



Special Report

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

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Women Religious in Africa

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The world's second most populous continent (after Asia), Africa is projected to more than double their Christian and Muslim populations between 2010 and 2050.¹ Africa is one of only two continents (Africa and Asia) where vocations to religious life among Catholic women is growing rather than declining. This special report on African sisters treats Africa as the complex continent it is, showing how the different countries of the continent are experiencing very different rates of growth and decline as well as documenting the varied ways African sisters are ministering.

Kenyan philosopher Mbiti, remarking on Africans' religious richness, noted that "Africans are notoriously religious . . . religion permeates all departments of life."² Although Mbiti's comments relate to traditional religion, this reality is the backdrop for the continent's large number of Christians. The Pew Research Center estimates that Christians accounted for 63 percent of Africa's population in 2010.³ In 2015, Vatican statisticians counted more than 222 million Catholics in Africa, about 19 percent of the population.⁴

Catholic Women Religious on African Soil

Christianity was introduced to the people of Africa on a large scale in the 19th century or earlier, when Protestant and Catholic Europe competed for areas of influence on the continent. The first Christian missions to Africa were male-dominated. The original motivation for the missionaries was evangelization and not the founding of new African communities. Early Catholic missionary activity in Africa focused on building of churches, medical centers, and schools in an effort to meet spiritual, physical and intellectual needs of the Africans. These early missionaries did not have religious formation in mind for African women. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, with the

KEY FINDINGS

- Temporarily and perpetually professed sisters in Africa make up 11 percent of the world's women religious in 2015, totaling 71,567 sisters.
- Africa is a place of rich apostolic activity. Women religious living together in communities bear witness that it is possible for people to live together in harmony despite ethnic origins, country, color or race.
- African women insert themselves amidst numerous challenges that at times strengthen them but which more often than not weaken their level of commitment.

advent of Vatican II and the independence of African countries, that the majority of formation houses were established for women. The first institute of women religious was founded in 1878, when Algerian Archbishop Lavigerie founded the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa or White Sisters. The White Sisters served side by side with the White Fathers in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Algiers. In Uganda, the White Sisters settled at Rubaga in 1899, in Tanzania at Karema in 1894, and Kirando in 1902. In an effort to make Africa self evangelizing, the White Sisters founded their first African congregation in Tanzania with the help of Cardinal Charles Lavigerie. They founded 22 others in Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Congo, Zambia, Burundi, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, and Kenya.⁵

Local African cultures typically discourage girls from vocations to religious life, viewing it as a waste of human resources and a drain on a family's economic well-being. Women were and are still valued as sources of material wealth gained through dowry.⁶ Though more tolerated today, many girls entering religious life still face family resistance.

Regional Statistics on Women Religious in Africa

According to Vatican statistics, temporarily and perpetually professed sisters in Africa make up 11 percent of the world's women religious in 2015, totaling 71,567 sisters. Africa, as well as Asia, is only one of two areas of the world experiencing growth in the number of women religious, with a 22 percent increase in the last decade.⁷ In a period of ten years, there was an increase of approximately 12,786 sisters making their temporary or perpetual vows.

Figure 1 presents the five African regions (as defined by the United Nations) and the change in numbers and percentage of temporarily and permanently professed women religious from 2005 to 2015.

The following five tables display the specifics of each region. While all six countries in Northern Africa and three of the five countries in

