News
Religious Life

Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary at her congregation's motherhouse on June 9 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On Aug. 11, Geary will become president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious at the organization's annual assembly in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Maureen Geary idolized her father. So when he began a mortal fight against colon cancer, she started to do some serious soul searching.

She thought of how he was a teacher at Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School and how much he loved it and, more importantly, how many lives he had touched. Then she thought of her own life: She was both a certified public accountant and an attorney at a respected law firm in town. She was 29 years old and had a great career ahead of her.

"But what difference will it make?" she asked herself.

She began attending daily Mass. She had been on a journey to deepen her faith since a youth retreat in high school, but her father's cancer battle and death in 1985 at age 70 gave her search urgency.

"I wanted God to heal my dad," Geary said. "I asked, 'What do you want from me, God?' I don't know that I was bargaining, but I was definitely pleading."

A Geary family photo from about 1984, the year before Francis Geary died. Maureen Geary is in the center, surrounded by (clockwise from top) Pat, Tim, Sheila, Mike, parents Marian and Francis, and Kevin. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

She was drawn to the Jesus of the Scriptures — the Jesus whose ministry was healing bodies, minds and souls, the Jesus who didn't build temples but ate with sinners, who chose the weak, the castoffs, and even his enemies to be closest to him and carry on the work.

"I'm sure that began to open me up to a vocation," Geary said. "I was asking, 'What's the meaning of suffering? What's the meaning of life?' I found I had a passion like my dad for what Jesus did."

That combination of intellect — experience in both accounting and the law — and a vulnerable, trusting faith will serve Grand Rapids Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary well as the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), those who know her say.

On Friday, Aug. 11, Geary will move from her year as president-elect to president of the leadership organization that represents about two-thirds of the nearly 40,000 sisters in the United States. LCWR holds its annual assembly Tuesday through Friday (Aug. 8-11) in Dallas, and will examine how, from the vastness of the universe to the space within ourselves, God creates life, even out of what appears to be destruction and death.

For Geary, her religious life was formed out of the death of her father. But that transition was made easier by a lifetime of growing up in the Catholic faith — and by being surrounded by sisters.

Maureen Geary, probably 2 years old, in about 1958 (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

Finding her faith

Geary, 67, is technically the fifth-born child of seven in her family. There were four boys born to Francis and Marian Geary before Maureen, but one died at birth. After Maureen came another girl and another boy.

They all attended their parish school, Immaculate Heart of Mary, which was staffed by Grand Rapids Dominican sisters. When Maureen got to high school, it was where her dad taught — Catholic Central — and it, too, was staffed by Grand Rapids Dominicans. The family home was just 3 or 4 miles from the congregation's motherhouse and its college, Aquinas.

"So I had many long-term relationships with the sisters," Geary said.

She also has a long-term relationship with Grand Rapids — she has lived and ministered there all her life, aside from when she was in college or in the novitiate.

"It's a big enough city that you feel there's both great opportunities and needs to serve, without being overwhelming," she said.

Sisters were family friends, there were home Masses held at their house, and Geary would help out in her mother's CCD classroom. But she didn't have much in the way of a spiritual life.

"I was probably a typical Catholic school kid: Things are structured this way, and it's going to be part of your life," she said. "But I wouldn't say there was any particular passion in my faith life. I never had feelings that I don't want to do this. It was, this is what I am, this is what I do, but there was not much beyond that."

Maureen Geary, bottom center, in a family photo from about 1962. In the photo are, from left, brothers Tim, Pat and Mike; parents Marian and Francis; and little sister Sheila. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

Then she went on a senior class retreat, and not only did her faith start to become real to her, but so did the students around her.

"We really got beyond the superficiality," Geary said. "It was a chance to encounter my classmates in a faith context."

That faith connection to others continued as she studied accounting at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

"Student life at Notre Dame revolved around the residence hall, and each one had its own chapel," she said. "I very much enjoyed worshiping with classmates."

