



Trinity Washington University/CARA Study: International Sisters in the United States

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“International Sisters in the United States” Research Team

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CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) is a national, non-profit, Georgetown University affiliated research center that conducts social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission: to increase the Church’s self-understanding, to serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers, and to advance scholarly research on religion, particularly Catholicism. CARA has more than 50 years of experience in quality social science research on the Catholic Church.



GHR Foundation improves lives by working toward a just, peaceful, healthy future. Built on faith in entrepreneurial creativity, the foundation accelerates systemic change by nurturing promising new possibilities and partnerships in the areas of global development, education and health. The pioneering design-build legacy of GHR’s founders has guided its philanthropic approach—collaborating with the world’s experts to design and build opportunities for change to take hold.



Trinity Washington University, founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1897, is a Catholic university in Washington, D.C. Trinity was founded as a women’s college and continues its commitment to women today in the College of Arts and Sciences. Trinity also offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs for women and men in the Schools of Business and Graduate Studies; Education; Health and Nursing Professions; and Professional Studies. Trinity continues the legacy of the SNDdeNs with a focus on social justice, ethics and lifelong learning.

Foreword

A Catholic sister who is in the United States but born in another country is not an anomaly. You can count her among more than 4,000 “international sisters” who are currently in the United States for formation, studies or ministry. She and other international sisters, who come from at least 83 countries spread over six continents, embody the global nature and reach of women’s religious life.

Like previous generations, today’s international sisters greatly enrich the Church, society and women’s religious life. You will find international sisters deeply engaged with people from their own ethnic groups. But you will also find international sisters crossing social and cultural boundaries, engaging with others in ways that are often mutually beneficial.

To welcome the stranger is a moral imperative within the Judeo-Christian tradition. International sisters are not exempt from the strains of migration and, in some cases, of separation from their own religious communities for extended periods. Their presence calls us to consider how international sisters have been welcomed and sustained in their vocations and ministries.

Of course, the phenomenon of the “international sister” is not exclusive to the U.S. nor is it new. Far from it. Across the globe sisters have and continue to move across borders in service to the Gospel and in fidelity to the charisms and missions of their respective institutes. But new migration patterns are emerging, and new wine needs new wineskins.

We wish to thank Sister Mary Johnson, SNDdeN and her team of researchers who have brought us the “Trinity Washington University/CARA Study: International Sisters in the United States.” This report summarizes initial findings which will be fleshed out in their forthcoming book.

We share this report with you with hopes that it will help deepen your understanding of women’s religious life and support your work with and on behalf of women religious.

Kathleen Mahoney
Senior Program Officer, Global Development
GHR Foundation
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Introduction

This report is a summary of preliminary findings from the first national study of international women religious in the United States. With support from GHR Foundation, researchers from Trinity Washington University and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University designed and implemented research in order to better understand the experiences and contributions of international sisters in the United States.

Three pieces of research, conducted in 2015 and 2016, provide the basis for this study.



A survey sent to the superiors or leaders of all U.S.-based religious institutes



A survey (in English, French, Spanish and Vietnamese) sent to international sisters in the United States



26 interviews and focus groups with at least 75 international sisters from 30 countries

Terminology used in this study

Woman religious: A Catholic sister or nun

International sister: A woman religious who was born outside the United States and is now in the United States for ministry, study or other reasons

Religious institute: A religious congregation, order, province, region or monastery with separate governance

The following briefly describes how religious institutes in the United States have welcomed and supported international sisters. A fuller description of international sisters follows which includes information about their backgrounds, pathways to and reasons for coming to the United States, their contributions to Church and society, and challenges in coming to a new country and in their lives as women religious.

Religious institutes and international sisters

Religious institutes of women in the United States are diverse: from a small monastery in a rural setting, to a U.S. congregation based in an urban area, to a province of an international order. Institutional diversity is one of the strengths of religious life in the United States and beyond.