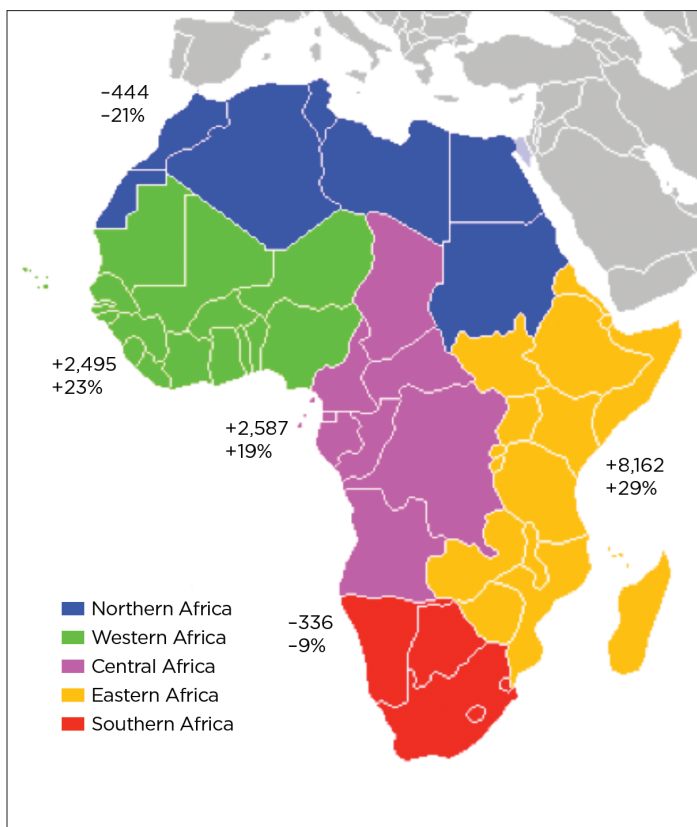
Southern Africa report declining numbers of women religious, all of the other regions exhibit a net increase in women religious. The five regions are presented below, ordered by largest percentage increase to largest percentage decrease.

TABLE 1. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN EASTERN AFRICA, 2005-2015

	2005	2015	Net Difference	Percentage Difference
Comoros	5	11	6	120%
Burundi	1,176	1,968	792	67
Kenya	3,915	5,546	1,631	42
Rwanda	1,455	2,044	589	40
Tanzania	8,033	11,157	3,124	39
Malawi	791	1,005	214	27
Uganda	2,944	3,699	755	26
Zambia	1,668	2,002	334	20
Madagascar	4,100	4,778	678	17
Ethiopia	690	794	104	15
Seychelles	52	58	6	12
Mozambique	1,113	1,182	69	6
Djibouti	24	25	1	4
Eritrea	706	727	21	3
Zimbabwe	1,062	1,037	-25	-2
Réunion	316	246	-70	-22
Mauritius	255	194	-61	-24
Somalia	4	-	-	-
South Sudan	-	221	-	-
TOTAL	28,309	36,694	8,162	29%

Data: 2005 and 2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, Liberia Editrice Vaticana

FIGURE 1. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN AFRICA BY REGION, 2005-2015



Map: CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=546265>
Data: Liberia Editrice Vaticana. 2005 and 2015 *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*.

EASTERN AFRICA

Eastern Africa⁸ is the largest region, covering a total of 19 countries. The region overall had the largest percentage change (29 percent) and a net increase in the number of religious sisters (an 8,162 sister increase). For some, like Comoros had an increase of six sisters in a 120 percent increase over ten years. Madagascar, on the other hand, increased by 678 sisters for a 17 percent gain. Other countries remained very stable over this period, with Zimbabwe decreasing by 2 percent after losing of 25 sisters. Somalia did not report sisters in 2015 and South Sudan did not enlist as an independent country in 2005, so comparisons for those two countries cannot be calculated.

WESTERN AFRICA

Western Africa,⁹ the second largest region. in Africa, experienced the second largest increase in women religious. The country with the greatest growth is Nigeria, adding 1,288 sisters for a 30 percent

increase. The greatest percentage gain is in Guinea-Bissau, which added 100 sisters over the ten-year period. Liberia experienced the largest percentage decrease (74 percent), followed by Mauritania (24 percent), Niger, and Mali.

