

## **Religious Sisters in Latin America. Identity, challenges and perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

The writing analyzes trends in the life and ministry of women in Latin America. It provides a quantitative sketch identifying religious sisters' trends from 1970 to 2017 and compares them both with other regions and with Latin American priests. It exams three patterns, all of them concluding with declining numbers at the beginning of the 2000s. The analysis is grounded on a database that was built using the Statistical Yearbook of the Church. The article also examines the social space women religious have occupied in the Latin American countries over time; the construction of their social and ecclesial identity, and their relationship with Catholic consecrated men. Finally, it addresses their current challenges deepening in three issues that account for their crisis: first, the persistent clerical culture that permeates the Church's dynamics; second, the disputes stirred up around decisions on their works, expressions of the past but not of their present; and, third, the building of their present identity through the complex process of finding inspiration in the confrontation of their foundational sources with present pastoral theological approaches, as those framed within feminist theologies. Unearthing clues to better understanding the Latin American sisters' crisis is a thread that runs throughout the analysis.

WOMEN RELIGIOUS – CATHOLIC CHURCH – LATIN AMERICA – CATHOLICISM –  
FEMALE RELIGIOUS ORDERS - RELIGIOUS SISTERS

### **Resumen**

El escrito analiza aspectos de la dinámica, evolución y desafíos de las religiosas en América Latina. Analiza la evolución numérica las religiosas entre 1970-2017 y las compara tanto con otras regiones como con los sacerdotes. Se identifican tres patrones, todos ellos concluyen con cifras decrecientes a principios del presente milenio. El análisis se basa en una base de datos construida a partir del Anuario Estadístico de la Iglesia. Se analiza asimismo el espacio social que han ocupado las religiosas en los países latinoamericanos a lo largo del tiempo; y la construcción de su identidad social y eclesial. Finalmente, se abordan tres aspectos que ayudan a comprender su actual crisis: primero, la persistente cultura clerical que permea la dinámica de la Iglesia; segundo, las disputas suscitadas en torno a las decisiones sobre sus obras, expresiones del pasado pero no de su presente; y, tercero, la construcción de su identidad actual a través del complejo proceso de encontrar inspiración en la confrontación de sus fuentes fundacionales con los enfoques teológicos pastorales actuales, como los enmarcados en las teologías feministas. El eje que atraviesa el escrito es encontrar claves analíticas que permitan comprender la crisis que están atravesando actualmente las religiosas.

RELIGIOSAS – IGLESIA CATOLICA – AMERICA LATINA – CATOLICISMO –  
CONGREGACIONES RELIGIOSAS FEMENINAS

This writing analyzes trends in the life and ministry of women religious (commonly known as “sisters”) in Latin America, their quantitative evolution, and the challenges they are facing at present. We examine the social space they have occupied in the region over time; the construction of their social and ecclesial identity, and their relationship with Catholic consecrated men. Why is it important to focus on women religious from the perspective of Catholic studies? On the one hand, the contribution of religious sisters to the strengthening of society and of the Catholic Church in the region has remained invisible. On the other hand, examining characteristics of their life and ministry allows us to understand better crucial aspects of the current crisis of the entire Catholic field in Latin America, which affects women religious in a much stronger manner than any other group. Unearthing clues to better understanding the Latin American sisters’ crisis is a thread that runs throughout our analysis.

In its first part our article characterizes the main features of Latin American women’s religious life (WRL) based on socio-historical scholar contributions to the subject. The objective is twofold, on the one hand, to highlight what has been studied so far about women religious in the region; on the other, to delve into what we consider key aspects of their presence in Latin American countries: origin, organization, their ministries, and the social and ecclesial spaces occupied. We also look at relevant issues that have outlined their identities, charted their trajectories, and their diversity.

The second part of this writing provides a quantitative sketch of Latin American WRL. The aim is to identify religious sisters’ trends and to compare them both with other regions and with Latin American consecrated men (mainly priests). The analysis is grounded on a database that was built using the Statistical Yearbook of the Church (*Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*), which is produced by the Central Statistics Office of the Catholic Church. We used also other sources, particularly the Latin American Leadership Conference of Religious People (CLAR by its Spanish initials). The results we present are unprecedented in terms of both the information and the analysis contained.

The third part addresses current challenges of the WRL in the region. We deepen in two key issues: first, the disputes stirred up around decisions on their works, expressions of the past but not of their present; second, the building of their present identity through the complex process of finding inspiration in the confrontation of their foundational sources with present pastoral theological approaches, as those framed withing feminist theologies.

## 1. Religious Sisters in Latin America. A long-standing invisible presence

During the colonial period cloistered monastic life was mostly the only vowed-consecrated communitarian option for women. In contrast, male orders deployed an active apostolic life through preaching, teaching, and missions. As required by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) female monastic life was governed by rules and constitutions steeped in a rigid iron discipline. Nuns lived cloistered from the world under pain of excommunication, spending their days in prayer. The Peruvian, Mexican and Río de la Plata viceregal women's monasteries were all very similar in their disciplines and dynamics <sup>1</sup> (Chavez Vargas 2019). Various features of women's cloistered conventual life in colonial Latin America, such as their internal discipline and everyday practices, their socio-religious role, the identity and promotion provided to women, have been addressed by a growing number of historical studies (Burns 1993; Algranti 1993; Jimenez Chaves and Bridikhina 1997; Martínez Cuestas 1995; Serrano 2000, Fraschina 2010, 2015, among others).

In the early nineteenth century a new alternative of vowed consecrated life was offered for women in Latin America: apostolic religious life in newly created institutes/congregations. Throughout the nineteenth century, following the periodization proposed by Lawrence Cada et al. (1979) religious life evolved in a new direction: the age of the teaching congregations. WRL rapidly grew engaging with the needs of the world outside the cloister. New religious congregations (RC) were founded involving ministries of teaching, nursing, and social work, through the institutions emerging at that time, mainly schools and hospitals.<sup>2</sup> In Europe about six hundred new communities were created in the nineteenth century, mostly female<sup>3</sup> since this new

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<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of the colonial period from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century 164 convents were founded in Latin America as indicated by Fray Ángel Martínez Cuesta. See Martínez Cuesta, Ángel O. R. A. "Las Monjas en la América Colonial 1530-1824", Thesaurus, t. L, Centro Virtual Cervantes, 1995, pp. 622-626. (quoted in Chavez Vargas 2019: 244).

<sup>2</sup> The transition towards the nineteenth century educational congregations is part of the Catholic Church struggle against the prevailing secularism at that time. Several measures to restore Catholicism were developed in Europe and in the rest of the nations, especially in Latin America. Priority was given to clergy discipline and formation; confraternities and other lay associations were encouraged as a way of rebuilding the inter-church network (Folquer, 2012). The foundation of numerous RCs was one of the most relevant effects of the policy designed from Rome in its effort to strengthen the Church and evangelize the population.

