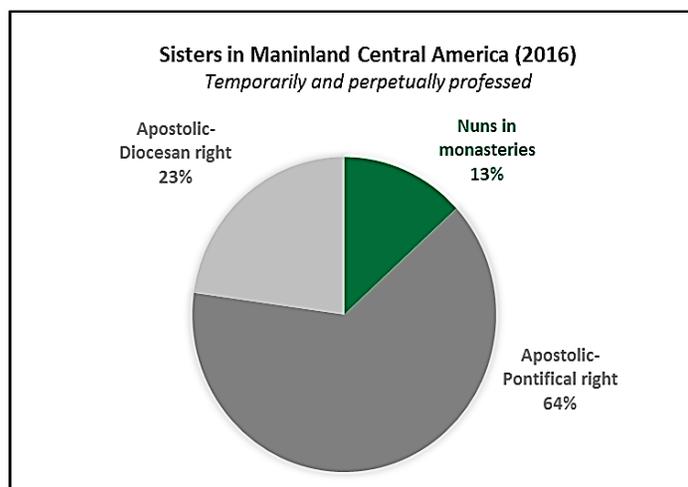
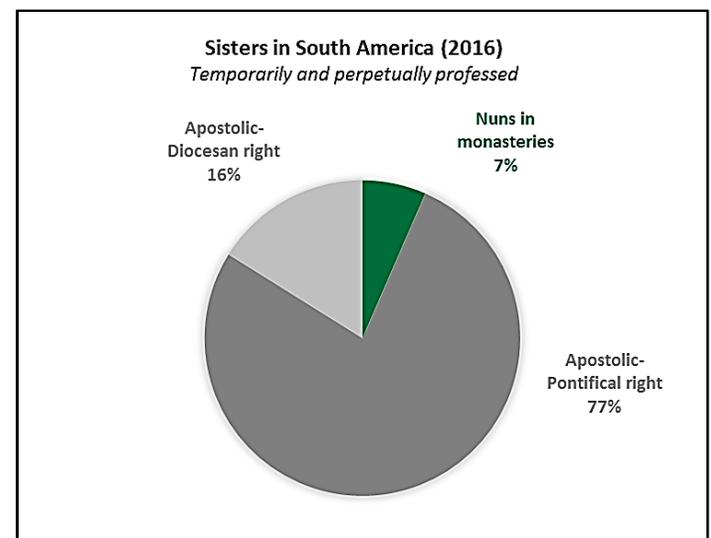
This distinction between contemplative religious life, cloistered away from the world, and active religious life, engaged with the needs of the world outside the cloister, evolved gradually into a further internal distinction: between nuns in monasteries and apostolic women religious. These institutes of apostolic women religious are primarily a 19th century phenomenon. Service to the needs of God’s people belongs to the very nature of these institutes and often influences their practice of prayer and community life. Institutes of apostolic women religious are either pontifical right (i.e., erected by or approved through a formal decree of the Apostolic See) or diocesan right (i.e., established by and are “under the special care” of the local diocesan bishop).

**Apostolic-Pontifical Right Sisters**

The second category of women religious are those belonging to active institutes under papal jurisdiction. These institutes are not monastic; their members are active in the world. The institutes are home to the majority of Latin American sisters, although they have experienced declines across most nations in the region during the past few decades. They tend to be older institutes, often with origins in Europe dating back several hundred years. Their institutes in Latin America tend to have been established throughout the twentieth century.

**Apostolic-Diocesan Right Sisters**

The third category of women religious are those belonging to active institutes under diocesan right. Any diocesan bishop can erect institutes of consecrated life in his diocese as long as the Apostolic See has been consulted (canon 579). Often, this is a first step toward becoming an institute of pontifical right. Similar to pontifical right institutes, those of diocesan right are active communities but they have a particular accountability to the bishop of the diocese where their motherhouse is located. These institutes tend to be younger than apostolic-pontifical right institutes, particularly in mainland Central America, where many institutes of diocesan right have been established in the past few decades. This subcontinent has seen rapid growth in diocesan right sisters over the past decades, while the corresponding numbers have stayed fairly stable throughout South America.