TABLE 2. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN WESTERN AFRICA, 2005-2015

	2005	2015	Net Difference	Percentage Difference
Nigeria	4,310	5,598	1,288	30%
Burkina Faso	1,248	1,629	381	31
Benin	1,149	1,408	259	23
Ivory Coast	942	1,052	110	12
Ghana	882	1,085	203	23
Togo	776	945	169	22
Senegal	711	820	109	15
Liberia	243	63	-180	-74
Mali	243	235	-8	-3
Cabo Verde	141	156	15	11
Guinea	109	121	12	11
Niger	97	83	-14	-14
Gambia	47	65	18	38
Sierra Leone	47	89	42	89
Guinea-Bissau	43	143	100	233
Mauritania	38	29	-9	-24
TOTAL	10,928	13,521	2,495	23%

Data: 2005 and 2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, Liberia Editrice Vaticana

CENTRAL AFRICA

In Central Africa, five of the nine countries reported a decrease in women religious. Increases in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in Cameroon result in 19 percent increase for the region overall.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

South Africa accounts for most of the net decline in the region of Southern Africa. Swaziland, with a smaller population of sisters, experienced the largest percentage decline. Overall, the region of Southern Africa experienced a net decline in women religious of 9 percent between 2005 and 2015.

NORTHERN AFRICA

Two countries in northern Africa experienced the greatest percentage decline in religious sisters on the whole continent. Libya, had a 91 percent decrease and Sudan had a 64 percent decrease. Much of the decrease can be attributed to the instability caused by wars and oppression. Sudan saw the greatest decrease in numbers, largely

TABLE 3. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN CENTRAL AFRICA, 2005-2015

	2005	2015	Net Difference	Percentage Difference
Democratic Republic of the Congo	7,799	9,459	1,660	21%
Cameroon	2,225	3,180	955	43
Angola	2,182	1,992	-190	-9
Central African Republic	411	345	-66	-16
Republic of the Congo	389	584	195	50
Chad	365	337	-28	-8
Equatorial Guinea	223	212	-11	-5
Gabon	165	245	80	48
Sao Tomé and Príncipe	39	31	-8	-21
TOTAL	13,798	16,385	2,587	19%

Data: 2005 and 2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, Liberia Editrice Vaticana

TABLE 4. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, 2005-2015

	2005	2015	Net Difference	Percentage Difference
South Africa	2,323	1,945	-378	-16%
Lesotho	693	741	48	7
Namibia	434	454	20	5
Botswana	81	73	-8	-10
Swaziland	63	45	-18	-29
TOTAL	3,594	3,258	-336	-9%

Data: 2005 and 2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, Liberia Editrice Vaticana

TABLE 5. CHANGE IN THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TEMPORARILY AND PERMANENTLY PROFESSED WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN NORTHERN AFRICA, 2005-2015

	2005	2015	Net Difference	Percentage Difference
Tunisia	125	102	-23	-18
Egypt	1,176	1,144	-32	-3%
Algeria	190	154	-36	-19
Morocco	231	181	-50	-22
Libya	94	8	-86	-91
Sudan	336	120	-216	-64
TOTAL	2152	1709	-443	-21%

Data: 2005 and 2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church, Liberia Editrice Vaticana

due to the mostly Christian South Sudan breaking away in 2011 and forming an independent country now united in the Eastern Africa.

Apostolate Works of Women Religious in Africa

Africa is a place of rich apostolic activity. Women religious living together in communities in a continent that is deeply wounded by the scourges of war and division, ethnic conflict, injustice, political instability and terrorism bear witness that it is possible for people to live together in harmony despite ethnic origins, country, color or race. Pope Benedict observes that religious life in Africa “can and must enable people to see and believe that today in Africa, those men and women who follow Christ Jesus find in him the secret of living happily together: mutual love and fraternal communion”.¹⁰

Most of the institutes of women religious in Africa are active in apostolic works, rather than engaged in contemplative religious life. Active communities respond to the needs of the world outside of the cloister contrary to those in cloistered communities.¹¹ Examples

of cloistered communities in Africa are the Benedictine Sisters in Namibia, Dominican Sisters in Kenya and the Poor Clares in Zambia. Among the many active women’s religious communities are the Sisters of Our Lady in Malawi, the Little Sisters of St. Francis in Uganda, Evangelizing Sisters of Mary in Kenya, Sisters of our Lady of Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus in Nigeria and the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Cameroon. On the whole, whatever the sisters do is geared towards a holistic evangelization of society to ensure that everyone enjoys living on Mother Earth. Sisters in active religious life commonly engage in the following apostolates:

SOCIAL WORK

In the social domain, sisters work with refugees, either in camps or in centers, where they provide for their spiritual and material needs, counseling services, academic and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills. They also reach out to street children and to mothers, physically and mentally challenged persons, orphaned children and single

FIGURE 2.
**CATHOLIC
WOMEN
RELIGIOUS IN
AFRICA IN THE
SERVICE OF
THE POOR**

Source:
ASEC, used with
permission.



mothers. In these apostolates, Jesus' call for us to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to the feast¹² comes to fulfillment.

HEALTH CARE

Sisters also are engaged in health care apostolates. The story of a Consolata missionary sister who entered Kenya in 1914 and died in 1930 remains fresh in the memories of the residents of Nyeri county. A newspaper reported "the nun contracted the plague that killed her from one of her fiercest critics, a man called Ngare. She died of bubonic plague in her bed in Gikondi, Nyeri. Ngare had succumbed to the disease a few days before she had baptized him, the locals recall".¹³ They named her "Nyaatha" which in the Kikuyu language means "compassionate". Her real name was Sister Irene Stefani, now "Blessed Irene Stefani". Today Africans experience a host of devastating ailments such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, malaria, malnutrition, and cholera. To run a clinic or hospital in Africa, sisters utter a big "yes" to Jesus' ministry of compassionate service of those ailing in body and spirit.

EDUCATION

Before the arrival of the missionaries, Africans had an informal education that formed the young morally and socially. Today the whole continent has embraced modern education. Teaching is one of the basic apostolates with which nearly every religious institute is involved. This apostolate has been given precedence in most women religious institutes so that, in collaboration with the governments many young people can rise and improve their lives.

PASTORAL WORK

Pastoral work is the heartbeat of religious life. As pastoral workers in parishes, and schools, sisters teach catechism, assist with children and youth programs, Catholic women and men associations, widows, single parents, the sick and the dying as well as choirs and other spiritual movements.

ADMINISTRATION

This category of service designates the sisters who provide different kinds of administrative work such as secretarial staff, administrative assistants, law school heads and leaders in their own religious institutes. To enhance their leadership skills, African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) has embarked on providing variety of leadership skills to women religious in their countries of focus.

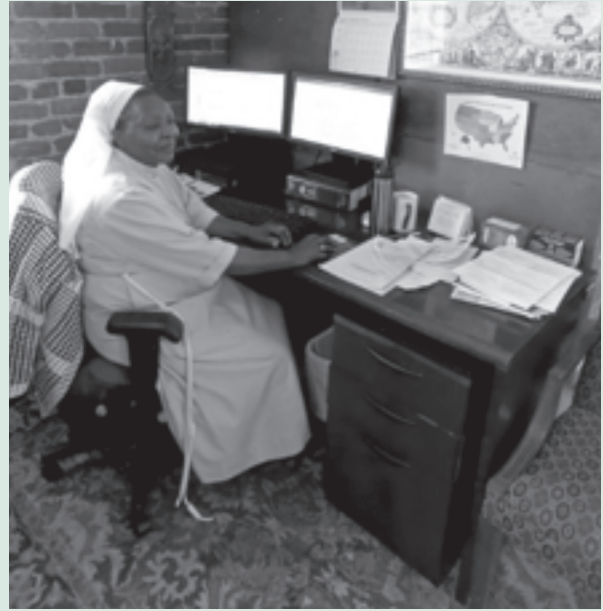


FIGURE 5. **SISTER BIBIANA NGUNDO, LSOSF, PH.D.**
AT HER RESEARCH DESK AT CARA

In October 2016, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, received a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to host three African women religious over three years as Visiting Scholars. ASEC is partnered with CARA to recruit the sister scholars and engage them in research opportunities.

