

# Catholic Extension sisters graduate from college

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



More than 10 years ago, Catholic Extension Society partnered with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to create the U.S.-Latin American Sisters Exchange Program.

Since then, 150 religious sisters have completed their university degrees while working across the country in ministry. This May, 44 sisters completed the program with three of those sisters working in Arkansas.

Sister Maria del Refugio Caldera, Sister Ana Lilia Mares and local superior Sister Ana Luisa Chavez arrived at St. Mary Church in Batesville and St. Cecilia Church in Newport in the spring of 2021.

The three sisters, members of the Catholic Teachers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Maestras Católicas del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus), earned master's degrees in integrated studies with focus areas in human services and pastoral care from St. Mary University of Minnesota in May.

Father Jon Miskin, pastor of St. Mary Church in Batesville and St. Cecilia Church in Newport, said the sisters graduated through the Extension program after doing mission work in Batesville and Newport. Father Miskin said the sisters will continue serving the two communities.

"Their mission continues in the parishes here in Batesville and Newport to catechize and

empower leaders in our communities to share in the ministerial work in the parishes,” he said. “They have been instrumental in uniting the parish, especially between the Anglo and Hispanic communities. The grant we received from Catholic Extension is for five years. (The sisters) began their ministry in January of 2021 and will conclude in January of 2026. We are currently unsure of what the sisters will be doing next. Much of that depends on their congregation and where they will be assigned.”

The sisters have been intimately involved with nearly every aspect of a parish’s livelihood.

One of those aspects is music ministry. Sister Ana Luisa directs the Spanish choir in Batesville and coordinates with the English director for bilingual services. She also directs the bilingual choir in Newport. Sister Ana Luisa and Sister Maria also teach guitar lessons to anyone interested in learning. Sister Maria also directs the youth choir that plays for bilingual services and on Wednesdays.

The sisters have also been involved with catechesis. Sister Ana Lilia teaches adult catechesis in Spanish and has formed and directed a group of catechists for baptismal preparation classes. Additionally, Sister Ana Lilia formed and directed the RCIA programs in Spanish in Batesville and Newport, while Sister Ana Luisa and Sister Maria helped teach these classes on a rotating schedule.

The sisters also assisted in coordinating wedding preparations. Sister Ana Luisa helped direct the parishes’ PRE programs, with a particular focus on curriculum, formation of catechists who meet monthly and formation of parents with children receiving sacraments.

The sisters have also been involved in youth ministry, especially Sister Maria, who has served as the youth minister for both parishes and has led the youth groups for the past three years.

Father Miskin said the sisters do plenty of other things in the parish, too.

“They sit on our parish council, are available for counseling and share their devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus through guiding families in a consecration of their homes to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to name a few,” Father Miskin said. “Not to mention their invaluable witness as consecrated women in service to God and the Church. Simply, their presence in the community is a source of comfort and grace, helping to unify our parish and offer support to individuals in the community.”

Father Miskin said the sisters have also helped create a legacy that will last long after they leave by empowering parishioners to fill in the roles that they leave behind.

“Amidst all this ministry and activity, the sisters are also helping to call and form members of our community to take on these roles they are doing,” Father Miskin said. “For example, Sister Ana Lilia has helped to form and empower a member of our parish to direct the RCIA program so that when the (Catholic) Extension contract ends, the parish is able to continue to the good ministry the sisters were able to begin. The same goes for each of these areas of ministry.”

When the sisters originally arrived to Batesville and Newport in the spring of 2021, Father Stephen Gadberry, now the pastor of St. Theresa Church in Little Rock, was the pastor. Father Gadberry was thankful for the opportunity to welcome the sisters three years ago.

“Working with religious sisters on such a regular and intimate basis was life-changing, not only

for me personally, but also for the parishioners and, indeed, all the citizens of Independence and Jackson counties,” he said. “The presence of women who’ve been consecrated for the sake of the Gospel is a true testament to Christian discipleship. The response of the parish was phenomenal.”

The Catholic Extension U.S.-Latin American Exchange Program first came to Arkansas in 2014. Sisters also have served in Danville, Dardanelle, Russellville and Springdale while getting their degrees.

From 2014 to 2019, Father Mauricio Carrasco, now the director of spiritual formation at the House of Formation in Little Rock, worked with three sisters at St. Augustine Church in Dardanelle, St. Andrew Church in Danville and St. John Church in Russellville. As the first cohort of sisters, also from the Catholic Teachers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Sister Mary Magdalena Esparza de Lira, Sister María Teresa de Loera López and local superior Sister Mayela Báez Briones would go on to prove the program’s success. Sister María Teresa received an honorary doctorate from Boston College, and Sister Mayela would go on to be a Catholic school principal in Guadalajara, Mexico, after receiving her master’s degree.

The second cohort of sisters, from the Missionaries of Charity of Mary Immaculate, arrived at St. Raphael Church in Springdale in 2019 and completed their mission in June. Sister María Minerva Morales Manuel and Sister Deyanira González Alvarado used the Catholic Extension-developed app, Power BI, to track data and trends in the community and better identify ways to help parishioners. The sisters also helped young Latino parishioners after personal trauma.

“These sisters and their order were perfect for St. Raphael,” said Father John Connell, vicar general for the Diocese of Little Rock and former pastor of St. Raphael in Springdale. “They were focused on their ministry but at the same time everyone could relate to them including English speakers... They were a joy to be around and they were funny.”

## **Carmelites complete work in Conway**

Three members of the Missionary Carmelites of St. Teresa in Conway returned to their motherhouse in Houston in May after concluding its mission that began 13 years ago.

Sisters Aquilina Cari, Francisca Nava and Vidalina Barajas were honored by parishioners at St. Joseph Church at a farewell reception in April.

Over the years, the Carmelites sisters in Conway helped develop leadership training programs for the more than 200 Hispanic parishioners originally from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Columbia, Panama and Peru. Their work will continue under the guidance of Deacon Ramon Argueta, who is the parish’s new Hispanic ministry director.

The Missionary Carmelites of St. Teresa have worked in the diocese for more than 25 years. They will continue working at Holy Spirit Church in Hamburg and Our Lady of the Lake in Lake Village. Pastor Father Joseph Friend said the sisters have trained parishioners to be leaders, while also training altar servers, leading Bible studies and religious formation for children and their parents. They have helped with music ministry, teaching parishioners to play guitar.