News
News
Ministry
Religious Life



From left: Rebecca Ann Gemma in 1980, when she was a senior at the University of San Diego, and in 1987, donning the habit she thought was a dealbreaker before choosing the Springfield Dominicans (Photos courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma); and Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma in a more recent photo (Courtesy of the Springfield Dominicans)



by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile

ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

August 8, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, a Dominican Sister of Springfield, Illinois, has learned over the last 20 years that leadership can sometimes feel like a juggling act. Sometimes, she just has to tap into the Spirit in order to put the balls down and "attend to this moment."

"Sometimes, it is to take that pause long enough to get to, 'All right, God, where do I need to be in this present complexity?' "

That practiced mentality, Gemma said, has prepared her to become president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on Aug. 12, the final day of the 2022 assembly in St. Louis. LCWR represents 80% of sisters in the United States.

Gemma's friends say that with her rich history of work in anti-racism, education and counseling, she will be a welcome and invigorating asset in religious leadership at a time when logistical and existential challenges may feel daunting to congregations across the country.

"I trust her judgment, and I trust her ability to articulate responses that add to understanding and that express the fullness of what's needed when we're dealing with situations," said Springfield Dominican Sr. Marcelline Koch, director of her congregation's office of justice and peace.



"She's got a quick sense of humor," says Grand Rapids Dominican Sr. Megan McElroy, right, about Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma — a sentiment all who spoke with GSR shared. "She just finds a way of saying things that make people laugh and to see the humor and not take ourselves so seriously. I often sit there and wish I had that sense of humor." (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

And Gemma's championship of those on the margins makes her a natural leader for LCWR's current priority: the intersection of racism, migration and climate, issues at the center of the 2019-22 resolution that will be renewed for another three years at the Aug. 9-12 assembly.

"All of her experience has led to this moment," said Dominican of Grand Rapids Sr. Megan McElroy, who has been friends with Gemma for nearly 20 years since they served in their respective congregational leadership. "It's not an easy time to be leadership in the church and religious life. And she will continue to engage the questions that we need to face; she won't shy away from it."

Gemma, 63, served in the triumvirate for the last year with LCWR past-president Adrian Dominican Sr. Elise García* and LCWR president Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Jane Herb, all working closely with St. Joseph of Philadelphia Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director of LCWR.

"I was glad that she left her name in [as a candidate for the presidency] because it's always my belief if everybody refuses, you'll get someone who isn't capable, and I think she's capable of this," Koch said. "Leadership causes you to grow in a way that you might not have grown if you didn't have that experience, because you have to make decisions. You have to learn about things. And what I know about Rebecca is that she's very careful about studying what's needed to be able to understand this situation and respond to it."

'She will just give a lot'

Gemma's interest in the "why" of life and her knack for Italian cooking have roots in the "sacred space" that was her family's lively dinner table growing up, she said.

The youngest of seven, Gemma grew up in California's San Fernando Valley with first-generation Italian parents who "gave us the best of their tradition," she said. Her father worked in the entertainment industry, and her mother taught at a Catholic high school with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. The Gemmas frequently had sisters and priests visit their home.

But it wasn't until she worked in campus ministry while attending the University of San Diego, where she received a degree in special education, that Gemma began "recognizing that I had a religious vocation."



Rebecca Ann Gemma with a student in 1981, right before she entered religious life. "I always said if they had kept me in first grade, I'd probably be there today," Gemma said of teaching as a newly professed sister. "I just loved it." (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

"I just had this sense that maybe God was asking me to do something different," she said.

In order to maintain a sense of control, she came up with three criteria for a congregation she would consider joining:

1. It would allow her to live in California.
2. It would not require a full habit.
3. She could continue to work in special education.

But after writing to 30 congregations that she found in a magazine, Gemma felt drawn to the "real intense joy" that she felt from the Dominican Sisters of Springfield she knew in San Diego. After flying to Illinois to visit the community over Easter break, she "felt at home immediately, felt the spirit of love and family and engagement" — even though the congregation met none of her criteria.

She entered that August, thinking she'd try it for a year. "I told my mom, 'Don't get rid of any of my clothes.' "

That was 41 years ago.

When she was a sister in her 20s and 30s, Gemma's jobs regularly fed into new educational pursuits. She went from teaching first grade to earning a degree in education administration before becoming a principal then earning a master's degree in social work and clinical counseling. She worked at a rape crisis center and later at the Dominican Literacy Center in Aurora, Illinois, a program that offered tutoring, special services and resources for women and families.

"The women at the center felt very comfortable with her," said Dominican Sr. Ann Clennon, prioress of Sacred Heart Convent, the community's motherhouse. The two have worked closely regarding the needs of sisters who are ill or retired and sisters who have internal ministries.



Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma celebrates Christmas with her community in 1996. (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

"She has a great heart for the poor," Clennon said, adding that Gemma is easy to talk to, warm and approachable. "She will just give a lot."

As an educator and social worker, Gemma said her spirituality "is a recognition of finding Christ in people. You're working with folks that have very equal perspective, meaning we're all learners who have been hurt and healed. And relationships are at the epicenter of that."

A leader who listens

Gemma's call to leadership came in 2004. She spent nine years as a council member on the congregational leadership team and is currently in her second term as prioress general, which ends in 2024.

After she became a council member at 46, Gemma served on committees that focused on ongoing formation, "understanding our charism but really moving toward understanding religious life as a whole."

Gemma also learned what it means for a religious community to experience a visitation: She was on the board and a council member during her congregation's canonical visitation in 2009, and she was on LCWR's national board and a regional chair during the Vatican's 2012-15 apostolic visitation of LCWR.