After graduation, she took an accounting job in Grand Rapids, but it required traveling to conduct audits three months a year, so she lived at home, where she joined Renew International. She wanted to learn more about her faith, she said, and what had been a habit for her as a child became more and more meaningful.

But after two years of being an accountant, she decided she needed a change, and entered the University of Michigan's law school. By 1983, she was an attorney at the prestigious law firm then known as Law Weathers & Richardson — the firm where President Gerald Ford had been a lawyer.

Two years later, her dad died, and everything changed.

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Grand Rapids Dominican Sr. Jackie Bennett was a family friend, and after talking to Bennett at a Christmas concert, Geary began to wonder if there was a place she could find true meaning and life and make a contribution in the world. So one day she called Bennett.

"I must have picked up the phone five times and hung up again," Geary said. "Finally I called her and said, 'Can we have lunch?' "

Soon, she was at a "come and see weekend" with Megan McElroy, who would become a sister a year after Geary and a lifelong friend.

"I think *she* was surprised when she started thinking about religious life," McElroy said. "Yet she allowed God to kind of sneak in and entice her to something more and different. She could have a very profound effect on people's lives, still live a faithful life and in the world's terms be very successful, just in a different way."

The death of a parent can have a powerful effect, but watching her father slowly die over several months profoundly changed Geary.

"I think being there with someone as they're going through that process of dying, it can't help but leave an impact on a person's heart and soul," McElroy said. "It was the same with her mom."

Sr. Maureen Geary celebrates her mother's 100th birthday on Sept. 26, 2019. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

Marian Geary died in 2021 at age 101, with Maureen personally caring for her until the end.

"As she was going through the process with her mom, in many ways Maureen was very private about her grieving, but at the same time very honest, as well," McElroy said. "She would keep it to herself, and yet when she did talk about it, she was very honest and authentic."

As Geary preached during the Triduum services that year, she talked about Christ's tomb and how hard it is to be waiting, to be in those dark days before the Resurrection.

"And you knew her mom had just died a couple of months before," McElroy said. "She was able to articulate that: 'My faith is here, but I still have questions.' She is authentic, vulnerable and honest about her faith, yet it is very grounded. I think her faith is much deeper than what she thinks it is."

A life of leadership

In 1987, at age 31, Geary joined the Grand Rapids Dominicans (McElroy joined in 1988) and was soon on her way to the Dominicans' collaborative novitiate in St. Louis, where she learned and discerned with 10 other novices.

"It was just a wonderful experience, and really affirming," Geary said.

After a year, she was back in Grand Rapids, teaching accounting at Aquinas College, but soon moved out of the classroom and into financial administration.

"My dad was a teacher and I idolized my dad, so I wanted to be a teacher, but it probably wasn't my best thing," Geary said. "But I learned a lot, and I really appreciate what teachers do."

She became the university's comptroller, then its vice president of finance.

Sr. Maureen Geary, left, celebrates her 25th jubilee as a Grand Rapids Dominican in 2013. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

"Without a doubt, Maureen is a thinker," said Sr. Mary Ann Barrett, who lived with Geary in the 1990s and later was on the congregation's leadership team with her for six years. "She's thorough in her research, she gets input from other people before she makes decisions — she really weighs her options and thinks things out."

Barrett, too, said Geary's faith inspires others, even though she is generally quiet about it.

"I'm an extrovert and Maureen is not," Barrett said. "She has just grown so much in her reflections, and they're quite inspirational, out of the heart. You can tell there's a lot of prayer that goes into it."

Geary is not one to talk about herself. So it is not surprising that in a long interview about her life, she never mentioned an activity others say was central: softball.

"She was a softball player before and after she entered," Barrett said. "We would go to softball games and be on the sidelines cheering her on. She would just raise her glove and hide her face."

McElroy said Geary wasn't just a softball player — she was a great softball player.

"She played softball for 50-some years," McElroy said. "She was a pitcher and a wicked second baseman."

In 1999, Geary left Aquinas and began working in the Grand Rapids Diocese's Secretariat for Social Justice, which later became Catholic Charities, where she was the director of programs.