Amid these diverse institutions, we note a commonality: the presence of international sisters. There are international institutes whose members have crossed national boundaries for ministry or studies. There are missionary institutes that have sent members to establish new missions in the United States. There are U.S.-based institutes that have welcomed new members who were born outside the United States.

Surveys were sent to 560 institutes with a 60% response rate. Responding institutes included:

- U.S.-based institutes
 - U.S. units of international institutes
 - missionary orders
 - apostolic (active) and contemplative institutes
-
- 1 in 3 are small with fewer than 25 vowed members
 - 1 in 3 are mid-sized with 26 to 100 vowed members
 - 1 in 3 are large with more than 100 vowed members

Key findings from the survey of religious institutes

Eighty-one percent of responding religious institutes have at least one international member.

Smaller institutes are more likely to have a higher proportion of international sisters among their members—sometimes exceeding 50 percent. Mid-sized and large congregations are more likely to have a smaller proportion of international sisters among their members.

For many responding institutes, engagement with international sisters is rooted in the practice of hospitality and fidelity to their own congregational histories as having once migrated to the United States. Over half of responding institutes offer hospitality and support to international sisters who are members of other congregations. The experience has often been mutually enriching with older sisters offering gifts of life experience, wisdom and support, especially in the form of help with the English language, and the younger international sisters sharing their cultures, congregational stories, energy and unique insights as they begin life and work in a new country.

More than half of responding institutes offer hospitality and support to international sisters who are members of other congregations.

Responses from the perspective of the Institutes:



What would be most helpful to improve the lives and ministry of international sisters?



Acculturation training and language acquisition were the most common responses.



What is most needed to help international sisters feel welcome and supported in community?



The mutual need for U.S.-born sisters and international sisters to understand each other's culture.

"Two-way enculturation"

"Understanding on the part of current members regarding intercultural living"

"Preparation on the part of the receiving country unit of the congregation"

Assistance provided to international sisters by institutes:



How religious institutes in the United States take on an international hue:

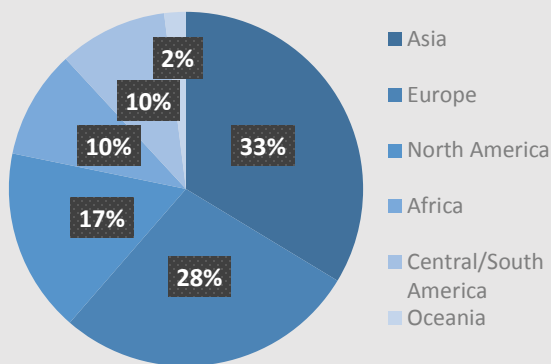
- International institutes whose sisters cross national boundaries for ministry or study
- International institutes with separate national provinces that allow sisters from other provinces to reside temporarily in the United States for ministry or study
- Institutes headquartered and primarily located in other countries who send sisters on a temporary basis to the United States for study or ministry
- Institutes headquartered in other countries that establish houses or provinces for sisters serving as missionaries to the United States for an extended period of time
- U.S. institutes who accept as members women who were originally from other countries but who now live in the United States
- U.S. institutes who accept women from other countries who come to the United States to enter the institute
- U.S. institutes who host sisters from institutes based in other countries on a temporary basis for study or ministry

International sisters

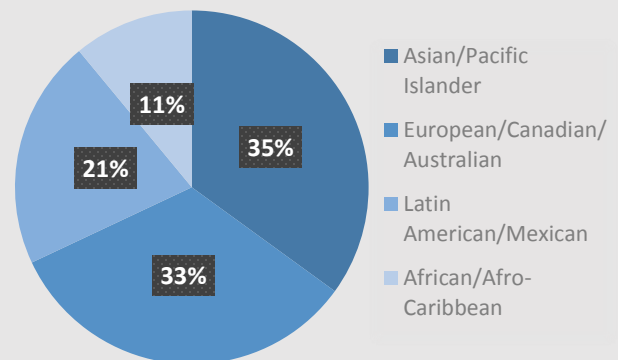
Responding international sisters come from at least 83 countries across six continents.