**MONASTERIES**

Monasticism has long been ingrained in the life of the Latin American Church. Convents have existed in the region for almost five hundred years, ever since the first one—La Concepción de la Madre de Dios—was established in Mexico City in 1540 (Holler, 2005). Although it is possible to ascertain a precise total of nuns in colonial Latin American, historical accounts indicate that they were a sizable population in many regions. In colonial Mexico City, for instance, nuns

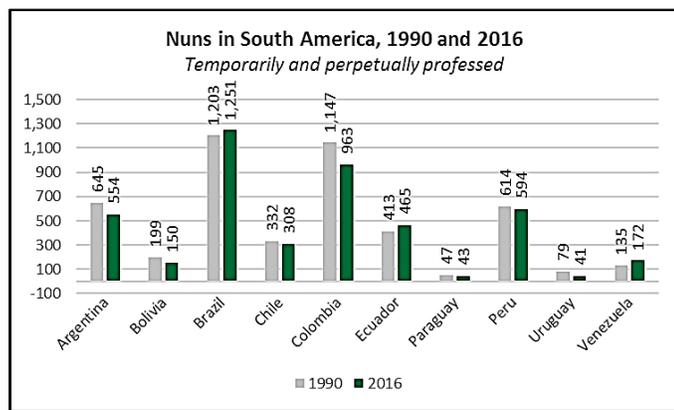


composed approximately 7% of the population (Socolow, 2015). The numbers of women belonging to these institutes have declined since their heights between the middle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though. Tourism websites for Latin American countries feature a plethora of once-grand convents that now lie in ruins, abandoned for decades or even centuries. Nonetheless, the current trends of women religious in monasteries are not nearly as grim for Latin America as they are worldwide; in fact, several nations in the region have even seen marked increases in the numbers of professed nuns since 1990.

**Mainland Central America**

Mainland Central America has similarly experienced relatively steady levels of nuns in monasteries, with the total figure increasing by about 4% since 1990. The overall sum, however, is dominated by the vast majority of Mexican women religious in this region. In all, 3,107 of the 3,320 perpetually vowed women (94%) belonging to Central American monasteries reside in Mexico. While the total for Mexico has declined by less than a percentage point since 1990, several of the smaller Central American nations have increased the number of nuns in monasteries, a growth that is obscured by the sheer size of their counterparts in Mexico.

In Costa Rica, the total number of professed sisters in monasteries increased from 12 in 1990 to 59 in 2016; Honduras saw an increase from 6 to 32 women, and Nicaragua went from 17 to 37 over the same time period. While these numbers are, of course, miniscule in comparison to the figures for Mexico as well as to the total number of religious sisters in these nations, they nonetheless indicate growth in monasteries in Central America, and suggest optimism for the future vitality of monastic life in the region.



