

UNIDAS EN CRISTO

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The Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América

hosts Biennial National Gathering of 125 Religious Sisters

The *Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América*, AHLMA, hosted the VI Encuentro of AHLMA on Thursday, June 30 through Sunday, July 3, 2022, at the University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, Texas. This year the theme was "Called to Communion: Creating Spaces for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion." Over the course of three days, this event provided an opportunity for reflection, personal enrichment and sharing of experiences. This year 125 women religious from all over the United States and other countries attended.



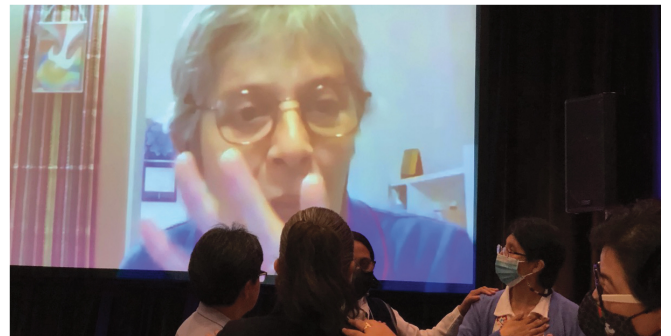
“We are excited to host this national gathering of religious sisters who are in mission in the United States,” said Sr. Elizabeth Guerrero, executive director of AHLMA. “This event not only offered religious sisters the opportunity for personal enrichment, but it also raised awareness of their work and dedication to the poor and most vulnerable.”

Since its first gathering in 2008, AHLMA has continued its efforts to explore collaborative and creative ways for its members to discern together the implications of life and mission in the United States. Its vision is to be a bridge between cultures. “The topic capturing our attention these days is intercultural living,” said, Sr. Guerrero. “AHLMA joins the global sisterhood that is on a transformative journey awakening to the challenges and opportunities that explore and embrace interculturality in our call to communion.”

Due to the pandemic, members of AHLMA have been unable to meet in person, but with high hopes, the situation permitted the event to be held in person. Participants of this event were blessed with special presentations by Sr. Mercedes Casas Sánchez, FSpS, who works in the Dicastery for Consecrated Life of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome, and Sr. Griselda Martínez Morales, CSJ, former director of the Cultural Diversity Program, which she coordinated in Le Puy, France. On Saturday, July 1, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller MSpS celebrated a mass of thanksgiving with the sisters.

“Since the national Encuentros’s inception, we’ve gathered to build a network of accompaniment, and forge bonds of sisterhood,” said Sr. Guerrero. “This year we continued to create spaces for diversity, equity, and inclusion so to encourage each other to respond to the challenges of our times.”

For more information and photos of the Encuentro, please visit <https://ahlma.org/project/llamadas-a-la-comunion/>





MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"Consecrated women who accompany the pilgrim people of God."

Dear Sisters,

Peace and good to all of you!

I am honored to serve as Executive Director of the *Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América* (AHLMA) [the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters] and my greatest desire is for you to join the Association so that together we can achieve our mission of weaving networks to support, accompany and empower Latina Sisters in their ministry and service for consecrated life, for the Church and society in the United States. This is our first newsletter. Through its annual publication, AHLMA will share our stories and what we are doing to carry out our mission.

Many of us have been missioned to the United States to carry out our ministry and we have accepted it with joy; however, upon arrival, we encountered challenges that we were unaware of.

One of the biggest challenges is navigating the contours of a culture that is different and sometimes not so easy to understand, besides the fact that we do not know, or we are not proficient in the new language, and that does not make our work easier.

Recognizing that some sisters have just begun their mission here, others emigrated long ago, and others were born in the United States, we affirm the need for an organization that can convene and represents the diversity of Latina Sisters serving in the United States. That is why AHLMA's primary mission is to network and accompany them to effectively carry out their ministry in the Church and U.S. society.

One of the strategies that AHLMA has implemented to fulfill its mission has been the organization of National Encounters every two years. These meetings have been spaces to reflect, share our dreams, challenges, and hopes, and live the joy of our vocation in light of our Hispanic identity.

To provide a better service, AHLMA organizes, in collaboration with other institutions that support religious life, workshops and formation programs that facilitate spaces for dialogue, leadership development, and the possibility of deep exchanges and networking.

