News
Religious Life



In this undated photo, Mother President Catherine Marie Schuhmann (center, seated) visits with a community of Passionist nuns in Japan. Now-Sr. Catherine Marie, 82, completed her six year term as mother president of the Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ in the spring of 2025 and returned home to her beloved St. Joseph Monastery in Whitesville, Ky. (OSV News/Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Marie Schuhmann)

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As a musician, Sr. Catherine Marie Schuhmann likens the expressions of the female Passionist vocation to "a symphony orchestra — all these different instruments, all contributing to the one, beautiful, melody."

From her role as mother superior of St. Joseph Monastery in Whitesville; to being summoned to serve as a temporary superior for the Passionist community in Lucca, Italy; to being elected the very first mother president of the newly erected Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ, the Kentucky native has witnessed this contemplative vocation "lived in a beautiful multiplicity of ways."

She completed her six-year term as mother president last spring and, at age 82, is finally back home at her beloved St. Joseph Monastery.

Sr. Catherine Marie — as she is once again called — recently sat down with The Western Kentucky Catholic, newspaper of the Owensboro Diocese, and shared about her many journeys, all of which flowed from her vow of obedience as a Passionist nun.

"I and my dear council members were united in our Passionist charism," said Sr. Catherine Marie of her time as mother president, which brought both blessings and challenges. "We all believed in what the Church was asking us to do."

"I always say, 'This is not our work — this is God's work,'" she said.

> Today, "the Church is trusting the nuns through the principle of subsidiarity," said Sr. Catherine Marie, emphasizing "the trust placed that women can also do this."
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The Holy See erected the Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ on June 29, 2018, which brought all female Passionist communities across the world into the one congregation, instead of remaining in autonomous isolation without shared resources or support.

This development had been set into motion four years prior, when a questionnaire from the Holy See was sent to the 3,000 women's monasteries worldwide regarding issues such as membership, vocations and financial security.

"When the answers began to come in, there was a state of alarm throughout the Dicastery for Consecrated Life," said Sr. Catherine Marie, explaining that the survey recognized "the great decline of religious congregations and even risk of extinction among some."

These struggles "had begun to take a toll on the physical and spiritual life of the communities," she said. "In the face of that, the Holy See had to respond."

For the Passionists in particular, the answer was to form them all into a monastic congregation.

Despite initial fears about ways this could impact their lives as cloistered contemplatives, "our community had the grace of God not to rebel — but to try to seek understanding," said Sr. Catherine Marie.

This "yes" to God's will would soon cause a ripple effect across Passionist women’s communities worldwide.

When St. Joseph Monastery completed the 2014 questionnaire, it was noted that unlike many other Passionist monasteries, the Whitesville community was not only surviving but thriving.

This was largely credited to Sr. Catherine Marie's time as mother superior as she helped bring about a flourishing of vibrant new vocations.



The exterior of St. Joseph Monastery in Whitesville, Ky., is seen in an undated photo. The monastery is home to a community of cloistered Passionist nuns, one of whom, Sister Catherine Marie Schuhmann, was the first mother president of the Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ, erected by the Holy See on June 29, 2018, to bring all female Passionist communities across the world into one congregation. Sister Catherine Marie was elected to a six-year term as mother president during its first General Chapter in 2019. (OSV News/Courtesy of Joe Bland)

In 2018, Sr. Catherine Marie was summoned to Lucca, Italy, to step in as temporary mother superior of the local Passionist monastery, which was attached to the shrine of renowned Passionist St. Gemma Galgani. The historic Lucca monastery had been struggling with vocations and needed a mother figure to get back on its feet.

Then-Mother Catherine Marie was just getting settled into this temporary responsibility in Lucca when the newly erected congregation held its first General Chapter in early 2019. It included the necessary election of a mother president and four consultors.

"And that's when the second-oldest person present — me! — was elected, which was mind-boggling," said Sr. Catherine Marie. "But the grace was there!"

As mother president, her purpose was to "encourage and monitor each monastery as they, on their own, try to incarnate the Passionist charism in their culture," she said.

Another significant responsibility of this role was to make canonical visitations to the Passionist nuns around the world, accompanied by one or two council members, as the congregation continued to discern ways to assist and revitalize their communities amid today's challenges.

In her first circular letter to Passionist nuns worldwide, the new mother president "begged everyone to pray for a new Pentecost. I know it's going to happen," she said.

Sr. Catherine Marie, then 75 and undergoing several major surgeries over the next few years, set out to meet with the communities under her care.

Currently, there are 240 Passionist nuns residing across 14 nations.

One of the more difficult aspects of the mother president's role is to make visitations to communities experiencing "diminishment" due to aging, physical ailments and a lack of vocations, all of which negatively impact their ability to sustain themselves.

"Our Lady has always intervened to solve what we could not solve," said Sr. Catherine Marie.

Sr. Catherine Marie was present for the powerful witness of the women's Passionist community in Genoa, Italy, which chose through prayer and discernment to ultimately join the community of Lucca Passionists.

"This heroic community left their beautiful seaside home in Genoa to integrate with the sisters in Lucca," said Sr. Catherine Marie. "Everyone was praying their way through, asking, 'What does God want?' Now, they are truly one."

She said that anywhere she and her council members went, "we were welcomed as family," encountering "a beautiful expression of the Church — and the people living at the heart of the Church in contemplative life."

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Even when she could not speak the native language in the various countries she visited, Sr. Catherine Marie described the experience of communicating cor ad cor — Latin for "heart to heart" through their "life-giving, love-giving" shared Passionist charism.

There was "such a beauty in each culture that I truly cherished and love," she said. "I was able to form some real friendships."

Sr. Catherine Marie said that amid these changes for the Passionists, some laypeople have asked her "Is the pope trying to destroy traditional monasteries?" by forming this new monastic congregation.

"Quite the opposite," she said. "In all of my dealings with the Holy See, they trusted me, my advisors and councilors: they stood behind us. We did not feel abandoned."

Instead of the Holy See ignoring the warning signs of many struggling Passionist communities, Sr. Catherine Marie said Church officials responded above and beyond: "All my experiences with the Holy See were that they were there to help."

"In 2014, we asked the Holy See if our sisters could have more authority in certain things that pertain to the local communities, as our men's communities do," she said.

And the Holy See said yes.

Today, "the Church is trusting the nuns through the principle of subsidiarity," said Sr. Catherine Marie, emphasizing "the trust placed that women can also do this."

> "I pray for good, solid vocations because without healthy, good vocations we cannot go on," she said. "I pray for an organic growth — because everything in nature grows slowly. If you force a rosebud open, you destroy the beauty of the rose."

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Because the Passionist nuns are more united, they can now share resources for formation, the training of novice directresses and bursars, and even have same-language support groups for their mother superiors.

This past spring, the second General Chapter took place and the new mother president was elected: Mother Gertrude Poggio, an Italian nun who helped to found the first Passionist monastery in Indonesia in the 1980s.

At this gathering, nuns looked to the future with hope, instead of trepidation.

"Now, we care!" said Sr. Catherine Marie. "And the young sisters are leading the way. They are catching the fire and taking it up."

Mother Gertrude "kindly designated me as the first 'grandmother' of the monastic congregation," said Sr. Catherine Marie, who continues to hold all the Passionist nuns in her heart.

"I pray for good, solid vocations because without healthy, good vocations we cannot go on," she said. "I pray for an organic growth — because everything in nature grows slowly. If you force a rosebud open, you destroy the beauty of the rose."

Sr. Catherine Marie is encouraged by the "spirit of solidarity and respect" she found among her Passionist sisters across the world.

"The congregation is in good hands," she said.