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St. Joseph Sr. Kathy Brazda delivers the presidential address Aug. 13 at the LCWR assembly in Atlanta, speaking about how her cancer reshaped her view and practice of leadership. (GSR/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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The Leadership Conference of Women Religious' annual assembly kicked off in earnest Wednesday, Aug. 13, with a moving presidential address from Sr. Kathy Brazda and a keynote from Sr. Simona Brambilla.

The conference, held Aug. 12-15 under the theme "Hope Unbroken: Journeying in God's Promise", brings together leaders of Catholic sisters from around the United States. This year nearly 600 sisters are attending, plus nearly 300 guests. LCWR represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 U.S. sisters.

Wednesday morning brought the presidential address, which Brazda, a Sister of St. Joseph, used to share the lessons she has learned in the last 10 months since she was diagnosed with cancer. That humbling, profound experience made her a better leader, she said.

The moment she was diagnosed, "everything changed. 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?"

Related: New LCWR president, Sr. Kathy Brazda, to lead conference in time of 'vulnerability'

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."

After surgery, she moved into the congregation's assisted living center, spending quality time with sisters she had not been with on a daily basis since her novitiate.

"It was a joy to encounter them again, to experience their deep prayer, joy, curiosity about the world. They weren't retired from mission — they were living it," Brazda

said. "We grew together in sharing our giftedness and weakness to live our vocation and mission. And isn't that the call to community? Isn't that the call to leadership?"



Nearly 600 sisters and 300 of their guests are gathered in Atlanta for the LCWR assembly, which runs Aug. 12-15. (GSR/Dan Stockman)

She said she was stripped of her veil of self-sufficiency and the narrative she told herself of competence and abilities.

"It shouldn't take a major illness or injury to bring us to this," Brazda said. "When we let go of our pride, our ego and move to more participatory ways of leadership, all of us have the opportunity to radiate Christ and depend on the Spirit for inspiration and grace. Illness did not take leadership from me. It reshaped it."

Following her address was the afternoon keynote speaker Brambilla, prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, a position that made 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 the past, the prefect has sent a letter to the assembly to be read by his representative. This year, Brambilla, of the Institute of Missionary Sisters of Consolata, gave her greetings and encouragement in person with a few, spontaneous words of welcome during the Tuesday, Aug. 12, opening of the Assembly.

Brambilla's Wednesday keynote, delivered in her native Italian, 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.



Missionary of Consolata Sr. Simona Brambilla, prefect of the Vatican dicastery for religious, gives her keynote address Aug. 13 at the LCWR assembly in Atlanta. (GSR/Dan Stockman)

"The moon … travels in company, inhabiting the horizon of communion and sharing that finds in the night a time of intimacy, a privileged expression," Brambilla said in the written translation of her remarks. Unlike the sun, which overpowers every other light, religious must be "humble stars called to illuminate, along with other stars and planets, the firmament of this night that is our time."

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.

She went on to tell of several religious who have been martyred in recent years.

"We might ask ourselves why hatred, violence and evil are unleashed against such vulnerable, fragile, defenseless beings, so far from the power structures, so far from the pursuit of visibility, strength, triumph or fame. Who could such lives possibly threaten?" Brambilla asked. "Probably they trouble and frighten evil itself, precisely because they are completely vulnerable and yet extraordinarily strong in spirit. They are filled with God, inflamed by His fire. …There is a kind of fragility inhabited by God that frightens evil. It disturbs evil. It makes it tremble."

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She closed with an anecdote of visiting Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2018, and seeing the contrast between the powerful, well-armed NATO soldiers and the completely vulnerable Catholic sisters there.

"I will never forget the words of one NATO officer: 'These two women, extraordinary, humble, and dedicated, do infinitely more for these people than all of us soldiers put together,'" Brambilla said.

Thursday's keynote address, Aug. 14, will be by Jesuit Fr. James Martin, editor at large of America Media, a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication

who is also well known for his work to encourage the church to reach out and embrace LGBTQ Catholics.

Friday, Aug. 15, will see the transition of LCWR officers as terms end and begin, and the presentation of the Outstanding Leadership Award to Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin.

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