In communion with other Conferences that serve consecrated life in the United States and other countries, AHLMA is creating relationships and spaces for participation which not only offers our sisters the opportunity to connect but also widens the tent. This opens the possibility that other religious can become part of the AHLMA family, thus broadening the horizons of our Association's membership.

These collaborations in turn enrich the organizations and Conferences themselves that receive from the asset of the voice of Latin American and Hispanic/Latina sisters, who speak to a unique reality of religious life and ministry in the United States.

We know that there is much to do and that we will achieve much if we have the support and help of each and every one of you.

At AHLMA we are here to serve you and to walk together in our life and mission as consecrated women.

United in Christ,

Sr. Elizabeth Ann Guerrero, MCDP

The association was established in 2008. During these formative years, the association dedicated our purpose to accompany and echo the voice of the Latin American congregations that did not have a provincial headquarters in this country. In 2017, thanks to the GHR Foundation* and a generous grant, AHLMA was able to strengthen its infrastructure, fund its annual operations, acquire full-time staff, and two offices in San Antonio, Texas.

**GHR Foundation is a hope-fueled global funder of service to people and their limitless potential for good. Based in Minneapolis, USA, GHR works in collaboration with partners and communities around the world to reimagine what's possible when accelerating progress on issues related to Children in Families, Education, Racial Equity, Alzheimer's Disease, Prepare the Future and more.*

Sister Mercedes Casas Invites LCWR

to Give an Unconditional, Confident 'Yes' to Creating Space for the Future

In August 2021, over 1,000 women religious gathered virtually for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Assembly 2021. At the invitation of LCWR, about 15 sisters represented AHLMA at the assembly. The theme of the Assembly was "The Realm of Transformation: Creating Space for the Future." Participants looked at the pressing need to dismantle racism in society and within religious communities, as well as the call to reimagine how religious life may be restructured to best continue its mission. To broaden and diversify the participation, LCWR took advantage of the virtual platform and included more than 300 guests as full participants. The guests came from a variety of organizations. They welcomed nearly 1,000 people from across the United States and 14 other countries for the three-day virtual gathering.

We have a cloud of witnesses over us, began Sr. Mercedes Casas, Daughter of the Holy Spirit, and keynote speaker at the assembly, "consecrated women who have come before us, who have sown the seeds, who have given life." This marked the first time, in the history of the conference that a keynote address was delivered entirely in Spanish.

Her speech titled "Creating Space for the Future," reminded sisters that their predecessors, consecrated women, "allowed themselves to be transformed by that passion for God and for Humanity and that is why they transformed people, environments, societies, culture."

Casas continued her speech speaking about the crisis we are living in. Not only referring to the pandemic we have all been suffering over the last years but also to the crisis of religious life worldwide, commenting on the disappearance of attendance in congregations and communities.



“The first sisters of our congregations blazed the trail. At first, there were few of them,” she said. She followed by reminding sisters of Pope Francis’ words to “not give in to the temptation of numbers and efficiency.”

While recalling a story of a Canadian nun Casas knew, who at the time was trying to learn Spanish at the age of 80, she said, “that’s how I see nuns in the United States,” as nuns who live with a fiery passion and who are “passionate about today’s realities, concerned and paying attention to humanity’s and creation’s most urgent cries.”

Casas commended the sisters saying, “they dare to say the things that not everyone wants to hear” and how they “make mistakes with confidence as is normal with those who passionately seek the truth.” As sisters who are ministering in the US, AHLMA’s drive is to use this passion Casas speaks of to be a point of reference for all the Latina congregations to build one body and voice for their human and social rights.

Casas posed the question of how consecrated women can create spaces so that charisma can continue to grow and asked sisters to contemplate what can sustain communities and religious life. “Create spaces suggests attitudes, like willingness, discernment, and seeing for what or for whom you want to make space,” she said. She proposed the following suggestions.

The first is to be women of the spirit, moved by a law of freedom. She suggested that in order to create space for the future “we need freedom given by the Spirit.”

The second suggestion was to give new meaning to communal life. Casas commented on the challenges of individualism and the loss of community between sisters. “We no longer emphasize community life, communal living,” she said. “Let us believe in the strength of community testimony, which makes individualistic society—where personal importance prevails, and sharing is not an option—sit up and notice.”