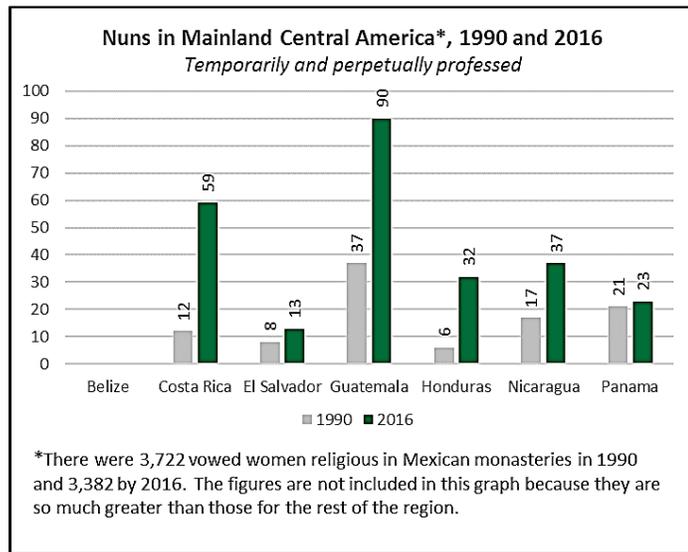
**South America**

The global Church has experienced an overall decline of 27% in nuns in monasteries between 1990 and 2016. Latin America, however, has managed to escape such downturns. South America has maintained a steady number of nuns; between 1990 and 2016, there was only a 2% decrease overall. Ecuador and Venezuela actually increased their totals of professed nuns by a few dozen each. For Venezuela, this uptick occurred while the nation’s total number of professed women religious declined by almost a third over the course of the same time period. The remainder of South American countries experienced either modest increases or somewhat gradual declines, with Uruguay seeing the largest downturn in its numbers of total professed women religious in monasteries: a decrease of nearly half between 1990 and 2016.

Some of this growth is tied to the establishment of new monasteries throughout Central America over the past few decades. Of the Central American monasteries catalogued by the Alliance for International Monasticism, all aside from those in Mexico were founded after the middle of the twentieth century, most within the last thirty years (Alliance of International Monasteries, 2018). In 1991, for instance, a delegation of Benedictine nuns from Spain arrived in San José, Costa Rica, and established the Monasterio Santa Escolástica, motivated by a desire to promote vocations and monastic life in the country (Monasterio de la Ascensión, Zamora, 2018). A decade later, seven Argentinian Trappistine nuns similarly established a convent in central Nicaragua (Hermanas Trapenses de Nicaragua, 2018). Today, the nuns run a hostelry and sell marmalades and handmade rosaries, among other artisanal products.



Some news outlets have featured these communities in recent years, reporting that even as the total numbers of women choosing to pursue religious life as nuns have declined, this avenue of religious life remains a fulfilling path for the women who do pursue a vocation to monastic life.



A 2015 Panamanian newspaper article profiled the Visitation Sisters living in El Monasterio de la Visitación de Santa María, one of two remaining active convents in Panama. An eighteen-year-old novice described how the monastery offered her a refuge from the meaninglessness of the outside world: “*Allá afuera podía hacer lo que quisiera, pero no me sentía libre. Me sentía dominada, triste, aburrida. No le hallaba un sentido a mi vida*” (Sotillo, 2015). In translation: “Out there I could do anything that I wanted, but I did not feel free. I felt dominated, sad, bored. I did not find a sense of meaning in my life.”

**APOSTOLIC-PONTIFICAL RIGHT INSTITUTES**

In Latin America, as is true for the Church as a whole, apostolic women in institutes of pontifical right make up a majority of the total professed women religious. In almost all of the nations in the region, these members comprise between about two-thirds and four-fifths of the total professed women religious. These ratios are generally in decline, though. Since

1990, the first year that the ASE provided a breakdown by numbers of houses, postulants, novices, and temporarily and perpetually professed women religious in these institutes, the total number of professed religious in such communities has declined by nearly a third worldwide, a decline from approximately 670,369 in 1990 to 458,373 in 2016.

**South America**

South America closely adheres to this worldwide trend. Bolivia is the only country on the continent to have seen any growth in the total women religious in these apostolic-pontifical right institutes throughout this window of time. Even then, its overall growth of 8% obscures the reality that the total figure from 2016 actually represents a decline of more than a fifth since its peak around the turn of the twenty-first century. The rest of the nations in South America have experienced declines of varying severity. Several have seen decreases of more than a third, while Argentina experienced a decline of almost half and Uruguay has suffered a downturn of 58%.

**Mainland Central America**

Mainland Central America, on the other hand, has seen an overall decline that is more modest, as well as growth in several nations. Between 1990 and 2016, the region saw a 7% decrease in the number of sisters in apostolic-pontifical right institutes. This overall decline obscures the fact that the total figure actually peaked around the turn of the century, though it has now fallen below its 1990 levels.