<sup>3</sup> In France alone, around 400 new women RCs were founded the nineteenth century (Schatz, 1992: 48). Spain and Italy also strongly contributed with new institutes of consecrated life.

age began with the lifting of the ban on apostolic active life for women.<sup>4</sup> Monastic life was no longer the only community consecrated life option for women.<sup>5</sup>

Several of these new RCs began their journey from Europe to America, accompanying the church's impetus to evangelize and strengthen its presence outside the old continent. They arrived in America throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in its second half, and in the first half of the twentieth century. Academic studies analyze this flow, indicating that they tended to arrive from Europe, particularly from France, Italy and Spain, to Latin American countries within a few decades of their founding (Suárez 2020a; Monreal 2020; Patiño 2020; Lecaros 2021; Arduini and Bittencourt 2020; Bianchi 2015). These newly arrived RCs were joined by similar local foundations in each country. In some countries, as in Mexico, local foundations were numerous, currently representing about 50% of WRL (Patiño 2020).

In Latin America, the new institutes of WRL steadily consolidated their presence in the fields of education, health care, and in the assistance of the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Various congregations assumed also the education of the girls from the upper class. In the nineteenth century, the French congregations were particularly sought-after; later on, in the twentieth century, North American and Canadian congregations became popular. The WRL took on supplementary tasks and subsidiary roles to those of the State, therefore gaining social legitimization. The RCs were also functional to the consolidation of the Catholic Church in the different countries of the region, even if the relationship between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the RCs has been often tense and conflictive (Folquer 2012, 2020).

Women RCs (WRCs) provided an alternative life project to that of family. Several scholars (Suárez 2021; Patiño 2018; Lecaros 2017) stress that carrying out their works implied for WRCs a great investment in order to obtain organizational efficiency and professionalization of services. Schools, for example were managed and staffed by sisters, who were also in charge of most of the teaching at all levels. Sisters, in addition to their religious education, received the training required to teach in a classroom. For many of them it was a more attractive life project than the family one, in which most likely they would be just housewives with no professional careers.

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<sup>4</sup> The daughters of Charity founded by saint Vincent de Paul in 1655 are the first to develop apostolic work outside the cloister. However, they were not really involved in Latin America until the independence.

<sup>5</sup> Since early nineteenth century the share of cloistered nuns in the overall figures of vowed consecrated life declined. However, figures have been pretty stable over the last decades. Nuns in monasteries represented in 2016 about 13% of vowed women in Central America, and about 7% in South America (Greenwood and Gautier 2018).

Sisters from these RCs lived in communities usually located inside the walls of their works. They lived a “mixed” religious lifestyle: apostolic activities were undertaken inside the convents, with a cloistered area reserved for nuns, and the obligation, whenever it was not truly impossible, of community liturgy of the hours prayer.

This lifestyle succeeded in attracting women in the different Latin American countries that progressively joined one of the many WRCs in the region. Within the Church, however, even if always much more numerous than celibate males, sisters occupied subordinate roles. The Church’s structure has historically reserved the sacred order -priesthood-, and the positions of power and control to males. Sisters’ commitment and active involvement both in society and within the Church made them indispensable, but barely visible. In short, this collective of women has always been indispensable but invisible (Lecaros 2021).

The Latin American reception of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is an important milestone in WRL’s identity. Liberationist theological-pastoral approaches developed between 1968 and 1976 by Gustavo Gutierrez, J. L. Segundo, J. Comblin, J. C. Scannone, L. Gera, L. Boff, J. Sobrino, I. Ellacuria, Santa Ana, among others, (Castro-Gómez 2008) challenged several communities. Many began to delve into these new approaches recurring also to the new areas of interaction and exchange favored by the recently created Latin American Conference of Religious. Most notable in the Second Vatican reception has been the second meeting of the Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) held in Medellín in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Its concluding Document, aligned with Liberation Theology, launched “the *preferential option for the poor*”. Many RCs -particularly female ones- began to renew their structures, updated the purpose of their social and pastoral missions, and changed the way they faced their ministry. Some of them made radical choices not only working for the poor, but living among them in small communities and modest houses, in what came to be known as the *inserted option*. In these marginal and peripheral areas, they engaged in creative socio-pastoral activities. They went from carrying out their educational and assistance works with populations inside the walls of their convents, to “go out” not only to work but to live among the poor (Quiñones 1999).

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<sup>6</sup> The Second General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops was convened by Pope Paul VI in 1968, in Medellín, Colombia. The Conference established the importance of the Church's addressing contemporary socioeconomic realities, endorsed new pastoral practices, and marked the emergence of the new, distinctly Latin American “theology of liberation.” The Conference shifted the Catholic Church's emphasis toward the poor majority.

The *inserted option*, as argued by several scholars (Rosado Nunes 1985; Suárez 2020b; Bidegain 2014; Cubas 2020; Kublin and Pulfer 2020; Roselli 2020) helped to question and change the traditional social roles and lifestyle of female congregations. It resulted in many positive impacts both for sisters and for the poor communities they served. Towards the end of the eighties parts of Latin American WRL envisioned a vibrant future for them thanks to the impulse of insertion.<sup>7</sup> However, aging members and fewer new entrants, were already signs of a stagnation that worsened over time. Many of these small communities had to close, narrowing the scope of the experience. Moreover, the new ecclesial period inaugurated with John Paul II pontificate (1978-2005), continued with Benedict XVI (2005-2013) decelerated the Latin American renewal movement.

Sisters' social commitment translated in some cases into political positions. This topic is addressed in various studies (Cattoggio 2010; Cubas 2020; Barry 2004, Touris 2010, among others). The authors analyze how Latin American countries' political configurations between the 50s and the 70s impacted on choices made by some WRCs or by some of their members. These are sisters that, following the analysis proposed by Claudia Touris (2010) are part of the "third world" constellation of the time. Compared to the Movement of Priests for the Third World (MSTM), particularly strong in Argentina, religious women adopted a more horizontal ecclesial model and less public exposure.

The democratic and political fragility of several countries in the region led to situations where some sisters were threatened and persecuted, or even killed. Nine nuns were raped and murdered in a Latin American country for their faith based socio-political commitments: ITA Ford and Maura Clarke (Maryknoll sisters), Dorothy Kazel (Ursuline), Jean Donovan (lay missionary of Cleveland Diocese) – the four of them murdered in El Salvador, 1980-; Dorothy Stang -from the Ohio Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur -killed in Brazil, 2005; Teresa de Jesús and Ramirez Vargas, murdered in Colombia, 1989-; Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet French sisters assassinated in Buenos Aires in 1976. These sisters' commitment and martyrdom have become increasingly well-known through academic studies (Temporelli 2014; Viñoles 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> This hypothesis is supported in a pioneering study undertaken by the Latin American Conference of Religious people (CLAR), led by historian Ana María Bidegain (CLAR 2003). The study reconstructed the path of WRL from 1959 to 1999 using a participatory research method. She collected testimonies of women religious from 160 WRCs present in various Latin American countries. Many of these WRCs at the time of the CLAR's study had sisters living among the poor. They tended to have a very positive assessment of the experience.

Their biographies illuminate a strong concept: the spirituality of resistance, characterized by being mystical, prophetic and incarnated. A spirituality that responds to the needs of the context, which favors inter-congregational, inter-generational and ecumenical life from the praxis of life, justice and peace (Temporelli 2014:344).