Asia is the largest sending continent; one in three responding international sisters was born in Asia. Asia is followed by Europe, then North America, Africa, Central/South America and Oceania.

Continent of Origin



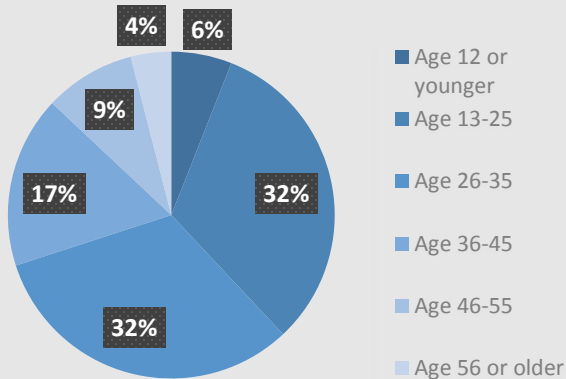
Ethnic/Cultural Background



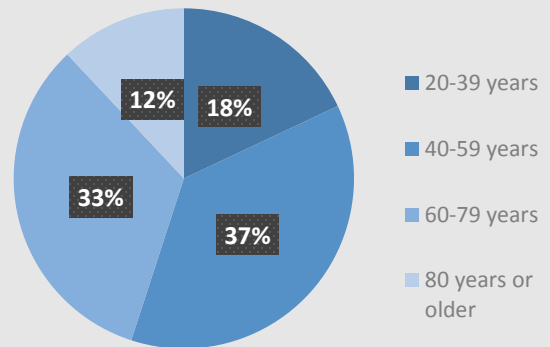
Top sending countries by continent

Asia	Europe	North America	Africa	Central/ South America	Oceania
Vietnam 39% Philippines 24% India 23%	Ireland 41% Poland 18% Italy 11%	Mexico 79% Canada 21%	Nigeria 38% Uganda 16% Kenya 10% Tanzania 10%	Peru 14% Colombia 13% Brazil 12% El Salvador 10%	Australia 79% Samoa 16%

Age at arrival in the United States



Age distribution of international sisters, 2015



Most international sisters came to the United States when they were relatively young. Some came as children and teens when their families migrated and then became sisters. Others came when they were already a member of a religious institute. Most were between the ages of 13 and 35.

A plurality (41 percent) has been in the United States for 15 years or less; one in five (20 percent) has been in the United States for no more than five years.

Average age at time of arrival: 30
Median age at time of arrival: 29

International sisters are typically much younger than U.S.-born sisters.

Average age of international sisters: 58
Average age of U.S.-born sisters: high 70s

Pathways

International sisters:

62% entered religious life outside of the United States and then were sent to the United States for ministry, studies or formation

28% came to the United States before entering religious life

8% transferred from another province into the U.S.-based province of their institute or from another congregation to a U.S. congregation

Pathways to the United States

I entered religious life in this congregation outside the United States, then was sent to the United States for ministry	39%
I entered religious life in this congregation outside the United States, then was sent to the United States for study	13%
I entered religious life in this congregation outside the United States, then was sent to the United States for part of my religious formation	10%
I came to the United States prior to entering religious life	28%
I came to the United States to enter religious life in the United States	2%
I transferred to a U.S. province of my congregation from another province outside of the United States	6%
I transferred to my congregation in the United States from another congregation outside the United States	2%

Fifty-seven percent of respondents were sent to the United States by their superiors for ministry, study or formation. Fifteen percent came because a priest or bishop from the United States requested sisters from their institute for ministry.