As is typical for the region, religious sisters in Mexico comprise the majority of those in the region overall. They have declined by almost a tenth between 1990 and 2016, from 18,681 to 16,851 in the most recent year. This decline has not been steady throughout the period, though; the total women professed actually peaked in the mid-2000s but has since fallen below what it was in 1990. The decline in the total number of professed sisters can be primarily attributed to a steep decline in women temporarily professed. The number of perpetually professed women religious declined by a modest few hundred, but the number of temporarily



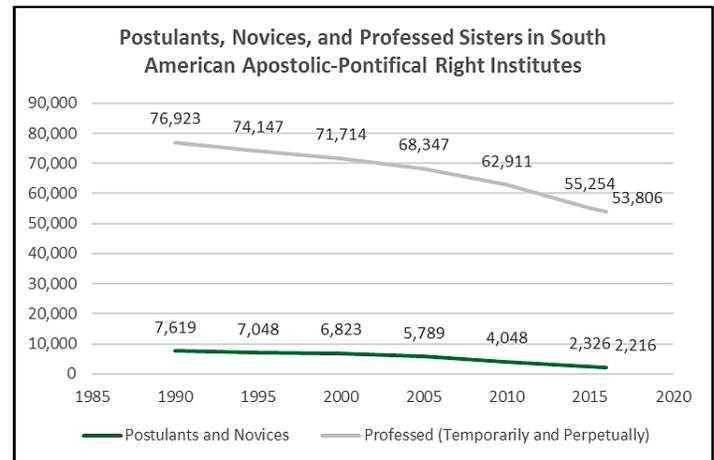
professed sisters fell by over half, from 2,868 to 1,365. While several of the other Central American countries have either experienced minor declines or remained relatively unchanged, a couple of nations have shown remarkable growth. El Salvador’s institutes of apostolic-pontifical right grew by over a quarter between 1990 and 2016 in the total number of professed women religious, increasing from 1,012 to 1,293. Honduras saw its total of professed sisters increase by 80%, from 367 to 659.

**Difficulty Sustaining Numbers**

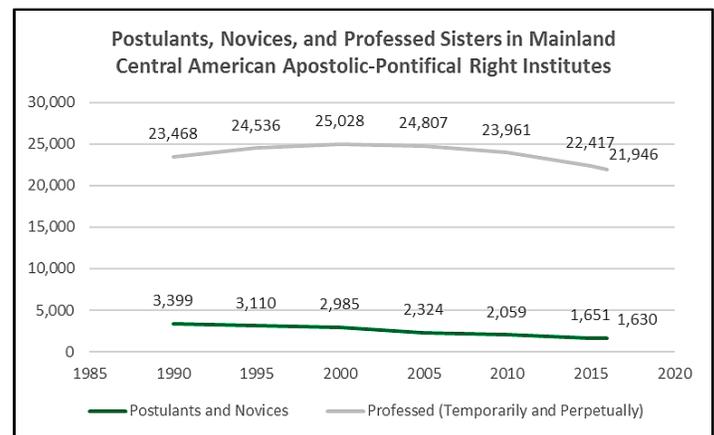
Although there are a few countries—Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras—that have seen growth in the women professed in these institutes, a majority of Latin American countries have begun experiencing difficulty sustaining their levels of perpetually professed religious in such institutes. This is illustrated through several statistics that the ASE provides. First, the numbers of postulants and novices have been declining here more rapidly than in the rest of the world. While the Church globally experienced a 31% decline in the total number of postulants and novices between 1990 and 2016, that figure fell by just over half in mainland Central America, and declined by 71% in South America. Even the countries that experienced growth in the total number of professed since 1990 still saw declines in the women entering. Honduras, which saw growth in the number of professed women religious during this time period, nonetheless reported a drop in the combined total of its postulants and novices by just over half during those years.

Unsurprisingly, as the numbers of women entering religious life in institutes of apostolic-pontifical right has fallen, so too has the number of women professing temporary vows declined. Such downturns have affected every country in mainland Central America. The total number of temporarily professed sisters in institutes of apostolic-pontifical right has declined by more than half throughout the region since 1990. The drop-off has been especially severe for a few of the smaller nations. Costa Rica has seen its temporarily professed sisters decline by two-thirds, from 195 to 64,

while Panama has witnessed a dip of more than four-fifths, from 101 to 18.