Casas’ third suggestion was to create space to transform the mission, creativity, and collaboration. She gave a subtle warning that it is not the time for women religious to put efforts into what makes them different, but instead to “put strength behind what unites us,” stating that it is the mission that unites sisters not necessarily the work.

The fourth suggestion Casas made was to create space for hope. Hope gives us wings, she quotes a poem by Emily Dickinson, “it connects us with the past and the future.”

Casas’ fifth suggestion was to revisit the signs, by giving new meaning to evangelical counsel and to ministries. Sisters must be “signs of a love that has called us, that through our small, poor, limited lives wants to tell humanity that God loves it more than it can imagine.”

These suggestions by Casas are a wonderful opportunity for sisters of AHLMA to put to practice in order to implement our vision to be a bridge and prophetic sign, a space of encounter between cultures, congregations, and other organizations.

Casas concluded her speech encouraging sisters to say yes in the same way that Mary did. “With her [Mary] yes,” she said, “she created the space for the future, and made it possible for what God and She herself wanted to happen.”

Sister Mercedes resides in Rome working in the Dicastery for Consecrated Life of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.



Rivers of Hope Pilgrimage

connects communities to share in hope and strength in their ministry.

The idea that a watershed, an area of land where water drained goes to the same place, really exemplifies us all being connected, said Julie Gerwe, of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in one of the four virtual visits that were part of the virtual pilgrimage called Rivers of Hope/Ríos de Esperanza. The initiative was designed by AHLMA along with several other organizations so that in the same way bodies of water connect, religious communities can be presented with opportunities on what they can do to be more connected with people who are living in suffering and fear. Rivers of Hope was an important collaboration for AHLMA so that we can continue to strengthen our service as catalysts for Latina congregations to advocate for human rights, including Hispanic communities in the US.

The series involved four virtual visits to provide opportunities to hear from those who are ministering to people impacted by some of society's most difficult situations: immigration, climate change, human trafficking, and economics, education, and racism.

The virtual pilgrimage began in December 2021 along the banks of the Rio Grande. AHLMA and the Mexican American Catholic College invited ARISE, a community-based program that works with Colonia families, as representatives.

Ramona Casas and Lourdes Flores, from ARISE, presented the theme, *El peregrino buscando posada*, which translates to The Pilgrim Looking for Lodging.

It was a theme fit for December as posada is a popular celebration in the Latino Catholic faith commemorating Joseph and Mary's pilgrimage from the town of Nazareth to Bethlehem. Casas and Flores guided the participants through stories of immigrant brothers and sisters waiting in shelters along the Rio Grande, emphasizing on the pilgrimage immigrants experience while crossing many rivers in order to touch the hope of US soil.

"The thing that fills my heart and refreshes me is the love of family and the hope and spirit of strength," said one of the participants, Jennifer Hardy, retired lawyer, and advocate. "To see everyone working together brick by brick building this shelter. Everywhere I am there is love, hugs, and a high spirit. If they have hope, then I should too."

The virtual pilgrimage then traveled further north to the waters' tributary to the Mississippi River in Kentucky. Julia Gerwe represented the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, a congregation that works to advance its mission to care for the earth by offering education and community outreach locally and globally.

"The thing that fills my heart and refreshes me is the love of family and the hope and spirit of strength"



In her presentation, Julia defined climate change and spoke about the impact of climate change in the US, specifically Kentucky. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth are reacting both proactively and reactively, she explained. She shared how the community is installing solar panels, prioritizing energy efficiency, growing their own food, and investing in electric vehicles. Most notably, they also have a ministry called the Disaster Relief Team, which started in 2001. The team, guided by the Spirit, responds to tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods within a five-mile radius of Kentucky.

“The sisters respond in the same spirit of St. Vincent de Paul, with reverence for each person and witness to God’s presence in the midst of adversity,” said Julia. “It is truly faith in action.” This second stop on the virtual pilgrimage was hosted by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

Participants then visited the Missouri River where the Leadership Conference of Religious Women (LCWR) presented their efforts to end human trafficking. LCWR has been an advocate for the abolishment of human trafficking for over a decade.