Reason/Purpose for Coming to the United States

My superior sent me here for a particular ministry	35%
A priest/bishop from the United States requested sisters from my congregation for ministry	15%
My superior sent me here to study	13%
My superior sent me here for part of my religious formation	9%
I came to the United States with my family	9%
A friend or family member invited me to come	8%
I came to the United States to enter religious life	7%
Other	5%

A significant percentage of international sisters across all ethnic/cultural groups is sent to the United States for ministry. African/Afro-Caribbean sisters are highly represented among international sisters who are sent for studies, followed by Asians. Sisters from the Americas, Europe and Australia are more likely to come to the United States for formation than sisters from other regions.

European/Canadian/ Australian	Latin American/ Mexican	African/ Afro-Caribbean	Asian/ Pacific Islander
I entered outside the United States and came for ministry (36%)	I entered outside the United States and came for ministry (48%)	I entered outside the United States and came for ministry (41%)	I entered outside the United States and came for ministry (35%)
I came to the United States prior to entering religious life (29%)	I came to the United States prior to entering religious life (25%)	I entered outside the United States and came for study (38%)	I came to the United States prior to entering religious life (32%)
I entered outside the United States and came for formation (15%)	I entered outside the United States and came for formation (14%)	I came to the United States prior to entering religious life (12%)	I entered outside the United States and came for study (17%)
I entered outside the United States and came for study (6%)	I entered outside the United States and came for study (6%)	I entered outside the United States and came for formation (3%)	I entered outside the United States and came for formation (5%)

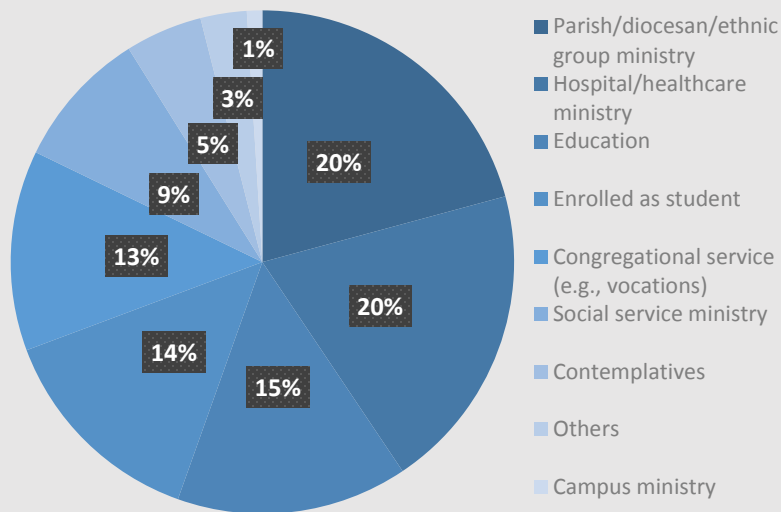
In terms of legal status, more than half of responding international sisters (53 percent) are U.S. citizens. A fourth (25 percent) has legal permanent resident status. The remaining responding international sisters hold visas as non-immigrant religious workers (13 percent) or students (9 percent).

Contributions

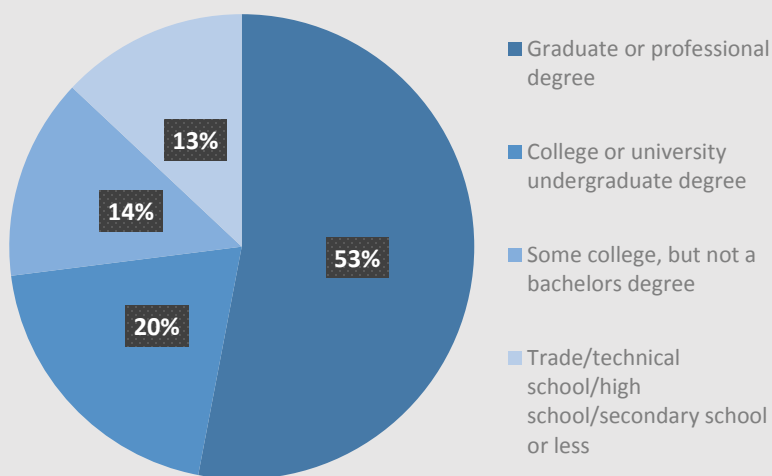
The United States has benefitted for centuries from sisters who have come from other countries. Today is no different.

