News
Religious Life



A participant in the Pilgrimage for Hope holds up a banner as hundreds of Catholic sisters march through downtown Atlanta Thursday morning, Aug. 14, singing and praying for social justice, during the LCWR assembly. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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Nearly 600 leaders of Catholic women's congregations took part in four days of prayer, inspiration, discernment and blessings at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' annual assembly.

LCWR represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 sisters in the United States.

Along with nearly 300 guests — including justice promoters, lay executives congregations have hired, such as finance or executive officers, and communications professionals — LCWR members heard keynote speakers such as Sr. Simona Brambilla, one of the highest-ranking women in the Vatican, and Fr. James Martin.

> 'Leadership is about holding paradox. It's about letting go of control without letting go of purpose.'
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> —Sr. Kathy Brazda
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Vulnerability and sanctity

The assembly, under the theme "Hope Unbroken: Journeying in God's Promise," ran Aug. 12-15. On Aug. 13, the gathering got off to a powerful start as LCWR president Sr. Kathy Brazda used her presidential address to reflect on how cancer had reshaped her leadership and her life.



Sr. Kathy Brazda of the Sisters of St. Joseph delivers her presidential address at the LCWR convention, Aug. 13 in Atlanta. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

"My world paused. No, it stopped," Brazda said to a rapt audience. "My role in LCWR, my leadership in the congregation, even my sense of self was uncertain. How could I lead when I had doubts about my own future, my own life, my own abilities? How

could I plan for a future when I wasn't even sure I would be a part of it?"

But that vulnerability, that uncertainty, she said, became an entrance to a sacred encounter with Christ, and she realized that her leadership needed to come from that place as well.

"Leadership is about holding paradox. It's about letting go of control without letting go of purpose," Brazda said. "It's about being vulnerable and being grounded in something deeper than ego or title. It's choosing to stay rooted in hope, even though life is uncertain and unsure."

> U.S. sister leaders gathered at the LCWR annual assembly, highlighting surrender and transformation. With a march through downtown Atlanta, at least 400 participants pledged their commitment against racism, climate change and forced migration.
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Nearly 600 sisters and 300 guests gathered for LCWR's 2025 annual assembly. The group's 2026 assembly runs Aug. 11-14 in Orlando, Florida. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

God is 'like the moon'

That day also brought the keynote address by Brambilla, a Consolata Missionary. She is the prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, a position that makes her the first woman religious to oversee religious in the history of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis in 2023 had made her the first female secretary of the dicastery, and in January elevated her to prefect.

Delivered in her native Italian, her message focused on synodality, or walking together, as a path of hope for consecrated life.

She referenced a proverb from the Makua people of Mozambique, where she ministered for several years, that says God is not like the sun, which travels solo through the world, but like the moon, which shines with the stars.

She also drew on the biblical passage in Luke where the resurrected Jesus builds a charcoal fire for his disciples, just as leaders in religious life are called to serve their members.

"Evangelical authority stirs, guards, and nourishes the sacred fire that gathers brothers and sisters around the one Bread of Life, makes them grow as people of God, and inflames them with that love that unites diverse people with bonds of charity as ardent as they are delicate," Brambilla said.

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Sr. Simona Brambilla of the Consolata Missionaries and prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, gives her presentation Aug. 13 at the LCWR assembly in Atlanta. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin is the recipient of this year's Outstanding Leadership Award. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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  Jesuit Fr. James Martin — editor at large of America Media, consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, and widely recognized for his work in reaching out to LGBTQI+ Catholics — gives a keynote address during the LCWR assembly on Aug. 14 in Atlanta. (GSR/Dan Stockman)

A march for justice

Aug. 14 began with hundreds of sisters shutting down several downtown streets as they marched, prayed and sang for social justice. At least 400 sisters turned out at 7 a.m. for the Pilgrimage of Hope, a mile-long walk that served as their morning prayer and a symbolic stance against racism, climate change and forced migration, and an observation of the 10th anniversary of "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

With a police escort blocking traffic, the sisters walked through downtown, singing as they went, and stopping for prayers. Participants would not be deterred: at least one sister completed the march while on oxygen, another made the trek using a walker.