The downturns in South America are even more stark. Since 1990, every nation saw its numbers of temporarily professed women religious fall, for an overall decline of 64% across the continent. The decline was most dramatic in Uruguay, where there were 66 temporarily professed sisters in 1990 but only seven by 2016.



For the other various measures in the ASE and examined in this study—at least those related to the situation of women religious—South America either follows the trend for the rest of the world or reports slightly better numbers than the global average. When it comes to sisters temporarily professed in these institutes, though, South America has experienced a



relative decline nearly three times as steep as that facing the global Church between 1990 and 2016.

### Fewer Hands, Important Work

Even as these institutes of apostolic-pontifical right have experienced rapid declines throughout much of Latin America, these communities nonetheless continue to do important work serving the Church and the world. Although the numbers may paint a grim picture of the state of these institutes in this region, there are still new communities of sisters missioned to Latin America from other continents, undertaking new initiatives there, and serving the people most in need. The Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary, for instance, are an international congregation dating back more than a century and a half to France that established a new mission in Huancayo, Peru in 2015. In their newsletter that following spring, a sister wrote about how the congregation, already few in numbers, desired “to remain attentive to the calls of the Spirit” and the prospect of “opening a new mission” in the Southern Hemisphere “filled [their] hearts with hope!”



Sister Marlene Aparecida Avanzi of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God serves the local poor at a hospital in Óbidos, Brazil (Courtesy the Sisters of Divine Providence, Marie de la Roche Province, Twitter)

The sisters who ventured to Huancayo moved into their own home and began ministering to the sick, poor

farmers, and immigrants fleeing terrorism, among others. One of the missioned women wrote that newly arrived sisters had been “struck” by the vibrancy of Peruvian culture and begun feeling “closer to the people” they were serving.

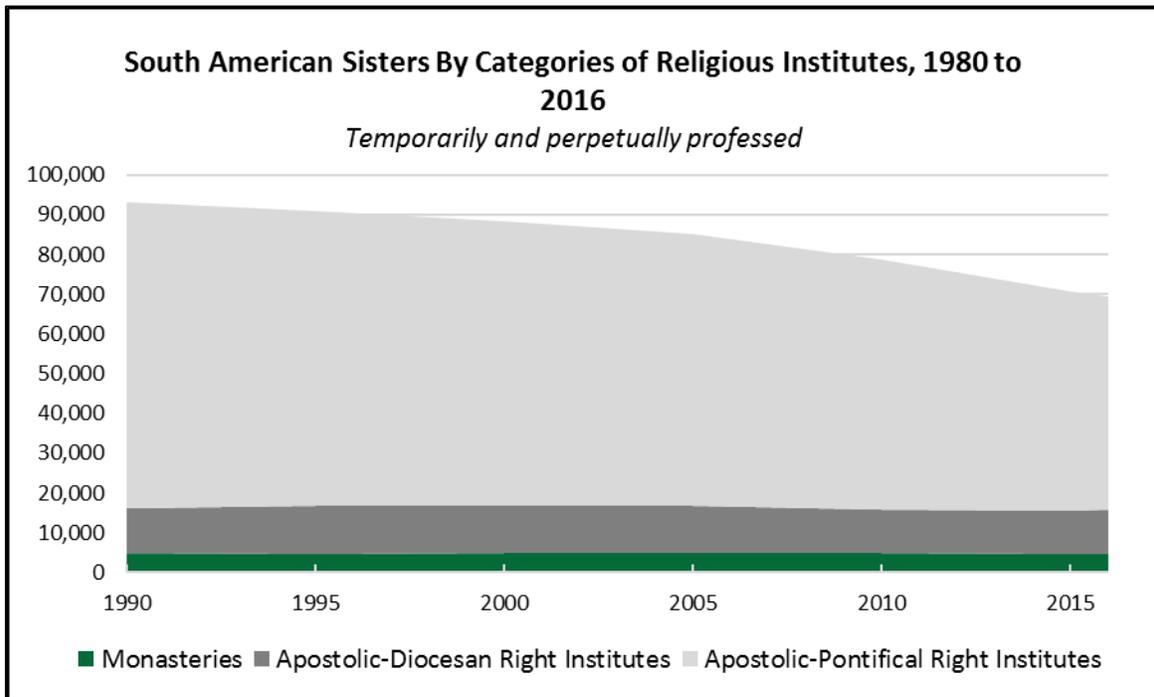
Additionally, some of the congregations already well-established in Latin America—even those pressed for numbers—continue to serve local populations in new ways. The Sisters of Bon Secours have their origins in nineteenth-century France and are dedicated to providing “Good Help to Those in Need.” They began missions to Latin America in 1966. Today, Peru is one of the nations they serve and where they are still undertaking new missions and beginning new projects. In 2013, the sisters opened a shelter for children at risk in northwestern Peru.