Sr. Bibiana M. Ngundo, LSOSF, Ph.D., arrived at CARA in January to begin her six-month term as the inaugural African woman religious Visiting Scholar. Sr. Bibiana is faculty and chairperson of the department of Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya. She has published research on African culture, religious, religious life, and the interaction of culture and religion. At CARA, Sr. Bibiana worked on a variety of CARA projects, including a study of men and women entering religious congregations and a study of the intersection of science and religion in seminaries. She also worked with CARA to develop a questionnaire for her home parish in Nairobi, Kenya. With the cooperation of her pastor back home, she surveyed the parishioners and prepared a report of the findings for the parish. Sister will continue her research program in Kenya and plans to study best practices for attracting new candidates for religious institutes in Africa, among other projects.



FIGURE 3. **THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGIOUS IN UGANDA WITH PARTICIPANTS OF AN ASEC ADMINISTRATION WORKSHOP** Source: ASEC, used with permission.

Challenges Facing Religious Life in Africa

African women insert themselves amidst numerous challenges that at times strengthen them but which more often than not weaken their level of commitment. Some of the factors currently challenging consecrated life in Africa are:

FAMILY SUPPORT

Sisters, like any other persons, remain members of their biological families despite their commitment to a life of total self-giving in the service of the Church. A study carried out in Zambia revealed that “a consecrated religious sister often struggles to reconcile living out her vows fully and having to meet the expectations of her family or the demise of close family members due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Consequently, this puts a burden on the sister in her efforts to seek concrete ways to take care of her orphaned siblings, nephews and nieces”.¹⁴ Sisters also struggle with sick parents and siblings, whether suffering from this pandemic or some other malady.

POVERTY

Today Africa is portrayed as one of the developing continents. While this is true, it is also true that many other families of women religious sisters are languishing in poverty. The need to help siblings

and other needy children access education is a real challenge to many sisters. This situation affects a sister who is trying to balance her vow of poverty with her love for her needy family members.

LACK OF SUFFICIENT FUNDS

A study carried out among university religious women revealed that “in terms of economic welfare, many religious communities lacked adequate funds to fully and adequately meet the academic needs of their sisters and that their respective communities did not adequately provide for their basic necessities.”¹⁵ A majority of African religious communities lack stable sources of funding to cater to the growing medical, educational, domestic and basic needs of the sisters. This situation constrains development in these communities.

CONFLICTING CULTURAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

African sisters who join international communities experience unique challenges as compared to those in purely indigenous communities. Although religious life calls for a total surrender to the gospel way of life, there are some cultural demands from which one cannot easily disengage, such as attending the funeral of close family members and relatives. Cultural conflict is also experienced among members of different ethnic communities in Africa.

RELIGIOUS HABIT

In some international communities, a religious habit is a cause of concern among African members. With time, most communities in Europe and America have embraced a new way of witnessing to the gospel message by adopting a modified habit. In some African dioceses, a sister without a veil is a contentious issue. Nevertheless, although the life to which a religious professes no longer mandates it, a religious habit still speaks to a majority of Africans about the presence of Christ among his people and the call to holiness and purity of life. It is a sign of consecration.¹⁶

EDUCATION AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY

In Africa, many women religious communities are still well below the required standard of education to serve effectively in a world that is digital and highly competitive. Sisters need to adapt to modern technology which is difficult for many. The establishment of ASEC, built on a foundation of solidarity and global sisterhood developed between Catholic sisters in the U.S and Africa, was a timely response to this need. Towards this effort, the Conrad N Hil-

ton Foundation has helped to ensure that African women religious are being well educated to serve the people of God in Africa. Since its establishment in 1999, ASEC has served 4,500 sisters in 10 different African countries.¹⁷ Through its Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program, many sisters in Africa have graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees. In addition, many sisters receive leadership training through the ASEC SLDI program (Sisters Leadership Development Initiative).