Faith, love and fear

That afternoon brought the keynote address of Martin, editor at large of America Media, a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, and well-known for his work to encourage the church to reach out to and embrace LGBTQ+ Catholics.

Martin used the story of Lazarus rising from the dead to show how faith, trust and love defeat the feelings of fear, grief and doubt, even for religious congregations that are shrinking to the point of preparing for completion.

Mary and Martha, who had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, must have been surprised and hurt that Jesus didn't come right away, just as many religious are confused and hurt that they are forced to sell property and close ministries and convents, he said.

"What I want to highlight here, though, is the essential unknowability of God's plans. 'Why is this happening?' is often a question that for now, is unanswerable," Martin said.

Many congregations are like Mary and Martha standing with Jesus before Lazarus' tomb: Afraid of a future without their brother, fearing what they will find — and smell — when the stone is rolled away, but also still believing, still hopeful, he said.

"Can you surrender to the future God has in store for you?" he said, recalling the words of a friend when his father was dying of cancer. "This is our invitation, no matter who we are and no matter what congregation we belong to."

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LCWR assembly attendees carry a banner at the start of the Pilgrimage of Hope, a march through downtown Atlanta Aug. 14, where they sang and prayed for social justice. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Hundreds of Catholic sisters march through downtown Atlanta Aug. 14, praying and singing for social justice as part of the LCWR assembly activities. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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A sister lifts hands in prayer while listening to Sr. Simona Brambilla's address. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Franciscan Sr. Maria Elena Martinez (left to right) moderates a panel Aug. 15 on how leaders maintain their faith, which included Sr. Sara Postlethwaite of the Verbum Dei Fellowship, Mercy Sr. Pat McDermott, and Good Shepherd Sr. Barbara Beasley. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

'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. I am most grateful.'

—Sr. Mary Pat Garvin

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Sr. Debra Sciano of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the new president-elect of LCWR (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

'Who is on this committee?'

The conference also featured two panel discussions. The first, on the call to work for the healing of the world, included representatives from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change and The Carter Center.

The second panel featured three congregational leaders sharing how they stay grounded in hope despite the challenges of leadership.

Mercy Sr. Pat McDermott said that what has kept her hope alive has been something she learned from Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. When McDermott learned in 2012 that Farley, a widely respected theologian, was being investigated by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over her 2006 book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, McDermott asked her how she wanted to respond. Farley said she would need to consult with her committee before she decided.

"So I asked her, 'Who is on this committee?' And when she began listing names, I realized she was naming people who had already died," McDermott said. "I realized the wisdom of what she was saying, and I immediately formed a committee of my own."

Transition of leadership

The afternoon of Aug. 15, the conference said goodbye to one president and hello to another. LCWR has a three-person presidency, and their terms end at the end of the group's annual assembly.

First, the group thanked outgoing past-president Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary, who finished her three-year term on the presidential team. With her departure, Presentation Sr. Vicky Larson moved from president-elect to president; and Brazda became past-president.

The group then welcomed new president-elect School Sisters of Notre Dame Sr. Debra Sciano.

Sciano is a civil lawyer who has been an assistant district attorney for the State of Wisconsin, primarily representing children in need of protection and services, and a family mediator in Milwaukee. She has served as an LCWR region chair and member of the national board.

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Outstanding Leadership Award

The assembly closed with Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin being presented 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.

In her remarks, Garvin said she 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 said. "I am most grateful."

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."

This story was originally published in Spanish Aug. 25, 2025.



LCWR's 2025-2026 presidential team, from left to right: President-elect Sr. Debra Sciano, President Sr. Vicky Larson, and Past-President Sr. Kathy Brazda (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

This story appears in the **LCWR 2025** feature series. View the full series.