The range of ministries and places where international sisters serve is remarkable. They are at the core and margins of the society. Some work in major organizations such as the United Nations. Others work in ministries sponsored by their institutes in the fields of health, education and social welfare. Many are tending to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. While serving people from all backgrounds, they often play a special role in the lives of people from their home countries. And the prayers of international nuns in monasteries are prayers for the whole world.

Current ministry among active international sisters



Level of Education



Eighty-five percent of responding international sisters are active (i.e. for purposes of this study, not retired). Two-thirds are involved in ministries such as education or healthcare, etc. Fourteen percent are in studies. Thirteen percent serve their institutes in leadership, vocation and formation work. Contemplatives comprise 5 percent of international sisters.

It is worth noting that responding international sisters are highly educated: more than 7 in 10 have an undergraduate, graduate or professional degree. Their training and education contributes to the quality and efficacy of their ministries.

And as for those who are still in studies: sister students are studying a variety of disciplines in an array of colleges and universities in the United States, taking on their studies while adjusting to a new country. Their presence in classrooms is often the occasion for mutual learning, as U.S.-born students benefit from engagement with sisters who come from other countries with different experiences and from different circumstances.

International sisters as immigrants, long-term visitors and women religious

When international sisters arrived in the United States their experiences were similar to that of many other immigrants or longer-term visitors.

Responding international sisters described the needs they experienced when they arrived in the United States:

8 in 10	housing, education, financial assistance, immigrant or legal services and/or employment
7 in 10	acculturation or orientation
2 in 3	mentoring or support group
6 in 10	accent reduction or learning English
1 in 2	an interpreter or cultural liaison

In terms of meeting needs, responding international sisters report that these needs were largely met, primarily through their own congregations, although parishes/dioceses and other congregations were somewhat helpful for some sisters in securing employment and housing.

"I thought I knew English. But when I came here, the difficulty was the diction was different and I was not understood. And I did not understand them. Luckily one sister was compassionate and said, "OK, every weekend, you come here and we will teach you."

"Monsignor X got us jobs right away in the day care at [parish]."

"Another one of the things was the minister there: the pastor was totally Hispanic and he's been helping us and motivating us."

Because community life is a vital aspect of religious life, housing is particularly important. More than four in five (86 percent) international sisters live with other sisters of their own institutes, while 8 percent live with sisters from other institutes and 6 percent live alone.

The presence of international sisters in a community, whether as members or guests, can be deeply enriching. But as in any relationship, tensions and misunderstandings can arise, often due to issues of language and culture, and by culture we mean the cultures of the nation, of the Church and of religious life. In the deepest sense of the term, sisters who choose to live in these communities are willing to be truly intercultural, and thus they provide a witness to the love and understanding that is required in religious life, the Church and in all our societies as they become more diverse. The U.S. communities, likewise, witness to the international sisters the biblical mandate of welcoming the stranger.

“When I came to their airport, I saw somebody holding [a] sign saying, ‘Welcome Sister X.’ That was Sister A and Sister B. Then I met Sister C and Sister D. They said, ‘We know that you are so lonely and we are here for you. Just make yourself at home. And if you need anything, please let us know.’ So I felt like I was at home.”

More broadly, nearly all responding international sisters were “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with religious life and ministry. In fact, between three-fourths and four-fifths are “very satisfied” with their religious life and their current ministry.

Yet international sisters do report concerns. Many concerns would be shared with other immigrants and related to the physical, emotional and spiritual demands of migration. For example, more than three in ten report feeling at least somewhat tired, overworked, anxious and/or stressed.

