News
Religious Life



The Leadership Conference of Women Religious closes its annual assembly by honoring Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin (second from left) with the Outstanding Leadership Award, Aug. 15 (GSR/Helga Leija)



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Sr. Mary Pat Garvin has seen hope unbroken in the graced companionship of religious life, in the new generation of Catholic sisters discerning their own call to serve God's people, and in the transformative resilience of older sisters.

"Through all the unimaginable twists and turns of my life, though not always clearly perceived by me, God's unbroken hope and promise has sustained me," Garvin, a Sister of Mercy, said. "I am most grateful."

Garvin delivered her remarks as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious closed out its annual assembly Aug. 15 by presenting her the Outstanding Leadership Award, marking her decades of service to congregations of religious and their members around the world.

Garvin has taught formation, trained those who teach formation, helped create formation programs, and conducts ongoing formation for congregations and their members around the world.

A video tribute to Garvin before her award was presented said "Her legacy is not because of the titles or accolades, but because of the thousands of lives she has touched."

The LCWR assembly brought together nearly 600 Catholic sisters and 300 guests Aug. 12-15 in Atlanta. LCWR represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 sisters in the United States.

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Garvin said she has repeatedly heard new members of religious congregations express their desire for graced companionship, and are finding it in other sisters.

"These women, especially with the rise of social media and increased coverage by major news outlets, are discovering others like themselves across the globe, who, despite cultural and language differences, are responding to the same counter-cultural call to religious life," Garvin said in her remarks.



Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin, 1987. (Provided by Mary Pat Garvin)

Garvin said that several times she has been deeply touched as older sisters share their stories of resilience, despite the many changes in religious life since the 1960s.

"Over and over again it became evident to me and to the sisters that they had not only made it through times of adversity, but actually had been transformed through adversity," she said. "We rejoiced together that what is now known as post-traumatic growth was offering each of them wisdom and courage to live their elder years rejoicing in their own grace of resilience."

A formator for the 'whole' of religious life

Garvin never got around to having a website, let alone creating a consulting business. And yet she is called on by religious and religious congregations around the world, all by word of mouth.

"Everything I do is both looking at religious life and [asking] how do we grow humanly — that's the foundation for growing spiritually," she said in an earlier

interview with GSR. "They're not really two separate things."

That idea has been Garvin's guiding principle since she began teaching in the 1970s.

"I've always thought education is not just about the head, it's about the whole person," she said.



Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Gavin, in habit, poses with friends celebrating her reception into the novitiate in 1980. (Provided by Mary Pat Garvin)

Garvin received a history degree in 1979, and joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1980. In 1991 she got another bachelor's degree, this time in psychology, from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. She got a doctorate in psychology from Gregorian in 1999, but Garvin said her studies were inter-disciplinary, and included philosophy and theology in addition to psychology.

"One lens isn't really enough to understand the human person," Garvin said.

And Garvin does understand the human person, said Sr. Susan Francois of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. Francois first met Garvin when Francois was in initial formation.

"She gives her love of religious life and her understanding of the human person and the ministry of consecrated life, and shares that as an educator with the whole spectrum of religious life," Francois said. "From the very beginning, even though I was a new sister, I felt seen and respected by her."

She said Garvin has a way of engaging sisters of every stripe, whether they are novices or 100 years old, whether they are in the U.S. or anywhere on the globe.



Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin accepts her Outstanding Leadership Award at the 2025 LCWR annual assembly, Aug. 15. (GSR/Helga Leija)

"She is an educator and formator for the whole of religious life," Francois said. "I'm delighted she's getting this award."

She said Garvin told her something when she was still in temporary vows that she continues to draw on today.

"There's one insight she shared that I returned to over and over and over again. In religious life or life in general, we talk about how we have to find balance," Francois

said. "But she said that scales that are in balance are stuck — they're not moving. So we want to find the rhythm of life: Sometimes it's up and sometimes it's down. It's the same with Jesus in the Gospels. Sometimes he's here, sometimes he crosses the sea."

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>
> - Sr. Mary Pat Garvin
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Cabrini Sr. Barbara Staley, who traveled from Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland) to see Garvin receive the award, said some might find it unusual that Garvin is getting a leadership award, since she spent relatively little time in leadership.

"But there's all kinds of leadership. She has an informal leadership that works and impacts from the inside," said Staley, who has been friends with Garvin 37 years. "She plays an informal leadership role in anything she does."

Staley said Garvin not only does formation, but trains the formators and even helped the International Union of Superiors General develop a program for sisters who do formation.

She said Garvin doesn't just fly in or hold a virtual session and then disappear. Instead she develops a lifelong relationship with that congregation.



Missionaries of Charity Sr. Jane Muguku, Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin, and Irish Mercy Sr. Cait O’Dwyer in 1987. (Provided by Mary Pat Garvin)

"She has done an immeasurable amount of work for the Cabrini Sisters over the years," Staley said. "She's not an American sister, she belongs to the whole church. …She's bigger than just what the Mercy Sisters are."

Staley said a Cabrini Sister once helped Garvin when Garvin was a young novice. Decades later, when that sister was in memory care, Garvin drove three or four hours every month to spend time with her. The Cabrini Sisters were not even aware Garvin was doing it.

Despite Garvin's incredible intellect and accomplishments — Garvin's curriculum vitae is seven pages, including nearly four pages of publications — she is humble and down to earth.

"She intimidates nobody," Staley said. "She's hugely talented, but her demeanor is one of simplicity."

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- Cabrini Sr. Barbara Staley

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Sr. Mary Pat Garvin’s 4th grade portrait. (Provided by Mary Pat Garvin)

Mercy Sr. Margaret Anne Dougherty has known Garvin since 1977, when Garvin was teaching 8th grade and Dougherty was her principal.

She noted that when Garvin first went to Rome to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University, she didn't speak any Italian. Soon, she was not only teaching in Italian at Gregorian, but somehow was also a part-time professor at two other universities in Rome.

All who spoke about Garvin to GSR noted how she somehow takes even the most complicated subjects and makes them seem simple.

"I think the most impressive thing about Mary Pat's presentation skills is that she's able to be conversational while still providing a lot of in-depth information," Dougherty said. "She can unpack the most complicated concept and make you say, 'Oh, that's what they meant.' …She's an academic, but she's able to be user-friendly."

"She presents it like common-sense wisdom," Francois said. "I think that's why it crosses cultures — it's not intellectual."

Dougherty said the Mercy Sisters will be studying their constitution and vows in the fall, a topic that does not make for an exciting read.

"But her presentation for it is phenomenal," Dougherty said. "I'm always amazed at what she's able to do in engaging people in what can be some challenging conversations."

She said that when Garvin was teaching 8th grade — an age group that can be challenging, at best — Garvin somehow had perfect control over her classroom.

"If her class was getting rambunctious, she would say, '8th graders, I'm upset.' And everyone would settle and be quiet. The kids would be silent. I was like why? I never heard her raise her voice," Dougherty said. "I think because she had such great respect for them and they had great respect for her. They would walk on water if Mary Pat asked them to."

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