News



Sr. Kathy Brazda, president of the Congregation of St. Joseph, is seen in the chapel of the order's convent in Kalamazoo, Michigan, on July 19. Brazda will become president of LCWR on Aug. 16. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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KALAMAZOO, Mich. — August 12, 2024

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Sr. Kathy Brazda was several days into walking the Camino de Santiago, the 500-mile pilgrimage across Spain known in English as the Way of St. James, and her hand hurt.

Her feet hurt, too, of course, but her hand ached because she had been clutching her map so tightly, for fear of getting lost, that her muscles began to rebel.

Then a wind gust came and blew the paper out of her hand. All she could do was watch it fly away.



Sr. Kathy Brazda in 2015 on the Camino de Santiago in Spain (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

"I'm not good with directions," Brazda laughs, now nearly a decade after the incident. "But the route is well marked, so it's hard to get lost."

As her map floated off over the Spanish countryside, Brazda realized God gives us what we need for the journey. And carrying things we don't need — even if it seems vital, like a map — only slows us down or holds us back. She also realized that when she wasn't clutching her map, worrying about the route, she could better take in and experience her surroundings.

"It's a metaphor for life," she said.

It may also be a metaphor for religious life in the United States: The world of Catholic sisters is changing dramatically, and there is no map for the journey they are on.

But Brazda, president of the Congregation of St. Joseph, will have to help guide that journey, regardless — on Friday, Aug. 16, she will become president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about two-thirds of the nearly 36,000 sisters in the United States. Grand Rapids Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary will move from her year as president to the role of past-president, and Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sr. Vicky Larson will become president-elect.

LCWR holds its annual assembly Tuesday through Friday (Aug. 13-16) in Orlando, and will "name and look critically at what is happening in the world today and in religious life in order to see the compelling call to religious life at this time."



Sr. Kathy Brazda (left) at her first Communion in 1963, with her younger sister Geri (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

'Now I know you're ready'

Brazda, 64, grew up in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, where "everyone in our neighborhood was Polish and Catholic."

Family was close — her grandparents lived in the same apartment building — and Brazda and her two younger sisters, Geri and Jane, grew up in a home where the

walls were filled with pictures of saints. Their parish, Our Lady of Czestochowa, was near the center of family life.

"I grew up feeling surrounded by the communion of saints," Brazda said.

For high school, Brazda attended Nazareth Academy in nearby La Grange Park, run by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

"In the 1970s, it was a very progressive place to be educated," she said. "As a woman, we were empowered to be leaders at that school. In fact, I only learned later that many of the women leaders in my town and parish came from that academy."

She studied English education at the University of Illinois' Chicago campus — one of the first in her family to go to college — then taught in inner-city schools around Chicago, including Maria High School, run by the Sisters of St. Casimir.



Sr. Kathy Brazda in 1974 (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

But she wanted something more, and began wondering if religious life might be the answer.

"I knew four different communities, so I went and talked to each of them, but I found myself being really attracted to the Sisters of St. Joseph," Brazda said. "They had that spark of creativity — I felt at home there."

Brazda's sister Geri Mesik said that growing up, there wasn't the thought that Kathy would become a sister, but it also wasn't a surprise when she did — it was just a natural progression.

"I never questioned whether she's going to be a sister or not," she said. "It's just a thing that happened."

Mesik didn't join religious life, but has worked for the Congregation of St. Joseph for 26 years and is now the compensation and benefits manager.

In 1983, Brazda joined the congregation, and after formation returned to teaching. But before she took her final vows, doubt began to creep in.

"I started wondering, 'Is this really what I want to do?' " Brazda said. Finally, she decided she wasn't ready.



Sr. Kathy Brazda is pictured with her parents Theresa and Marvin Brazda in 1983. (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

"It was a very painful decision," she said. "I left for seven years."

Sr. Pat Bergen was Brazda's novice director.

"She needed more time to discern," Bergen said. "We were pretty sure, but she was not pretty sure."

During those years, Brazda got a master's degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University and a master's degree in education administration from Dominican University.

She kept teaching — including two years in Colombia — and began working at a small parish in Chicago. She focused on what she wanted and needed in her life.

"She took on experiences that really expanded her mind, her relationships, her heart," Bergen said. "She came back much more suited to be a member of the congregation — she grew in many, many ways."

Finally, Brazda knew she was ready.

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"My mom said, 'Now I know you're ready,' " she said. "One of the hardest things I ever did was to leave, but one of the greatest gifts ever given to me was that the congregation loved me in leaving and loved me as they welcomed me back. I was coming home."

She made her vows and became pastoral associate in the parish for 10 years before leaving in 2007 to co-found and direct Taller de José, a sponsored ministry of the congregation that accompanies people in need, connecting them to services available to help them. After a decade there, she joined the team of the Chicago Archdiocese's revitalization effort, Renew My Church.

She was elected to the congregation's leadership team, and in 2018 elected to her first five-year term as president, then joined the national board of LCWR.

In addition to founding Taller de José in 2007, there was a major change in Brazda's congregation — one that may make her uniquely qualified for the LCWR presidency.

What Brazda brings to the presidency

About the time Brazda returned to the congregation in the mid-1990s, serious discussions began with six other Sisters of St. Joseph communities about how they might better pool their resources. The process wasn't always easy.