## **2. Women Religious' Trends**

### **2.1. Evolution in Sisters' numbers since 1970**

By 1970 in several Latin American countries both the number of RCs and the number of religious sisters had reached their peaks. Since then, within a variety of trends by country, the overall number of sisters in the region tended to remain stable, to latter decrease in the present millennium. The declining numbers evidence a crisis shared with WRCs of most Western countries (Trescents 2017; Johnson, Wittberg and Gautier 2014; Stark and Finke 2000; Wittberg 1994). Compared with consecrated celibate males (diocesan priests, religious order priests, and brothers) sister's decline has been more pronounced. At present in some countries, the significant drop-off in religious sisters (who had always outnumbered by far their peer male) led to almost equalize the numbers of consecrated men and women; an unthinkable scenario a few decades ago. In turn, at a lower rate than up to the 1970s, new RCs continued to arrive or were founded in the continent.

Comparing numerical celibate consecrated people's trends with Latin American demographic evolution it is noticeable that the curves tend to increasingly separate. The *Aparecida Document*<sup>8</sup> analyzes both trends, highlighting that on average, the increase of the clergy, and especially of women religious, is falling behind population growth in our region (Aparecida Document 2007: 100). In footnote number 41, the document provides numerical precisions grounded on the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*: "Whereas the Latin American population grew almost 80% in the 1974-2000 period, priests grew by 44.1%, and women religious by only 8%." The *Aparecida Document* deals extensively with a vast range of Latin American issues, however from a pastoral point of view, it is worth noticing that it does not intend to explain the differences between priests and religious women. As a matter of fact, the

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<sup>8</sup> Final Document of the V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (Aparecida Document), 2007

Document addresses in a very marginal manner the situation and the achievements of religious women (Lecaros 2021).

Table 1 presents the number of women religious from 1970 to 2017 for the overall Latin American region, for its two sub-regions: Central America and South America, and for selected countries. The eight countries selected illustrate three different trends identified in the region. Starting the analysis in 1970 responds to two reasons. On the one hand accurate worldwide data reported in the Statistical Yearbook of the Church by *The Agenzia Della Congregazione per L'Evangelizzazione Dei Popoli* (Agenzia Fides) starts at that point in time. On the other hand, as stated in the first section, most Latin America countries were receiving an important flow of RCs founded mostly in Europe until the sixties. The flow continued afterwards, but at a much slower rate.

**Table 1. Women religious in Latin America. 1970-2017**

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017	Dif 2000- 1970	Dif 2017- 2000	Dif 2017- 2010	Dif 2017- 1970
Argentina	12,823	12,446	11,289	9,829	8,215	7,076	-2,994	-2,753	-1,139	-5,747
Uruguay	2,068	1,621	1,642	1,281	879	706	-787	-575	-173	-1,362
Brazil	36,786	37,024	36,532	35,365	31,109	26,947	-1,421	-8,418	-4,162	-9,839
Colombia	17,699	17,654	19,109	17,347	15,462	13,251	-352	-4096	-2,211	-4,448
Chile	5,838	5,088	6,909	5,574	4,503	3,723	-264	-1851	-780	-2,135
Ecuador	3,073	4,151	4,265	4,894	5,305	4,551	1,821	-343	-754	1,478
Mexico	22,859	25,598	25,783	29,050	28,288	25,661	6,191	-3,389	-2,627	2,802
Peru	4,429	4,732	5,204	5,537	5,740	5,386	1,108	-151	-354	957
Central America and the Caribbean	32,691	30,080	36,333	41,051	43,374	39,773	8,360	-1,278	-3,601	7,082
South America	89,476	89,675	93,098	88,375	78,839	67,838	-1,101	-20,537	-11001	-21,638



Overall Latin American Region	122,167	119,755	129,431	129,426	122,213	107,611	7,259	-21,815	-14,602	-14,556
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Source: Own elaboration based on data from the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae. Statistical Yearbook*

In the last five decades (1970 to 2017) in Latin America there was a net loss of 14,556 religious sisters. By 2000, in the overall countries of the region, however, there were 7,259 more sisters than in 1970. This figure indicates that Latin American sisters' falling numbers tends to concentrate in the present century.

Considering the two subregions: Central America (including the Caribbean) on the one hand, and South America on the other, the downturns in South America are starker. In the latter between 1970 and 2017 the number of sisters decreased by 21,638. In contrast, in Central America in the same period there was a net increase of 7,082 religious.<sup>9</sup> However, in this last sub-region with the beginning of the new millennium (during the 2000-2017 period) there's been 1,278 drop-off sisters. Comparing the trends in both subregions, it comes out that South American countries experienced relatively steady levels until the beginning of the new century where numbers began to decline. In Central America, in contrast, there was an increase in religious sisters until 2010, but since then numbers start also to decline, and both subregions follow a same trend.

Analyzing sisters' flow by country, different trends emerge that can be grouped into three patterns: 1. Countries in which since 1970, the number of religious women has been steadily decreasing. 2. Countries that maintained relatively steady levels of sisters between 1970 and the beginning of the present millennium, but since then decreased their numbers. 3. Countries that in the last decades of the twentieth century increased the number of sisters, but at the beginning of the new century have been experiencing progressive losses. The common pattern in all three groups is that in the present millennium the number of their religious sisters decreased.

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<sup>9</sup> The figures we present throughout the writing account for net changes over given periods. It needs to be acknowledged that people leave RCs very frequently (after short or long periods of membership), giving the flows a dynamic that net numbers overlook.

In Table 1 we selected countries illustrating each of the three patterns. Argentina and Uruguay (corresponding to the first pattern), experience declining numbers since 1970 with reductions that accelerate their pace in the last two decades.<sup>10</sup> Countries from this first group follow the European and North American trend of decline.

Brazil, Colombia and Chile<sup>11</sup> illustrate the trend of the second pattern. They record relatively stable numbers that only at the beginning of the new millennium are beginning to decline. Brazil, the Latin American country that has always concentrated the largest number of religious sisters, with its net loss of almost 8,500 sisters in the new millennium, is the country that has contributed the most to the overall Latin American decline.

Ecuador, México and Peru illustrate the third pattern. These countries recorded religious growth between 1970 and 2000, with declines in the current millennium, particularly since 2010. México, home to more Catholics sisters than any other country aside from Brazil, influences the whole region overpowering the regional averages for Central America. Mexican sisters' figures increased by about 6,200 from 1970 to 2000; from 2000 to 2017 it loses 3,389 sisters, which in the whole period under study (1970-2017), despite the decline in recent decades, ends up showing a positive balance. The pattern of this third group of countries corresponds to some South American countries: Bolivia, Venezuela, Paraguay and most of Central American.

It is worth stressing once again that these three patterns have the same ending: declining numbers since the early 2000s. This decrease in numbers between 2000 and 2017 is the trend followed by all South American countries, and by Central American and Caribbean countries, except for Honduras (+284), Cuba (+43), Dominican Republic (+1,592) and Haiti (+985). Trends in these four countries need to be further studied; possibly in some of them the increase is due to the arrival of sisters from abroad on humanitarian mission.

In depth studies need to be undertaken at each country level to better understand the many factors that may explain their patterns. Our figures may help to raise questions, and to

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<sup>10</sup> Costa Rica and Puerto Rico follow also this pattern, not so neatly as Argentina and Uruguay. Puerto Rico, a US protectorate, had 1,641 sisters in 1970, and has moderately, but consistently been decreasing numbers over the decades to end up with about 800 in present times. Costa Rica had 1503 sisters in 1970, and lost almost half of them by 1980; since then, numbers remained pretty stable.