But international sisters’ most salient concerns go to the heart of religious life. Five in ten (54 percent) are at least “somewhat” concerned about a sense of belonging, and six in ten (59 percent) are at least somewhat concerned about their ability to participate in the life of their own congregations. In fact, four in ten are “very” concerned about this.

Since you came to the United States, how much of a concern is each of these to you personally?

	“Somewhat” or “Very”	“Very” only
Ability to participate in the life of my congregation	59%	39%
Sense of belonging	54	31
Tiredness	45	10
Overwork	37	11
Anxiety/stress	31	7
Chronic illness	20	6
Weight issues	20	7
Loneliness/isolation	14	4
Depression	12	4
Alcohol or drug use	2	1

“I don’t have my own community here. I am the only one that is here, so I live in a different community with sisters, and they are very nice so far. But I am so used to living with my own community of sisters because community life there is so much different from here and we are so community bonded in terms of prayer life and community life and apostolic life. So the community life is better there.”

Conclusion

Historians tell us of the extraordinary contributions that sisters—including many international sisters—made to the creation of the health care, education, and social service systems of the Catholic Church in the United States. These are enduring places of ministry for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Future historians will undoubtedly tell of new and not-so-new ministries, and the unique perspectives that this generation of international sisters brings to the United States. We can already see that they bring new energy and new insights as they minister in the Church and in this society. In that sense, they bring a new breadth. But they also bring a new depth. In some cases, they continue the presence of their congregations in this country, and, in other cases, they add depth by planting new congregations here, for the sake of multiple ministries, especially evangelization. This new breadth and depth enhances religious life in this country, the Church, and the nation.

We are sensitive to the many challenges that international sisters, along with all newcomers to the United States, face in a new society. Individual sisters told stories of dealing with spiritual and cultural differences—such as different liturgical styles and different food and weather—and with emotional issues, especially loneliness. They spoke of problems with some U.S.-born sisters and laity who did not always welcome them and of problems with some religious superiors and clergy, sometimes from their own country. They had to adjust to a more individualistic society, with more bureaucracy, credentialing and criminal background checks, even involving ministry, a startling change for some of them. They had to adjust to a pluralistic society of many religions and ethnic groups, to a huge Catholic Church with hundreds of dioceses and religious institutes and a variety of parish and diocesan cultures, and to a religious life of multiple ministries and charisms. In the midst of this they share in the multiple political and social challenges facing millions of immigrants in the United States at this time.