Through its research program, ASEC investigates different elements of the experiences of African religious communities. Some of the findings were published in a book "Voices of Courage". ASEC's efforts to educate and to equip African sisters with innovative skills and knowledge have been augmented in their latest "scholar exchange" program. This exchange allows sisters from Africa to visit the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) for six months at a time, to acquire training in applied social science research that they can use at their home country upon their return.



FIGURE 4. **SLDI PARTICIPANTS HAPPILY HOLDING THEIR NEW LAPTOPS** Source: ASEC, used with permission.

Conclusion

Although consecrated life in Africa entered the continent as a foreign phenomenon, today it has become part and parcel of a Christian response to Jesus' call to discipleship. Compared to African families of the 1980s or earlier, contemporary families understand better the notion of religious life. This means that young girls today have more opportunity to discern a vocation without much opposition. The vitality of vocations in Africa corresponds to the growth and development of persons in Africa. A report to the Hilton Foundation states that, "sisters have educated many of the presidents, corporate leaders and influential people throughout the continent of Africa. They also run and staff many of the best hospitals and clinics, they advocate for human rights as they serve children with disabilities and work in many of Africa's slum areas."¹⁸ Amidst this growth in vocations to religious life in Africa, many congregations of women religious continue to struggle with sustainability. They need to maintain current institute numbers while encouraging more vocations. The institute should be able to maintain the current members by adequate provision for their medical needs, space, education and basic needs.

The ability to maintain the available infrastructure, ensure the institute's financial well-being and to expand outreach missions to needy areas and keeping pace with the institute's charism and the Church's teaching in an effort to achieve spiritual and temporal goals of the institute are very important. Pope Francis in his letter to religious men and women says "the religious need to be serious with the religious calling and live it joyfully in the Lord"¹⁹ Joyful living is not only an institute's duty but also a personal responsibility. Joyful living for African women religious also means reaching out to mission lands to share the same faith received more than a century now. Some countries such as Spain have many young vocations from Africa. International institutes with formation houses in Africa have

more African sisters now than non-African sisters. Some indigenous institutes are also opening convents abroad for mission purposes. This collaborative spirit aligns with Jesus' desire, "that they may all be one" (John 15: 21).

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center. *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*, p. 179.
2. Mbiti, S. *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), p. 1
3. Pew Research Center. *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*, p. 179.
4. Liberia Editrice Vaticana. *2015 Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, p. 18.
5. Soeurs Missionaries de Notre Dame d'Afrique. Mission/women-with-women-religious-congregations Retrieved from <http://www.msolafrica.org/index.php/en/our> (2015).
6. A girl who forfeits marriage is a disgrace to her family and clan. This attitude is understandable from the point of view that every member of the community is expected to marry and to contribute to the enlargement and continuity of the community.
7. In 2005, the Vatican's *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* reported 58,781 temporarily and perpetually professed women.
8. Data for Mayotte was not reported in the *Statistical Yearbook for the Church*.
9. Data for Saint Helen was not reported in the *Statistical Yearbook for the Church*.
10. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Africa's Commitment to Apostolic Exhortation of his holiness Pope Benedict XVI (2011), p. 58.
11. Johnson, M., Wittiberg, P. and Gauntier M. *New Generations of Catholic Sisters* (2014), p. 35
12. Luke 14: 13
13. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000159770/sister-nyaatha-the-nun-bringing-the-world-to-sleepy-nyeri-village>
14. Wakahiu, J. et al, *Voices of Courage: Historical, Sociocultural and Educational journeys of women of Women religious in East and Central Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines publications, 2015), p. 446.
15. Ibid. p. 166.
16. "Religious are to wear the habit of the institute determined according to the norm of proper law as a sign of their consecration and as a testimony of poverty" (Canon 669), 1
17. ASEC-SLDI Educational insights (December 2016), p. 2
18. Center for Religion and Civic Culture, Measurement, Evaluation and Learning Model (University of California, (2015), 20
19. Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Year of Consecrated Life. November 2014-2015. A Letter to consecrated men and women. A message from the teachings of Pope Francis.



CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

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