Like the Sisters of Bon Secours, many other apostolic institutes of pontifical right first initiated missions to Latin America in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council. The Council and the emphases of the popes of that era continue to inspire much of the work of women religious in the region. In 1955, Pope Pius XII called for a renewal of evangelistic efforts in Latin America as well as for priests from other lands to be sent to the region, thus reinvigorating a focus on the importance of Latin America to the global Church (Hartch, 2015). His successor, Pope St. John XXIII, would proceed to issue thirty-three documents throughout his short papacy calling for aid for the region. He asked for a tenth of all U.S. religious to be missioned to Latin America. Pope Paul VI upped the ante: he called for a tenth of all priests from the States to go to Latin America. Many of the female congregations currently missioned in Latin America cite these popes and the Council as their inspiration.

### APOSTOLIC-DIOCESAN RIGHT INSTITUTES

Finally, the third category of vowed life in this study is that of apostolic institutes of diocesan right. These institutes are erected by a diocesan bishop after





consultation with the Apostolic See and may at some point eventually petition to become an institute of pontifical right. The numbers of women religious in these institutes have been growing throughout the Church worldwide since 1990. While there were approximately 157,000 apostolic-diocesan right sisters in that year, their ranks had increased by an estimated 4,000 by the year 2016. This category of religious life, then, is numerically stronger than either monastic institutes or apostolic-pontifical right institutes.

**South America**

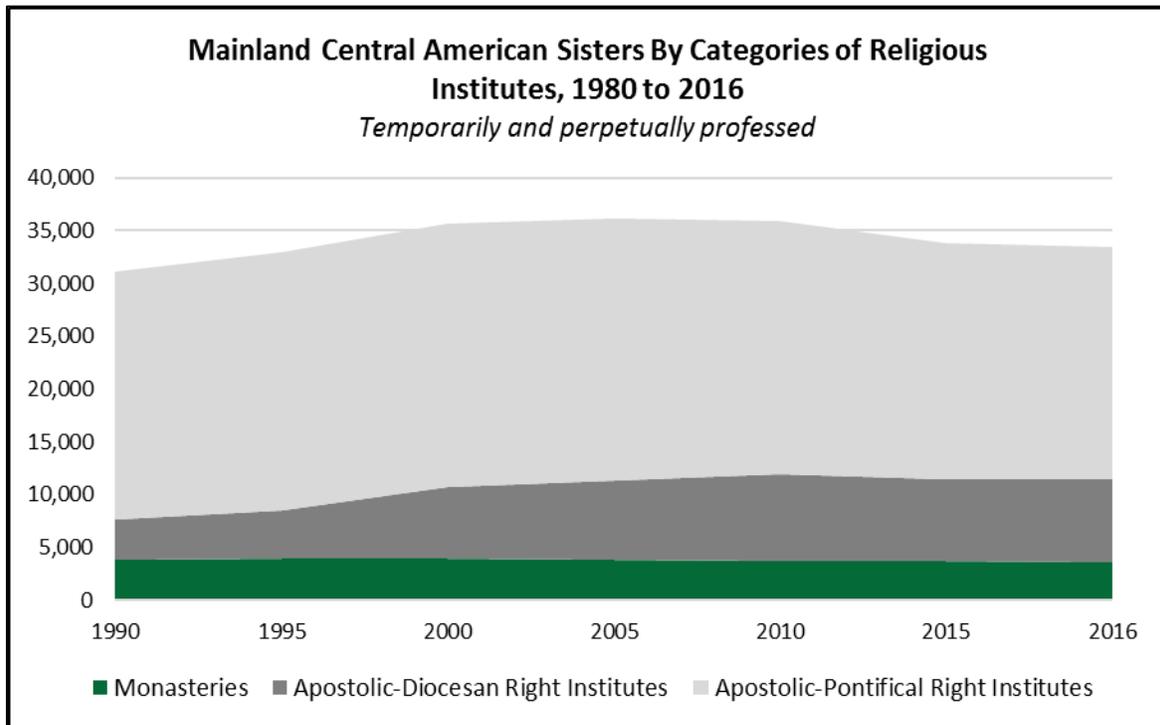
Overall, apostolic-diocesan right institutes appear to be stronger in numbers than their counterparts of pontifical right, especially in mainland Central America. In 2016, both the global total and that for South America were approximately equal to the respective figures from 1990, the year that estimates of apostolic-diocesan right institutes became possible using ASE. Despite such apparent uniformity throughout this time period, individual South American countries actually experienced quite varied trends. A couple of nations—Chile and Uruguay—saw their numbers of sisters in apostolic-diocesan right