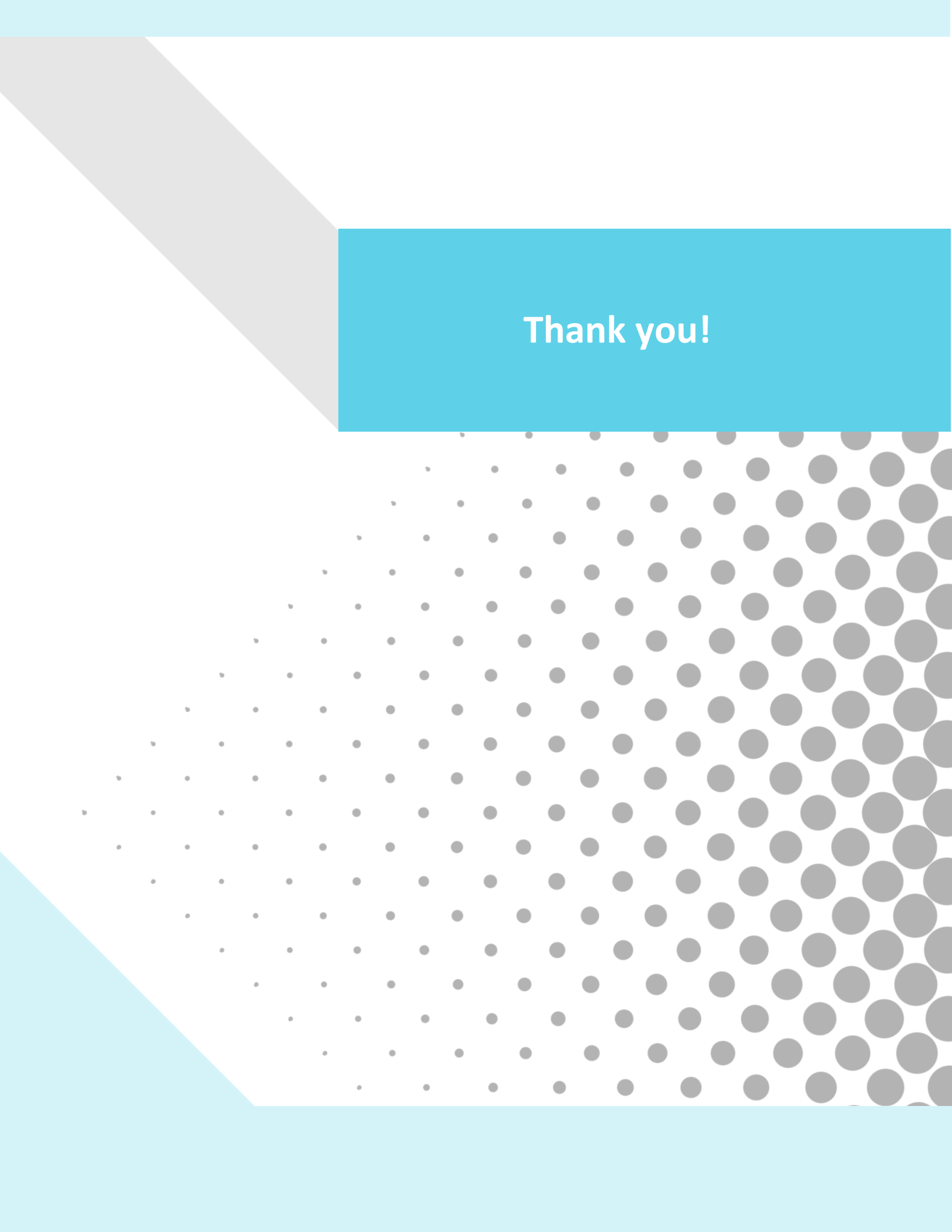
Thus their collective identity is a complex one. While the resiliency shown by international sisters is inspiring, the need for the Church and the people of the United States to grow in understanding the challenges of migration is urgent. As Pope Francis noted during his visit, the United States is a nation of immigrants.

These international sisters in the United States are part of the complex migration patterns that circle the world at this time. While a century ago many European sisters left their home countries to serve in the Americas, Asia and Africa, and while we know that today sisters in Asia, Africa and Latin America are sent to serve in North America and Europe, we also realize that the picture is more complex than that of a simple reversal of mission. Sisters from the North and South cross paths, creating new patterns of international relationship and ministry that have the potential for even greater collaboration and effectiveness in ministry as well as a renewed energy for the building up of religious life and the Church, and in even greater service to the world.

While the primary focus of this research was on institutes and sisters, we also learned of other longstanding and newer organizations, networks and structures that support international sisters, such as the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., Assumption College for Sisters, and Formation Support for Vietnam. More research is needed on the growth and development of organizations like these so that ideas can be exchanged as new needs emerge. Our forthcoming book will provide more details, along with more description of the networks and structures being developed by and for international sisters, in order to provide a more accurate understanding of the many dimensions of religious life today.

We are grateful for the generosity and vision of GHR Foundation who funded the study, to consultants, and all who supported us in our work. We are especially grateful to the extraordinary international sisters of today who follow in the long line of sisters across the centuries who left their home countries to minister in new lands, for a short while or for a lifetime, for the sake of the Gospel.

Notes

The background features a light blue top and bottom border. A grey diagonal shape is on the left. A teal rectangle contains the text 'Thank you!'. The bottom right is filled with a pattern of grey dots of varying sizes.

Thank you!