<sup>11</sup> Chile follows this second pattern. However, it is interesting to point out the 1990's figures indicating an important increase after a drop off in the eighties; a decade latter -in the 2000s- figures go back to the numbers shown in 1970 and 1980. The Statistical Yearbook of the Church indicate that numbers jumped up in 1989, and went back to the 1980's numbers a few years later. We believe that this might indicate a mistake in the reporting (which is not unusual to find in this book), rather than a real increase. However, in depth studies need to be undertaken to understand fluctuations over time, since it might indicate substantive changes that need to be understood.

frame hypothesis. In the next paragraphs we offer some preliminary arguments that may help to understand the flows.

Two types of explanation may help understand those patterns. On the one hand, the trend may be justified by changes in the feminine condition which are common to all countries although those changes may have occurred at different moments. Women have thus found new ways of realizing their professional aspirations without becoming sisters. Lay women have become empowered. Besides, single women are not anymore stigmatized as they used to be. This phenomenon has happened earlier in more urbanized countries like Argentina and Uruguay (countries from the first pattern) and much later in countries from the third pattern, like Peru where until a decade ago, young women from the countryside looked at religious congregations, not only as a spiritual option but also as a way to go to the city and to obtain a university degree (Lecaros, 2017).

On the other hand, different factors, specific to each country, have influenced the number of feminine vocations. The growing proportion of the population becoming evangelical, especially in Central America, in Brazil and in Chile has to be taken into account. It is worth noting that in the Andean countries, the growth in the Evangelical population has come out much later and slower. From this point of view, Mexico remains an exception, the proportion of the Catholic population is much higher than in the rest of the countries, except for Paraguay.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Brazil, in particular, the strong popularity of the Charismatic Renovation could explain some of the tendencies. The spirituality of the movement, with its effervescence and its expressive personal piety, entices members to become leaders in prayer groups or diocesan priests and to shun religious communities, especially apostolic. Most congregations are not very attractive because they tend to offer a lifestyle on the one hand, dominated by silent prayers, in some ways close to the monastic type and on the other hand, deeply involved in social work.

In the case of Chile, the steep fall between 2010 and 2017 may be attributed to the priest Karadima factor and the whole abuse crisis that has precipitated a landslide in the country religious landscape. In 2009, 61% of the Chilean population identified as Catholics whereas they

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<sup>12</sup> See Pew Research Center, Religion in Latin America, November 2014.  
<https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>

were only 38% in 2011. The crisis has had a lasting effect since in 2017, 36% of the population identified as Catholics.<sup>13</sup>

That all three patterns have a same ending: declining numbers in the last two decades, needs also to be deepen in studies at a country level. A common factor may be the passing away of old members which may be indicating the aging configuration of WRL in the last decades.

One of the issues that may be influencing in WRL declining numbers is the increasing awareness of the male governed structure that puts male and women consecrated people in different tracts. While this gender Catholic Church dynamic has for ever been present, during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century it would not trouble neither young women attracted by religious life, nor Catholics in general. We will dedicate the last part of this section to analyze figures that may illuminate our hypothesis. Before that we will compare Latin American WRL flow with other regions.

In the present millennium as repeatedly affirmed, almost all Latin American countries experience declining numbers in WRL. How does this trend compare with that of other regions of the world? To address the question, we compare the evolution of religious sisters in South America, Central America (including the Caribbean), North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. As showed in Table 2 the worldwide overall number of women religious in 2017 was 670,330, that is 130,855 sisters less than in 2000. Europe is the continent that contributed the most, with a decrease of 118,583 sisters. The American continent is second, with a drop-off 61,033 sisters. The largest drop within this continent is in North America (-39,218), followed by South America (-20,537). On the other hand, in Central America and the Caribbean, although there was a slight loss (-1,278), numbers remained stable. In contrast, Asia and Africa experienced important growths (33,101 and 18,984 respectively), increasing also significantly their share in overall worldwide WRL. At present these two continents concentrate 36,3% of overall WRL; this percentage is very close to the European (37%), historically not only the WRC's cradle but its support.

Summing up, the data show, a clear reconfiguration of the WRL map. Latin America, particularly South America, follows the global declining trends in the number of sisters. The overall tendencies in the region are less severe than those confronting the Church in Europe and

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<sup>13</sup> See [https://www.cpi.pe/images/upload/paginaweb/archivo/23/opnac\\_visita\\_papa\\_francisco\\_201802.pdf](https://www.cpi.pe/images/upload/paginaweb/archivo/23/opnac_visita_papa_francisco_201802.pdf)

in North America, but the path is clear. Europe has been the cradle of most RCs and the seat of their governing bodies. The numerical decline in WRL, added to aging members and few new entrants, has implications for the whole dynamics of WRL. The seedbed of vocations in Asia and Africa is currently being reflected in the increasing number of sisters arriving from these regions to Europe and to the American continent, providing the communities with a type of interculturality that did not exist a few decades ago. In Latin America, for example, in the sociodemographic composition of religious communities, European women had a strong weight; native women from each country would also count. At present this composition has changed. Few European sisters are left. The communities are primarily composed of native women; and Asian and African sisters that are slowly beginning to arrive. It is worth highlighting that Asian and African sister are gradually entering the central governing bodies of the RCs challenging a Western style of managing and conceiving power. At present RCs of European origin, with communities and works in Latin American countries, for the first time are governed by Superiors General raised in Asia or Africa. Such is the case of the nuns of the Society of Mary and the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Tarbes.

Several scholars have stressed what they consider the outstanding dynamism of the Latin American Catholic Church, among them, Edward Cleary and Daniel Levine, recognized specialists of the topic (Cleary, 2009, 2013; Levine, 2012). However, it is worth noting that none of these scholars take into account (Cleary does not even mention them) the importance of women religious for the Catholic Church. Based on the same evidences as ours (grounded in the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*), Levine expresses great optimism for the future of the Latin American Church. Truly enough, Levine notices briefly that the number of religious women has been "substantially decreasing" in relation to the growth of the population, however, he immediately ponders how the number of clerical vocations has increased, concluding that in the medium term, the Church will have at its disposal enough staff to carry out its objectives. Although Cleary and Levine have considered and valued the weight and the importance of the laity's involvement, in keeping with the spirit of Vatican II, it is quite remarkable how the traditional bias that equates Church with clergy, has crept into their minds and has driven them to somehow questionable conclusions.

**Table 2 Women Religious by continents.  
Percentual and absolute distribution. 2000-2017**

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>Net difference</b>	<b>Change in %</b>
<b>North America</b>	12.9% 103,560	9.6% 64,342	-39,218	-37.9
<b>South America</b>	11.0% 88,375	10.1% 67,838	-20,537	-23.2
<b>Central America and the Caribbean</b>	5.1% 41,051	5.9% 39,773	-1,278	-3.1
<b>Asia</b>	17.2% 138,195	25.6% 171,296	33,101	24.0
<b>Africa</b>	6.6% 52,583	10.7% 71,567	18,984	36.1
<b>Europe</b>	45.7% 366,326	37.0% 247,743	-118,583	-32.4
<b>Oceania</b>	1.4% 11,095	1.2% 7,771	-3,324	-30.0
<b>Total</b>	100% 801,185	100% 670,330	-130,855	

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae. Statistical Yearbook*

## **2.2. Women religious' trends compared to celibate consecrated men's flows**

This section compares women religious trends with their male peers, celibate consecrated male, for the period 1970-2017. This comparison illustrates one of our hypotheses: the male governed structures of Church have not helped women to find attractiveness in WRL. We do not demonstrate the hypothesis; we only show figures that may help frame a better understanding of religious sisters flows' in the last decades, that may help to raise further research questions.

