News



LCWR executive director Sr. Carol Zinn speaks Aug. 13, 2024, at the group's assembly in Orlando, Florida. Nearly 600 sisters are expected for this year's event in Atlanta Aug. 12-15. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Nearly 600 leaders of congregations of women religious and 300 of their guests will gather next week in Atlanta for four days of discerning God's call for Catholic sisters in the United States.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious' annual assembly brings together sisters in leadership from across the country, as well as justice promoters, the lay executives congregations have hired, such as finance or executive officers, and communications professionals.

LCWR represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 sisters in the United States; the assembly runs Aug. 12-15.

The conference will focus on "what will sustain the leaders for the work that is in front of them," said LCWR executive director Sr. Carol Zinn. "What is it that can happen here that can't happen on Zoom?"

If the assembly in recent years seems to have leaned more toward being like a retreat, Zinn said that is no accident. Other organizations, such as the Resource Center for Religious Institutes, offer workshops and specialized information, where the LCWR assembly has a different aim, she said.

"Members have said they want to talk to each other, so our process has shifted to more table conversation," Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph from Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, said. "The shift is not so much to being more retreat-like, but more to the communal discernment of responding to the question of what are we called to be now? You can't do that in a 90-minute workshop."

The assembly often attracts heavy hitters for its keynote presentations, but this year has two of the biggest: Sr. Simona Brambilla and Fr. James Martin.



Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla, prefect of the Dicastery for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, will address the LCWR Assembly in Atlanta. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Brambilla, of the Institute of Missionary Sisters of Consolata, is prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, making 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. In May, Pope Leo XIV named Sr. Tiziana Merletti, of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor to succeed Brambilla as secretary.

With Brambilla will be Daniela Leggio, a civil and canon lawyer and a member of a secular institute. She has worked in the dicastery for 26 years and oversees leadership conferences of religious around the world.

In the past, the prefect has sent a letter to the assembly to be read by his representative at the event's opening. This year, Brambilla will give her greetings and encouragement in person.

Zinn said it is most important that the prefect is a member of a religious order, because they — whether man or woman — better understand living in community and the needs of congregations and their members. But "we're absolutely thrilled that she's a sister."

It is also significant that Brambilla participated in the synod on synodality, Zinn said, and understands religious life on a global scale.

Jesuit Fr. James Martin is editor at large of America Media, a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, the author of many books, and is well known for his work to encourage the church to reach out to and embrace LGBTQ+ Catholics.

LCWR has a three-person presidency, and on Aug. 15 their terms end. Presentation Sr. Vicky Larson will end her term as president-elect and become president; St. Joseph Sr. Kathy Brazda's term as president will end and she will become past-president; and past-president Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary will finish her three-year term on the presidential team. Joining as president-elect will be 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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The theme of this year's assembly is "Hope Unbroken: Journeying in God's Promise." Zinn said two panel presentations will address how to hold onto hope in today's world. One, addressing social justice, will include representatives from the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Change and the Carter Center. The other, on how to hold onto hope as a congregational leader, will include Good Shepherd Sr. Barbara Beasley, Mercy Sr. Pat McDermott and Verbum Dei Sr. Sara Postlethwaite.*

To mark the 10th anniversary of Laudato Si', the morning prayer on Aug. 14 will be conducted as a short pilgrimage through downtown Atlanta with a focus on the three legs of LCWR's social justice efforts — racism, migration and climate change.

The assembly will close Aug. 15 with the presentation of the Outstanding Leadership Award to Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin.

Zinn said that over the decades, and in recent years as LCWR shaped its social justice work, sisters began with direct service to meet the urgent needs of the day. It

then expanded to work on systemic change to decrease those needs, then political advocacy to encourage policy changes around them both. Now, she said, transformational justice is at the forefront.

"The core of what is tremendously out of balance is how we are with each other as human beings," she said. "It's all about relationship."

That work is not easy because much of it is internal — people need to change themselves first — and most of it is invisible.

Even as congregational leaders struggle with declining membership, selling properties and buildings, spinning off or shutting down ministries, and paying for health care for aging members, Zinn said there is abundant hope to hold onto.

"Maybe we are exactly where we need to be — to be vulnerable, to not know, to not have everything sealed up, and to just walk together," she said. "This is not about what we want to see fixed, it's about what is God doing right now?"

**This story has been updated to clarify information about a panel presentation to be held at the annual assembly.*

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