institutes fall by more than half between 1990 and 2016. Other countries experienced dramatic growth in the same category, some of which seems to be related to the establishment of new diocesan right institutes during this timeframe. Ecuador appears to have seen its first institutes of diocesan right during the early 1990s, and there were an estimated 901 sisters professed in such institutes by 2016. Bolivia’s apostolic institutes of diocesan right also grew at a similar rate: its total of 88 vowed sisters in 1990 increased to 600 by 2016.

**Mainland Central America**

Unlike their neighbors to the south, every nation in mainland Central America saw growth in the number of professed religious in diocesan right institutes. The total in that category in the region more than doubled, increasing from 3,811 in 1990 to 7,819 in 2016. The most recent figure available for the region has declined by a few hundred women since the total peaked a half-decade earlier, but the 2016 figure nonetheless represents a marked increase over 1990. As in South America, it appears that some of the growth is closely





tied to the recent establishment of diocesan right institutes in these countries during this period. Belize, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua all reflect this phenomenon. Even those countries that already contained well-established institutes under the care of local bishops have exhibited strong growth in this category. Mexico, for instance, saw its estimated total of apostolic-diocesan right sisters increase by more than two thirds, from 3,370 in 1990 to 5,681 in 2016.

This growth among diocesan right institutes has served to offset at least some of the declines confronting other categories of vowed life. While Mexican apostolic institutes of pontifical right have declined by more than 2,000 professed sisters since 1990, growth in diocesan right institutes has offset these declines overall—and even provided for a 1% increase in the total number of professed women religious between 1990 and 2016. This trend is present across the whole of South America as well. In mainland Central America, the growth in diocesan right institutes has provided for much of the total growth in professed women religious since 1990.

**CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This CARA study of population trends among Latin American sisters presents a deeper understanding of the situation of women religious in the region. While South America as a continent generally tends to follow the trend lines—and declines—that the global Church has seen in the numbers of women religious, it has maintained a fairly steady presence of diocesan right active sisters. Its northern neighbors in mainland Central America, though, are more of a bright spot for the landscape of women religious in today’s Church. Mexico has experienced modest growth in its female vowed religious and several of the smaller surrounding nations have also recorded sizable growth, especially among monasteries and institutes of diocesan right. Further research should seek to understand why these categories of religious life in the region are growing amidst general declines in women religious throughout the rest of the Church and explore these more nuanced trends in other regions of the world.



## APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND REFERENCES

### Definition of Latin America

This study considers women religious of the Latin American region. For the purposes of this study, CARA focuses on the traditionally Catholic nations within mainland Central and South America. The *Statistical Yearbook of the Church (Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae, or ASE)* publishes figures for each country and territory, as well as totals for each region. This study draws upon the totals provided for South America and mainland Central America. These data are useful in providing an overview of the trends affecting each respective region as well as for comparing them to one another and the rest of the world. When considering women religious, these totals often indicate distinct trends that emerge between mainland Central America and its southern neighbor.