In the Catholic Church there are many categories for a celibate consecrated life. We will include in our analysis two of them: 1. Members of orders/congregations of active religious life, where women religious are the female option (they are the target of our analysis throughout this article); while male members of religious congregations have the choice between being ordained

as priests (regular order priests) or remain brothers. 2. Diocesan priests; they do not have vows (poverty, obedience and chastity) as members of religious institutes, but according to Canon Law, they have to promise obedience and celibacy to their bishop. We are leaving aside four other alternatives of consecrated celibacy life: members of monasteries (monks and nuns), members of secular institutes, consecrated in associations of the faithful,<sup>14</sup> and, consecrated virgins. According to the official statistics of the Church these four categories account for less than 10% of the overall of consecrated life in the American continent.

In short, our analysis compares women religious trends with the flows in three categories of celibate consecrated men (diocesan priests, regular order priests, and brothers). Our figures account for over 90% of the overall celibate consecrated life in Latin America.

In Latin America, as in all worldwide regions, women religious in the period we are studying (1970-2017) have always outnumbered their male counterparts. However, over time the gap tended to narrow. A closer analysis identifies nuanced trends.

Latin America as a whole, between 1970-2017, experienced steadily growth in the number of consecrated men. This trend was driven by a significant increase in diocesan priests, who more than doubled their numbers (from 22,771 to 53,268). At present women religious are still more than their peer male. However, while in 1970 they more than doubled male's numbers (122,167 vs 55,194), at the present time, the ratio women/male is 1.3; that is, there is 1.3 religious sister for each consecrated men. Current figures are 107,611 and 85,576 respectively (see Table 3). At present, South American gap is slightly smaller than in Central America. Trends in these two subregions are similar as for total males' curve, but differ in women religious' curve. The intense decline in women religious since the 2000s in South America explains the smaller gap compared to Central America. Graphics 1, 2 and 3 illustrate these regional and subregional trends.

We will consider three countries to further the analysis and identify nuances in their trends: Argentina, Brazil and Peru. Each of these countries responds to one of the three patterns identified in the above section. In Argentina the number of religious women was twice as much their peer male (12,823 and 6,511 respectively). This ratio steadily declined, ending at 1.1 in

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<sup>14</sup> Most Secular institutes and associations of the faithful were founded in the twentieth century. Their consecrated members are lay people bounded by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, within a community life. They are dedicated to works of apostolate indicated by the institute itself. In canonical terms they do not constitute institutes of religious life.

2017. Both groups are currently very close in numbers (7,076 women religious and 6,507 consecrated men). It should be noted that throughout the last five decades (1970-2017) the number of consecrated men remained relatively unchanged. Growth experienced by diocesan priests was compensated by declining numbers both in regular order priests and in brothers. In other words, the gap between sisters and their male counterparts has been almost cancelled out by the sisters' constant shrinking numbers. In Brazil as well, by 2017 the gap between men and women were almost zero; as in Argentina there is a 1.1 ratio resulting from 26,947 women religious and 24,199 priests and brothers. The shrinking gap comes however, from a different trend compared to Argentina. It is the result of declining sisters' numbers from the 2000s on, and, contrary to Argentina, it is also the result of the constant growth of diocesan priests. Perú, let us recall, has experienced an increase in women religious when considering the extremes of the period under study (1970-2017); this trend hides moderate declines since the 2010s, marking a turning point in the curve. At the same time, the country experienced steadily and constant increase in males' figures in the overall period (1970-2017). As a result of these two trends, the gap between women religious and their counterpart males remained relatively stable throughout the period. Graphics 4, 5, and 6 illustrate Argentina's, Brazil's, and Peru's trends described.

A noticeable issue of the trends described above is the flow of consecrated males' curves. Priests and brothers are not the focus of our study, but their flows say something about Church's dynamics that may help understand WRL pattern. Brothers' curve has been pretty stable, with numbers far lower than priests' figures. Regular order priests' curve remained also pretty unchanged over time with figures outnumbering brothers' numbers. Diocesan priests' trend, in contrast, grew at an important speed. In 1970s both in overall Latin America, and in its two subregions, diocesan and regular order priests had similar figures. By 2017, in contrast, the gap in their figures had dramatically grown due to diocesan priests' increase. The three countries, Argentina, Brazil, and Peru illustrate this trend with interesting nuances. In Argentina total consecrated male's curve remained stable during the five decades we are considering, as a result of diocesan priests growing while regular order priests and brothers' curves declining. In Brazil and in Peru, in contrast, male's curve experienced constant and progressive growth driven by diocesan priests increase. Peru, one of the few countries with an important presence of regular order priests that by 1970s outnumbered diocesan priests, by 2000 inverted the trend. Regular order priests' figures remained stable while those of diocesan priests grew. To sum up, Latin



America in its overall numbers confirm the pattern of diocesan priests growth over brothers and regular order priests. These two latter groups had relatively stable numbers from 1970 to 2017. Graphic 1 to 6 illustrate these trends. To conclude, it may be argued that while religious life (both male and female) is losing attractiveness, diocesan priesthood remains appealing.

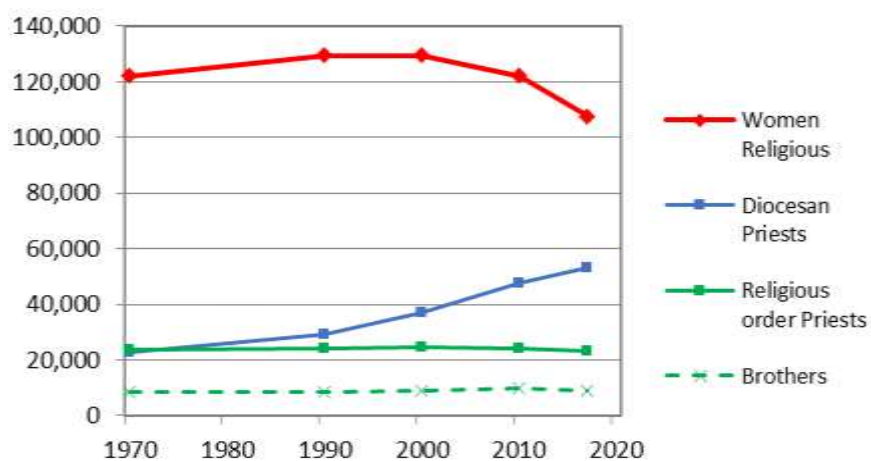
**Table 3 Consecrated celibate men and women. Latin America. 1970-2017**