They spoke of the importance of working in solidarity in order to be able to address this horrendous violation of human worth and dignity.

At last, the Rivers of Hope/*Ríos de Esperanza* virtual pilgrimage ended at the Hudson River, which was represented by the Religious Brothers Conference (RBC). Their presentation focused on the economy, education, and racism and how these issues continue to dehumanize society.



...to find hope in these challenging times

While all topics presented in the Rivers of Hope/*Ríos de Esperanza* were distinct, they were rich in context and provided realistic scenarios of how many religious organizations are being guided by the Spirit to support those most in need. Learning about these topics is crucial as AHLMA offers to strive to be the voice of the Latin American sisters who can speak to a unique reality of religious life and ministry in the US.

Attentiveness to the poor, urgent awareness and concern were some of the one-word reactions shared by participants throughout their virtual pilgrimage, and many shared how they were inspired to work in solidarity to be healers for those in suffering and be advocates to help them live a dignified life.

At the end of the virtual pilgrimages, approximately fifty religious brothers and sisters gathered at Bon Secours Retreat and Conference Center in Marriottsville, MD for a five-day retreat. The retreat was an experience offered to religious women and men currently ministering in direct service with people who struggle to find hope in these challenging times.

It provided the space and time for deep reflection on the challenge of accompanying people who live with trauma and fear, and who wish to find ways to continue ministering with hope and strength as well as learn ways in which they may assist others to cope with the challenges they face.

Ríos de Esperanza was a collaborative effort of the *Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América* (AHLMA), the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the Mexican American Catholic College (MACC), and the Religious Brothers Conference (RBC).

The program was funded by a generous grant.

Watch videos at <https://ahlma.org/peregrinacion-rios-de-esperanza/>

AHLMA Networking

Thanks to the gift of technology, sisters of AHLMA continued to be active during the pandemic and were able to participate in events all over the US in accordance with AHLMA'S mission to network to support, accompany and empower Latina sisters in their ministry and service for consecrated life. The following highlights some of the wonderful virtual events we have collaborated in.

Christmas Concert US Pastoral de Conjunto



In December 2020, AHLMA partnered up with *Raíces y Alas* to participate in a virtual Christmas concert. Those working in pastoral ministry in U.S. parishes were invited to submit a Christmas song. The result was the joyful one-hour-long *Christmas Concert US 2020 Pastoral de Conjunto*, which was posted on YouTube with the help of Vivit Media. AHLMA contributed two songs, *Ay del Chiquirritin* and *Feliz Navidad*.

NRVC Summer Institute

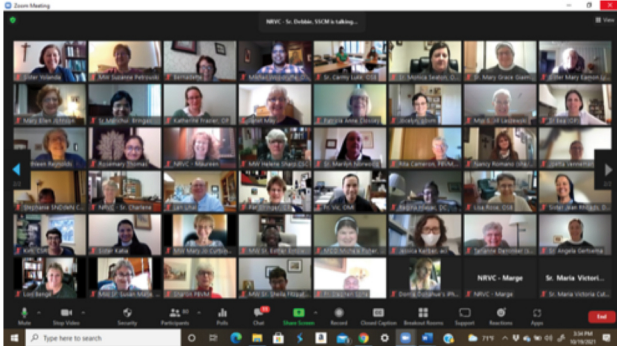


Photo used with the permission of the National Religious Vocation Conference

Three of our sisters participated in the National Religious Vocation Conference 2021 Summer Institute Workshop. Part of the workshop was to teach how to evaluate candidates for admission to initial formation. "I enjoyed Fr. Ray Carey's interventions with his real-life experiences as examples of the topics we covered," said Sr. Ruby Sampang, member of the Religious of Mary Immaculate in Washington, D.C. "I was struck by the issues of compassion in the accompaniment, and grateful for the new knowledge of the behavioral approach and the process and methods of the assessment for candidates."

Educational Opportunities

AHLMA



Asociación de Hermanas Latinas
Misioneras en América

In December 2022, the Mexican American Catholic College (MACC) in collaboration with the *Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América* (AHLMA) received a \$250,000 grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to empower religious sisters in leadership roles in their ministries. The grant funds will be used to launch a two-year certificate in Intercultural Ministry particularly focused on giving Latina sisters the knowledge and skills to minister in the United States. The grant will initially enable 10 religious Latin American sisters serving in the United States to earn the certificate.