While this study broadly considers the nations of continental America from Mexico southward, it disregards a few countries and territories that historically have not been considered part of Latin America: Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and the Falkland Islands. Guyana, located to the east of Venezuela on the northeast coast of South America, is an Anglophone nation originally settled by the Dutch. Its neighbor to the east, Suriname, is Dutch-speaking and, like Guyana, has only a minority Catholic population. To the east of Suriname lies French Guiana, which is an overseas department of France. Far off the coast of Argentina are the Falkland Islands, a territory under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom.

The numbers representing the women religious of these four countries/territories remain within the overall figures provided by the *Statistical Yearbook* for South America; that is, they have not been manually subtracted by CARA from the regional totals. However, this study is not particularly focused on considering the situation of these nations, and does not show figures relating to these territories in graphs or otherwise discuss these lands in the text of this Special

Report. These lands are small to begin with, and vowed life is sparse. After all, these four regions are home to just 90 vowed women religious in total—only about a thousandth of the 69,552 total religious sisters across the entire continent of South America.

While Belize, located just south of Mexico in Central America, is not always considered part of Latin America, in part because English is its official language, its experiences with women religious are fairly consistent with the general trends affecting mainland Central America at large. As such, for the purposes of this study, Belize is considered alongside the other Central American nations.

### Research Methodology

CARA collected data from the *ASE* beginning in 1970. The *ASE* has begun offering more detailed statistics in recent decades, though, and it still reports far more detailed information about priests and male religious than it does about sisters. In 1980, the *ASE* began publishing an annual total of the number of professed women religious for each nation and territory in the world. A decade later, it started reporting more detailed figures for institutes under papal jurisdiction—monasteries and pontifical right active institutes—as well as secular institutes. These figures were collected from 1990 and every fifth year through 2015, as well as from 2016, the most recent year available. The *ASE* also annually reports an overall total of professed women religious across the different categories of vowed life, which allowed CARA to estimate the number of sisters belonging to apostolic institutes of diocesan right. Information about women's religious orders in Latin America was also gathered from the websites of various conferences and associations of sisters as well as from the sites of selected religious institutes.

### Figures for Apostolic-Diocesan Right Institutes

While the *ASE* annually reports in-depth statistics for monasteries and apostolic institutes of pontifical right—the total number of houses, postulants, novices, and professed religious, both with temporary and perpetual vows—it does not report the same data



points for institutes of diocesan right. After all, the Vatican collects the data directly by surveying each apostolic institute of pontifical right and monastery, but it does not survey institutes of diocesan right. The *ASE* does, however, report the total number of temporarily and perpetually professed women religious for each country. This is an aggregation of those women with both temporary and perpetual vows in papal-jurisdiction institutes as well as in institutes of diocesan right. As such, the number of professed women religious in the latter category may be approximated by subtracting the totals provided for temporarily and perpetually professed in both monasteries and institutes of pontifical right. The remainder, then, ought to be the total for professed women in institutes of diocesan right. These calculations are possible beginning with the year 1990, when the *ASE* first reported detailed figures for papal-jurisdiction institutes.

While this method generally yields logical approximations and linear trends, it also produces certain figures that are erratic and obviously incorrect. There are five reported figures that factor into the estimated number of professed women in institutes of diocesan right, sometimes making it difficult or impossible to identify which *ASE* figure is problematic. Presumably, the reported total of women religious is generally the most suspect figure, given that its sum is obtained from numbers that each diocese in a particular country report to the Vatican. The totals for institutes of pontifical right, on the other hand, are obtained directly from the institutes themselves, and reported directly to Rome. Nonetheless, although these approximations of sisters professed in institutes of diocesan right may be affected by human error in counting and reporting, the numbers do provide an idea of the quantity of apostolic sisters of diocesan right in Latin America. In turn, these estimations contribute to a deeper understanding of the trends affecting women's vowed life in the region.

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