	Year	Women Religious	Diocesan Priests	Religious Priests	Total Priests	Brothers	Total Celibate Males	Ratio Women R/ Celibate Males
Argentina	1970	12,823	2,630	2,809	5,439	1,072	6,511	2.0
	1990	11,289	3,130	2,623	5,753	1,084	6,837	1.7
	2000	9,829	3,545	2,243	5,788	822	6,610	1.5
	2010	8,215	3,997	1,919	5,916	787	6,703	1.2
	2017	7,076	4,009	1,739	5,748	759	6,507	1.1
Brazil	1970	36,786	5,021	7,451	12,472	2,325	14,797	2.5
	1990	36,532	6,704	7,574	14,278	2,316	16,594	2.2
	2000	35,365	8,892	7,305	16,197	2,421	18,618	1.9
	2010	31,109	12,775	7,574	20,349	2,761	23,110	1.3
	2017	26,947	14,876	7,158	22,034	2,165	24,199	1.1
Peru	1970	4,429	859	1,409	2,268	469	2,737	1.6
	1990	5,204	981	1,367	2,348	476	2,824	1.8
	2000	5,537	1,340	1,371	2,711	639	3,350	1.7
	2010	5,740	1,887	1,298	3,185	605	3,790	1.5
	2017	5,386	2,117	1,267	3,384	395	3,779	1.4
South America	1970	89,476	14,724	18,371	33,095	6,802	39,897	2.2
	1990	93,098	18,274	18,169	36,443	6,246	42,689	2.2
	2000	88,375	23,260	17,641	40,901	6,398	47,299	1.9
	2010	78,839	30,818	17,456	48,274	6,951	55,225	1.4
	2017	67,838	34,395	16,457	50,852	5,988	56,840	1.2
Central Am and the Caribbean	1970	32,691	8,047	5,382	13,429	1,868	15,297	2.1
	1990	36,333	10,735	6,194	16,929	2,416	19,345	1.9
	2000	41,051	13,710	6,822	20,532	2,354	22,886	1.8
	2010	43,374	16,987	6,873	23,860	3,133	26,993	1.6
	2017	39,773	18,873	6,827	25,700	3,036	28,736	1.4
Total Latin America	1970	122,167	22,771	23,753	46,524	8,670	55,194	2.2
	1990	129,431	29,009	24,363	53,372	8,662	62,034	2.1
	2000	129,426	36,970	24,463	61,433	8,752	70,185	1.8
	2010	122,213	47,805	24,329	72,134	10,084	82,218	1.5
	2017	107,611	53,268	23,284	76,552	9,024	85,576	1.3

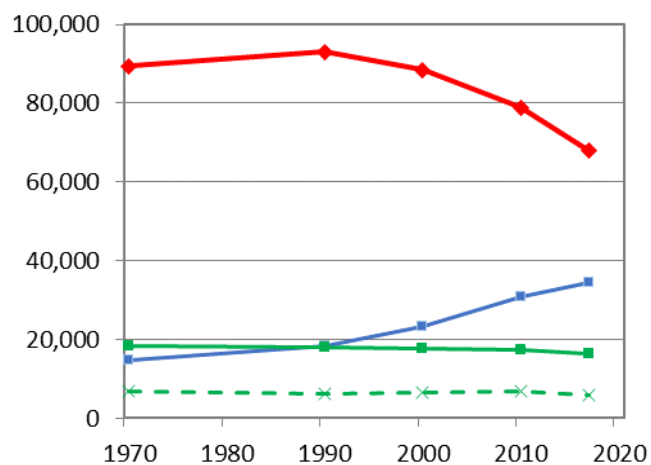
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae. Statistical Yearbook*

**Graphics 1 to 6** Consecrated celibate men and women. 1970-2017. Latin America

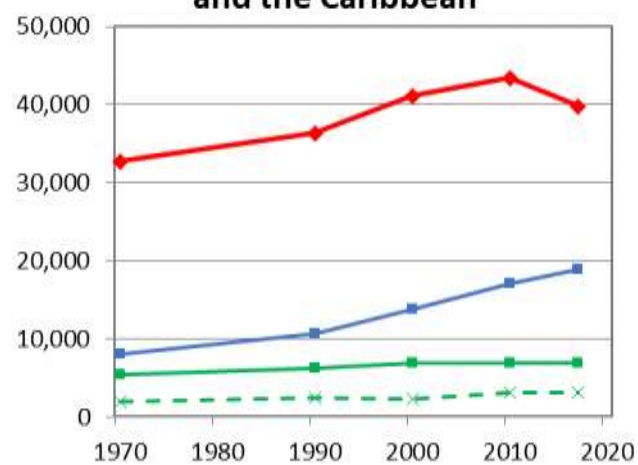
**1.TOTAL Latin America**

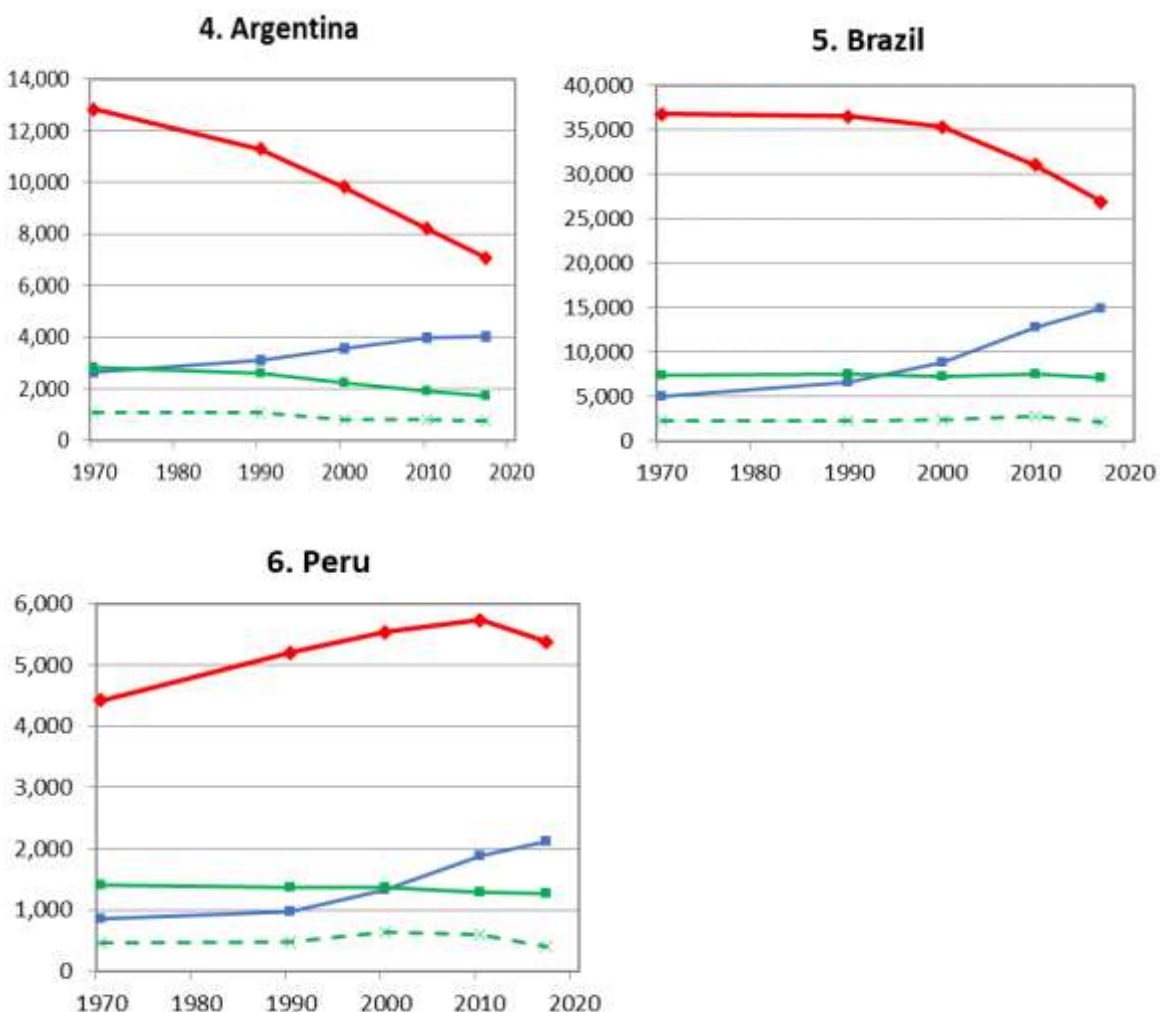


**2.South America**



**3.Central America and the Caribbean**





Source: Own elaboration based on data from the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae. Statistical Yearbook*