Raíces y Alas Washington, DC



The National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry -NCCHM-, which brings together the main institutions related to the Hispanic Ministry in the United States, has gathered national and international leaders for the 6th National Catholic Congress *Raíces y Alas* that took place in Washington, DC, from April 26 to 30 2022 under the theme: "Prophetic voices. *Ser puentes para una nueva época.*" AHLMA members participated and joined their voices to all those gathered for this event.

Sr. Ana Cecilia Montalvo Villanueva, FSpS
(AHLMA member), Washington, DC

“Women who dance to the rhythm of resilience” workshop



On February 17, 2023, over fifty sisters gathered for a virtual workshop entitled *Women who dance to the rhythm of resilience*.

This workshop had the purpose of helping sisters to respond more assertively to the adversities they encounter in their missionary and religious life. According to Michael Rutter, "*resilience is understood as individual variation in the way people respond to risks over time.*" Despite being born and living in high-risk conditions, resilience characterizes people who develop psychologically healthy and are socially successful.

From this perspective, the presenter Sr. Giselle Gómez, STJ helped to deepen the concept, to recognize resilient individuals and/or groups, and to question oneself on how to help themselves on a personal and community level to live as a resilient woman.

This event was conducted in Spanish and at no cost to the participants.

If you wish to support these and other programs, please consider donating to AHLMA. With your support, we will be able to continue providing workshops and programs that are tailored to your needs. Contact us for details on how to support our mission: ahlma.office@gmail.com.



AHLMA Receives Covid-19 Response Grant

from Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to support congregations with resources during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented us with a global challenge, affecting many aspects of our lives, including work, education, economics, and even religious faith. This prompted AHLMA to take on the task of listening to the needs of sisters, their communities, and ministries during these times.

AHLMA received a generous grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to support its member congregations as they faced the challenges posed by the pandemic. Thanks to the grant funds, 20 congregations of various sizes received monetary support ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000.



Sister Delia Ibarra Rodríguez, HMSDR, Sturgis, MO

One of the difficulties brought about by the pandemic for religious communities was the disruption of their ministry work. It was crucial to rethink their ability to reach their ministerial communities. The grant funds supported congregations with a safe and hygienic environment in which to live and work, as well as with the necessary technology to continue doing their work remotely.



Carmelite Missionary Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Kingsburg, CA

“It was empowering to see that our ministry was not over because of the pandemic, it simply changed,” said Sister Marilupe Mier y Terán, HMSS. “We needed to use our creativity to continue to serve those most in need as well as take care of ourselves.”

With technology readily available, congregations were able to minister to many more people at further distances without exposing themselves or others to the COVID-19 virus. They were able to continue with the formation of various groups at the parishes they serve. Sisters who were Catholic school teachers continued with their classes.

Sisters of AHLMA noted how uplifting it was to see congregations willingly accept the challenge of learning how to use the technology. The pandemic generated a certain bewilderment and raised many questions on how to cope. However, facing the circumstances compelled the sisters to evaluate their resources and helped them recognize their personal human agency. The experience has confirmed to them their strength in planning and adapting to change at any given moment. In solidarity, from young to old, the sisters humbly enrolled in training to learn how to effectively use technology and be creative in the ways they offered their ministry.

AHLMA initially projected the number of people who would benefit from grant funds would be around 2,500 to 5,400. However, thanks to their vigor, they saw a much greater impact as the sisters served approximately 17,000 people.



Institute Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, San Antonio, TX.

“It was important to accept challenges, and I think we all realized that we could develop new skills in order to adapt to changes,” said Sister Guadalupe Ramirez, MCDP. “It was great to be able to meet with other communities via Zoom to support each other and let each other know we were not alone.”

After this experience, sisters of AHLMA were excited to continue exploring the possibility of financial aid for religious women to support their mission and learning how to do strategic planning and contingency plans.

They also saw the need for comprehensive education and hope to look for funds to support ongoing formation as well as professional development through certificate programs or advanced studies.

*This newsletter is available in English and Spanish at www.ahlma.org

*“Consecrated women, maternal face of God,
sent to walk, accompany and encourage the people of God...”*



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