The canonical visitation of the Dominicans assessed their formation for radicalization or contemporary secularization. Gemma recalled the sisters' fear that they had done something wrong before they came together to say, "We know who we are, and we are following God's call as we continue in our ministry, as we continue to study."

But she said the LCWR visitation in which the Vatican investigated the leadership organization was particularly an "eye-opener."

"When I saw the pain and the questioning of women who had given their lives and who have been so faithful to Vatican II. ... It put me in a place of recognition that I needed to be both an observer of this team and a learner," she said. "And that's what I did."

Advertisement

She pored through the documents from the Second Vatican Council in search of the "kernels that we are just beginning to allow to grow," such as "the profound identity we all share in Christ by virtue of our baptism, the significant role of the laity within the church, the continual revelation of God in each moment of our existence."

To McElroy, this demonstrated Gemma's fearlessness in asking or approaching difficult questions relevant to congregations now.

"She comes to all of that through a real commitment to contemplative dialogue," as she did during LCWR's visitation, McElroy said. "That's helped her to not hold things so tightly that it begins to really burden her ... She's able to just say, 'I cannot carry it as I need to be able to — just trust that God is in this.' "

The Dominicans of Springfield sponsor three high schools near the Illinois motherhouse, including Marian Catholic High School in Chicago Heights, Illinois, where Gemma serves as the president of the board.



With first-generation Italian immigrant parents, Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma has developed a reputation among her friends for being a gifted cook of Italian dishes. (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

"What I have really enjoyed about our relationship is her management style, how she works," said Vince Krydynski, the high school's president. "She allows me and the school to do what we need to do on a daily basis," yet she's always available to talk things through as a counselor or mentor when he needs it, typically in a way that's "grounded in spirituality."

Gemma describes her spiritual life as "practical" while always looking at the "why or why not and working very hard not to be judgmental in that," instead inviting the variables that make life complex.

"Rebecca is very good at listening to all different sides, opinions, and somehow finding a way to include everyone's opinion even though it may not be exactly what we would want to go forward with, but to include it in such a way that it can become a part of the final decision," said Daughter of the Heart of Mary Sr. Anita Baird, who co-chairs The Spirit Call for the LCWR anti-racism effort with Gemma.

'She's willing to do the hard work'

Gemma's work in anti-racism was a priority and interest of hers well before it became a focus of LCWR.

For the past 18 years, the Dominicans of Springfield have worked with Crossroads to dismantle racism within their congregation. That anti-racism work, Gemma said, has become "leaven for recognizing a call for our congregation to address our own racism and white privilege and then bring that into our sponsored institution in systemic ways."

Her anti-racism work within LCWR through The Spirit Call includes a diverse committee with a goal to reassess structures, Baird said. Part of this includes inviting non-leaders to serve on the LCWR board to provide additional perspective for the leaders, most of whom are white.

Baird said Gemma is seasoned in this commitment and how to approach it.



Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, second from right, with the 2007 executive committee at the Dominican Leadership Conference (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

"She has a way of getting to the heart of an issue, speaking to it in a way that people are open to hearing but also challenging that we no longer just continue business as usual," she said.

"Rebecca sees [that] LCWR has been, in its tradition, the voice that will speak to this issue and speak truth to power. ... I've just been very impressed with the way that she leads, her vision and her real commitment to this work. Not just lip service, but she's willing to do the hard work and really to continue to challenge LCWR to this transformative moment."

Through her anti-racism work, Gemma has deepened an appreciation for the fact that simple solutions never satisfy complex issues; instead, Gemma said, one must revisit "the core." And therein lies a lesson for religious life, as well: At its core, she said, "religious life is about relationship with God and with people and with God's

creation."

Gemma said she draws from her experience leading a multiethnic congregation and revisiting traditions that, "in the past, have brought us closer to God, but we need to be able to say, 'What is the value of this, and where is it today that continues to bring others to God? How can we be diverse and not divisive?' That's a critical piece for us today."

Her genuine desire to hear different voices and be collaborative, Krydynski said, contributes to her willingness to be intentional with decisions, taking time to sit down and think things through.



Dominican Sr. Ann Elizabeth Little, left, and Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma at their 25th jubilee in 2009 (Courtesy of Rebecca Ann Gemma)

"You can tell there's always something else that she's thinking about," Krydynski said. "It's interesting because she's looking to come to you ... for your piece of the puzzle, your piece of the truth, and how it's going to fit into the larger picture. She's got that grasp of the larger picture. But on the other hand, she could sit down and talk to me at my level."

"It's very steadying to have someone at the helm who has the big picture, who's gathering as much information as she can from me to also help her make some larger decisions."

Baird echoed that sentiment, adding that she finds comfort in knowing that as president of LCWR, Gemma will still "be Rebecca."

"She will continue to expand the table, continue to invite those that did not feel welcome at the table before and to encourage that their voices are heard and included in a way that shapes the direction of LCWR," she said.

When asked about the challenges she sees for religious life from her vantage point in leadership, Gemma mentioned congregations coming to fulfillment, particularly the "recognition of wanting to provide for future leaders less administrative engagements — like properties, like sponsorships — and [keeping] the prophetic role of religious life that is needed in the world today."

Religious life, she said, is needed more today than ever, "no question." The challenge, then, is not to lose the "why."

"This is God's mission," she said. "It's not ours; we are part of it, and we get that great privilege, but it's not ours. So, how do we keep leaning into, if not falling into, the hands of the Spirit and just say, 'Work through us; don't let our mistakes be so big that it's too much.' "

**An earlier version of this story gave the incorrect past-president of LCWR.*

Read this next: Q & A with Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, new president-elect of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious
This story appears in the **LCWR 2022** feature series. View the full series.