How to understand the considerable Latin American decline in women religious? How can we explain the opposite trends in women religious' and priests' curves? Why does priesthood continue to attract members while WRL loses appeal? Several factors are combining to make up for this pattern.

One of the factors that we believe is most associated with the pattern and explains it, refers to how power is structured within the Catholic Church. At present women, by the mere fact of being women, continue to be excluded from the priesthood and from spaces of power (they cannot be at the head of a diocese, they do not vote in key meetings: for the election of

Popes, in synods of bishops, etc...). The Catholic Church hierarchy, which is male, as a body control, interferences in various ways in WRL. The persistent patriarchy in the Catholic Church, based on an openly exclusionary gender dynamic, is unacceptable to the Western social conscience of the 21st century. Many sisters find it difficult to cope with this male control; they find it hard to make sense in belonging to a Church framed in gender inequality dynamics. This may be the reason, we believe, many women religious end up abandoning their life choice; it also makes it less attractive for new members to join.

Let's dig a little deeper. The exercise of power in the Church nourishes, creates and determines a clericalist functioning and culture. Despite Second Vatican Council reforms, the clericalist culture has proven to be extremely resistant to change, and both symbolically and concretely, there is still an idealized image of the clergy; the clergy themselves have this idealized image. This small religious elite - the clergy - composed only of educated men, that monopolize the administration of power, of the sacraments, are conceived as having gone through a spiritual "ontological change" as a result of their consecration (Barrionuevo Duran 2021). This belief maintains priesthood still attractive for men. But given the increasing gender consciousness of the twenty-first century, the belief that supports clericalism, conflict or directly expels women who wish to have a consecrated life within the Church.

Clergy Sexual abuse scandals have exposed negative features of clericalist culture. Sexual abuse (and/or of power and conscience) perpetuated against women religious – increasingly exposed in the mass media - may be the tip of the iceberg. They may help to unmask, and hopefully change how power is exercised in the Church.

Another issue that may help understand the trends described above relates to the territorial strategy of the Catholic Church hierarchy in response to increasing believers' deinstitutionalization. They tended to strengthen the territorial structures of the Church through the creation of ecclesial structures, such as parishes, chapels and sanctuaries. This, that has been a worldwide strategy, has been particularly strong in Latin American countries. In Brazil, for example, the institutional and clerical strengthening of the Catholic Church implied a strong investment at various levels,<sup>15</sup> particularly in supporting diocesan clergy. This policy however, failed to stop the growing decline in Catholics (Steil & Toniol, 2013). Studies carried out in

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<sup>15</sup> In Brazil, from the mid-1990s to 2012, the number of parishes rose from 7,786 to 10,720; an increase of almost 40% in 16 years (Steil & Toniol, 2013, 233)

Argentina show a similar situation: a remarkable growth of places of worship in recent decades (Suárez & Olszanowski forthcoming);<sup>16</sup> strategy that currently runs into an insurmountable limit since it was accompanied by little clerical growth, which recently decreased, as described in the above paragraphs.

During the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the dignity of priesthood, in general, was highly emphasize. John Paul II asked each diocese to establish a seminary and incited the faithful to pray for vocations. Benedict XVI dedicated an entire year for priests, placed under the patronage of Jean Vianey, priests' patron saint, in 2009-2010. In countries, such as Peru, where the urbanization started late, the Catholic Church was overflowed by the arrival of migrants from the countryside, specially, in suburban areas of Lima and some of the big cities. In spite of the financial efforts accomplished by foreign priests, it did not succeed in attending the spiritual requirements of the inhabitants. Some parishes had to take care of 150 000 inhabitants (Lecaros, 2015). In the long run, this situation produced a growing number of people taking distance from the Church, a portion of them joining Evangelical churches. If there was a peak in vocations for priesthood, it has by now flattened.

Deeper research at each country level is needed to better understand the many questions that the trends show in our figures raise. The main question remains: why celibate consecrated life is becoming less attractive at a rate more rapid for women than for men?

### **3. Present times of WRL**

Multiple facets make up the current WRL crisis. Scholars have pointed at aspects such as the increasing estrangement and arduous compatibility between the religious life model and today's society dominant paradigm (Trescents 2017; O'Murchu 2005); lack of RC's strategic vision and of proper planning to adapt to changing times (Wittberg 2009). Another aspect, specifically for women religious' situation, refers to what has been argued in the preceding section: the persistent patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church that continues to make women religious invisible (Bidegain 2014; Lecaros 2017; Suárez 2020b). WRL crisis is evident in their

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<sup>16</sup> In Argentina, the number of parishes, chapels and sanctuaries went from 4,636 places of worship in 1961 to 13,708 in 2019. They tripled (Suárez & Olszanowski forthcoming).

continuing declining numbers, aging members, few new entrants, poor retention, and exit of those who find no more meaning to the life project offered by their communities. In this section we delve into two aspects that contribute to shaping and understanding the WRL current crisis: the management of their works, and the search of spiritual renewal digging in their foundational sources while confronting with the new theological approaches. The first aspect, the management of the works, confronts them with organizational and logistical issues; the second theme refers to theological issues, which, we argue, have been -and continue to be- constituent ingredients of their crisis.

### **3.1. Management of their "works" with fewer sisters**

Most WRCs currently find themselves overwhelmed having to deal with "works" that respond to their past but not to their present situation. The "works" they currently manage and staff demand much of their time and energy which, in their present situation, in the context of fewer sisters and an aging population, ends up being an increasing burden. Many WRCs are in the mid of a decision-making process on how to deal with responsibilities they can't keep affording, deliberating on the direction they should take, and what the community stands for. This is compounded by a growing state regulation that makes the administration more complex and takes up a significant amount of young sisters' time.

Recall what was stated in the first section: most RCs arrived or were created in the different Latin American countries between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century. Two circumstances favored their rapid growth. They were welcomed in the various countries. The states supported their work in schools (often facilitating the acquisition of real estate), in nursing homes, their work in hospitals, etc. Since many of them came from Europe, they were considered to be bearers and promoters of culture, which favored their social legitimacy. On the other hand, the RCs usually arrived during the period of expansion of their institutes within a few decades of their foundation. New members joined the RCs in the new continent, strengthening the consolidation of their presence in each country. In this context, many RCs projected a growth horizon that led them to broaden their goals, acquiring works, especially schools, and to invest time, resources, and energy in the improvement of what they were doing.