"Soon after I came back, we were talking about this reconfiguration," she said. "One of the reasons I came to the Sisters of St. Joseph in La Grange was it was local, and now that was changing."

By 2007 a decade of work came to fruition: The seven congregations went out of existence and became a new, single community: The Congregation of St. Joseph.

"It was an experience of self-emptying love, and I don't say that lightly," Brazda said. "There was a giving up of ourselves to become something new, giving something up for the greater good."



Sr. Kathy Brazda in 2006 with her nephew Sam (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

That experience, both the years of work before the consolidation and the years of work — getting rid of or renovating buildings, revamping ministries, organizing health care — that came after are now reality for many congregations, and their leaders are looking to LCWR for resources to guide them through it.

"We live in this mystery of death into life," Brazda said. "We have a tendency to hold on to what we know, what we are familiar with, what we like. … In religious life we are being called to give up things we don't need. We're letting go of schools, buildings, priorities and even numbers of sisters. My experience of reconfiguration had pieces of all of that in there."

Bergen said the most important part of that experience is that Brazda understands what congregations are going through as they spin off ministries, sell buildings and campuses, and even look to completion.

"It gives her insight into what many, many congregations in LCWR are going through right now," Bergen said. "Whether it be that their time is finished, or they're merging or uniting with another congregation … She understands the letting go, the grieving. And not only that, but the whole paschal mystery — the dying of an identity but coming out the other side to new life."

In times of great change, people look for leaders.

"At Our Lady of Czestochowa, [Kathy] was the leader of the teen club," Mesik said. "We all did Girl Scouts — Kathy continued on as a Girl Scout leader. She had her own troop that she took camping and everything. From president of the CSJs to president of LCWR is just a national progression for her."

Sr. Kathy Sherman has known Brazda since she entered the congregation, and lived with her for a while.

"What makes her a good leader is she really listens deeply," Sherman said. "We call it contemplation and action: We pray our way into action and action leads us back into contemplation. I think her leadership is grounded in that."



Sr. Kathy Brazda greets Pope Francis in 2021. (Courtesy of Sr. Kathy Brazda)

Brazda said there are many aspects to consider.

"It's a combination of pain with hope. We have to grieve, but we can't be stuck there," she said. "We are getting back to the essentials of religious life and what that is and how it's a gift to the world. We're getting back to the essence of what the life is about."

It's also seeing the big picture.

"The charism is not just ours. We don't own the charism — it's bigger than us," she said. "But I think the gift is we can recognize it in ourselves and others and bring it to the world."

It's also recognizing that our strength is in our vulnerability, another unique aspect Brazda brings to the position: Brazda ran for election to the LCWR presidency but lost to Larson, something that wasn't easy for her. But then Franciscan Sisters of

Perpetual Adoration Sr. Sue Ernster, voted in last year as president-elect and set to become president Aug. 16, resigned in May to dedicate more time to her own congregation's needs.

LCWR's national board then appointed Brazda to fill Ernster's position, meaning Brazda would only have two months as president-elect before becoming president. Larson will become president-elect on Aug. 16, as usual, and become president next year.

"It was in my vulnerability that I was appointed. There's a lesson in that," Brazda said. "This time in religious life is about vulnerability."

Sr. Marie Hogan, who has known Brazda for at least two decades, said not having a year as president-elect won't be a problem.

"She's been on the national board, so she knows the movements and workings of LCWR," Hogan said. "I think it's a real sense of trust from the current leaders of LCWR to invite Kathy in — they do know her and know her capabilities."



Sr. Kathy Brazda, president of the Congregation of St. Joseph, is pictured in the order's convent in Kalamazoo, Michigan, on July 19. An avid hiker, she has walked the Camino de Santiago twice. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Still, Brazda wasn't sure whether to accept the board's appointment — it meant her congregation would have her full attention after only two years instead of three, but it also meant the most intense year of the term would be a year earlier than expected.

"God had a different plan," Brazda said. "He says 'Hold your hands open,' even though you have the page with the map in your hand."

Sherman said that, too, is one of Brazda's strengths.

"It's not easy sometimes for things to change," she said. "But sometimes we have to take the courageous steps that aren't always comfortable. It's about listening for the next step the Spirit is inviting us to take."

Hogan said Brazda understands that vulnerability is also part of being on a team.

"We all have our maps we hold on to and our vision of particular things," Hogan said. "Sometimes we have to help each other let go of the map."

Spirituality and a strong flame

Brazda also knows about literally taking steps into unknown territory.

In addition to walking the Camino, she has a great love of backpacking and hiking, citing trips to Isle Royale National Park and the Superior Hiking Trail, which stretches hundreds of miles along the shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota.

She used to backpack into the wilderness to camp, but hasn't had the time for those trips in recent years. "I love being in the wilderness," Brazda said.

Sherman said she's hoping Brazda will be able to do some hiking this fall in Marinette, Wisconsin, known for its many waterfalls, but it is unclear yet whether she'll have time.

She said Brazda's love of hiking and camping reflects her spirituality in another way, as well.

"She knows how to build a great campfire," Sherman said. "It's kind of a metaphor for her own heart — her love of God, her love of our congregation, her love of our charism and spirituality. That's a very strong flame in her life."

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