Sr. Maureen Geary sits with a child in an orphanage run by the Grand Rapids Dominicans in 2014, part of a campus of ministries the sisters began in Chimbote, Peru. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

In 2004, she took on a new challenge: Writing a 10-year plan for the Grand Rapids housing continuum of care so they could receive $5 million in federal grants to end homelessness. She had to work with everyone in the community involved in housing, including developers, bankers, nonprofits, philanthropists, churches and activists.

She also worked closely with Betty Zylstra, who was director of the Salvation Army at the time; the Salvation Army was the finance agent for the grant. The work was complex and the relationships could be challenging.

"It wasn't just about a specific part of the homeless world, it was everything from emergency shelters to transitional shelters to affordable housing. It was the gamut," Zylstra said. "It was also helping people understand there wasn't one easy answer to this, that it involved all kinds of systems and all kinds of people involved, and Maureen put together a plan to do that."

But people wanted an easy answer. They wanted to just be able to write a check to build a homeless shelter and go back to not thinking about the homeless.

"There were not a lot of people who believed this was the biggest problem in the world," Zylstra said. "They were like, 'Just find a place to put the poor people. Come on.' "

But Geary knew the problem was systemic and any meaningful response would have to be systemic.

Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary at her congregation's motherhouse on June 9 in Grand Rapids, Michigan (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

"I was so grateful we had Sister Maureen because she doesn't trivialize people or issues. She came at that work with a deep understanding and a deep belief in people's rights and dignity and well-being," Zylstra said. "What she brought to it in those years was distinctive from anyone else we could have hired. She has a depth and a listening ear and a brilliant mind and a heart. There were lots of politics, but she found her way through it with grace."

In the end, people resisted change and little of the plan was implemented, Zylstra said. But nearly two decades later, it still resonates. That's because Geary truly listened to what the community — all of it — was saying.

McElroy said Geary has brought that skill to leadership. Geary was first elected as the order's councilor of finance in 2006, then was prioress from 2012 to 2018, and is now one of the three councilors on the leadership team. McElroy is also on the team,

and works with Geary at LCWR, as well, where McElroy is chair of Region Seven, which covers Michigan and Indiana.

"She is very insightful. She asks great questions," McElroy said. "She has a pastoral mind, a justice mind. She has a heart for justice, especially for the homeless."

That mind and heart will be tested as Geary fronts an organization of leaders of congregations searching for what God intends for religious life in the United States.

"It's no secret that we've been looking at what LCWR needs to be as institutes get smaller and many won't be members anymore," Geary said.

LCWR reported last year that one-third of all congregations in the United States have fewer than 50 members, that eight in 10 women religious are age 70 or older, and that while most communities have enough members for leadership and to hold chapters through 2025, that number will see a large decrease after 2025.

Sr. Maureen Geary walks the Camino de Santiago, or Way of St. James, in 2015, a 177-mile pilgrimage across Spain. (Courtesy of Maureen Geary)

"We're moving forward together," Geary said. "We have eyes wide open, hearts wide open, and hands extended in prayer wide open. But I've found it to be a very life-giving process. [Diminishment] is not just something to be mourned, but something that puts us on the path to a new reality."

McElroy said that echoes something that happened in 2015, when McElroy, Geary and a few others walked part of the Camino de Santiago, or Way of St. James — a 170-mile pilgrimage across Spain.

"It was a profound experience, and she often goes back to that," McElroy said. "We walked 14 days straight."

McElroy said that what Geary took from the experience — besides blisters — was the realization that they were not making a new path, but following a path already laid out for them. It wasn't always easy, because the signs were sometimes hidden or easy to miss, but the pilgrimage was much more about the journey than the destination. Several sisters have compared the changes in religious life to being on a journey where you do not know the path or where it will take you, only that you must trust God to guide you.

"It was a great metaphor for her because you're not finding the way, you're following the way. You're looking for those arrows. Who's the arrow? It's Jesus Christ," McElroy said. "It's all the encounters you have along the way, and because you follow that arrow, it leads you and invites you into different experiences you wouldn't imagine for yourself."

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