At some point in the second half of the last century, from a sociology of organizations perspective applied to congregations, most RCs entered a breakdown period (Cada et al. 1979). This phase, in which one of its first manifestations is membership decline, led to a rethinking of their goals as Catholic organizations. For some of them, the breakdown period was/is gradual, while for others it has been more drastic forcing them to close long-established works and even abandon their presence in the American continent. Going through a breakdown period, within a RC generates tensions, disorientation, and dissatisfaction. Individual and collective stress levels can grow rapidly as decisions on their works must be taken. Basically, the question about the works is a question about the very identity of the congregation.

There is little accurate data on the number of RCs' works. The Conferences of religious men and women in each country have a very precarious record, or no record at all. Therefore, it is impossible in this writing to make assertions based on data. What is evident in the Church Statistical Yearbooks of each country is a reduction in the number of houses (communities) over time. Many of these communities are home-based on a RC work; it is therefore possible to argue that a process of detachment from their works is underway. These are works (schools in general), that the congregation leaves in the hands of lay people, in what they understand as "shared missions"; that is, with lay people who share the spirituality of their charism. It is generally a step prior to a given RC complete withdrawal from one or all of its works. They experience the "shared mission" first with enthusiasm for the involvement and work with lay people who share their charism; but then they go through the mourning of the work from which they are detaching themselves. It may also happen that the school is acquired/bought by other groups, not necessarily related to their spirituality. In Latin America, the increasing number of schools in the hands of new conservative groups (Legionaries, Soladitium, Opus Dei, FASTA, etc.), were often previously in the hands of religious congregations.

### **3.2 The conflicting process of finding inspiration by going back to the sources**

The Second Vatican Council (1965) promoted a global renewal of the Catholic Church, it encouraged dialogue with the world and a reformulation of ecclesiological understanding.

Through one of its Documents, *Perfectae Caritatis*,<sup>17</sup> it called for religious life renovation, inviting RCs to better meet contemporary needs, by rethinking their ministry through a process of *aggiornamento*.<sup>18</sup> Within the framework of this "renewal" many RCs made community worship more flexible, for example, in the recitation of the liturgy of the hours. The use of the habit was simplified or even suppressed. Several RCs, as we have already mentioned, opened up to "shared missions" of their works with lay people, or, under the impulse of the "preferential option for the poor", opened up small communities in poor areas.

The *aggiornamento* called for in *Perfectae Caritatis*, also invited RCs to return to their sources. *Ressourcement*, as understood, involved a "return to the authoritative sources" of Christian faith, for the purpose of rediscovering their truth and meaning in order to meet the critical challenges of present times. RCs should, therefore, reread their founders, taking up the inspiration of the founding charism. This method was at the basis of the new constitutions that all of them had to rewrite after the Council. It was a rich process. According to various testimonies, it helped them to value commitment at the RC's founding period. We argue that it might be however, a conflicting process if contextualization of the founders' understanding of WRL is not accurately done.

*Ressourcement*, as argued by Juan Bautista Duhau (2021) is elaborated on the basis of texts written long ago, according to hagiographic genre norms of the time, which imply an idealization of the saints, particularly of the founders, as individuals directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. The process often led to the adulation of founders who are assimilated during their lifetime to heroes.<sup>19</sup> The process brought the RCs back to their founding period, confronting

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<sup>17</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* recommendations to face RC renewal are: a return to the Gospel; a return to the foundational charism; greater participation of the congregations to the life of the Church; openness to the "signs of the times"; spiritual renewal; and lifestyles adaptation to the needs of the apostolate, the cultural context, and the economic and social circumstances (Quiñones 1999). For the full Document See [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html)

<sup>18</sup> *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word. It is understood as adaptation to the changed conditions of the contemporary world

<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, RCs tend to give a central role to the person they recognize as their founder. The life of RCs to a greater or lesser extent revolves around what they consider to be the exemplary life of their founder, his or her "charism" and vision. Founders are credited with having undergone experiences of radical transformation, which can usually be pinpointed to an event or series of events; these are perceived and symbolically constructed as an abrupt change in their identity and as a timeless moment in which a vision or dream is received (Cada et al., 1979). In order to leave no doubt about the exemplarity of the founder's life, it is usually processed that he/she be declared a "saint" by the ecclesial hierarchy. Achieving this recognition, the highest within the Catholic Church, is read as a sign of legitimacy for the congregation and its works (schools, asylums, etc.) inspired by "such an exemplary" person (Suárez 2020a).



them with an ecclesiology and theology - moral, of the body, of the vows, etc. - embraced by their founders, which does little to help them in their present situation. This may be conflicting in some points. How to reinterpret a founder who, in accordance with the ideas of the nineteenth/early twentieth century, understood the Church as a perfect society governed by a male clerical elite to which only obedience was due? How to identify with founders who conceived religious life as a state of perfection; and the internal dynamics of religious life based on an iron discipline? How to reinterpret the vows when the founder himself justified the need for an unquestionable obedience to authority (synonymous with obedience to God), for radical poverty that left the religious at the mercy of the maintenance provided by the congregation, and for a chastity based on banishing the affections by punishing the body, and embracing suffering as a way of perfection? Documents from the founding period embedded in these ideas, rather than helping them, may possibly disorient and contribute to their crisis of meaning.

The theological and ecclesiological approaches that the RCs find in seeking inspiration in their founders, contrast and conflict with new pastoral theological approaches developed recently. Feminist theologies are of particular importance to the WRL. These approaches have been complemented by the contributions of Indian theology, eco-feminist theology, and political theology, with growing resonance since the 1990s in pastoral academic spaces in Latin America. They have been shaping a new theological vision that deeply questions the subjectivity of women who embrace RL. They increasingly underline the senselessness of Catholic Church structures, that continue to place women in second place compared to men. These approaches have also led women religious to find their own spaces, at the ecclesial margins, finding their own way to worship and to work on their social commitments.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article delved into issues that shape the current crisis in Latin American WRL. First issue: the decline in the number of women religious. We analyzed how the evolution of sisters in the Latin American countries responds to three different patterns concluding all of them with decreasing numbers at the beginning of the new millennium. Second: the persistent clerical culture that permeates the Church's dynamics. Women religious are increasingly experiencing a crisis of meaning as they attempt to find their way in a Church governed by men. Third: the painful process of dealing with works founded during the RCs' period of expansion, but that no

longer express their present. A loss of mission and identity accompanies this process. Fourth: the ecclesiological and theological approaches prevailing in the foundational period that shaped each congregation, and no longer inspire their present.

The nineteenth century ministries of teaching, nursing, and social work continue to predominate in many Latin American religious communities, and they are still contributing to strengthen society and Catholic institutions. However, RCs are in the process of understanding how to address the new set of needs within both Latin American societies and the Church. They are doing so while balancing their own scarce resources, leaving, unfortunately, many valuable social projects unattended, specially, in the education field where they used to compensate weak public institutions. Given this scenario, new research questions may be: What happens to the works left behind by RCs? Who takes charge? Do conservative groups, that seem to be growing in Latin America, step on these works? If not in their works, where is WRL finding new vitality? How do women religious understand and make sense of their future?

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