

A Creative Exchange: The Friendship of Thomas Merton and Mary Luke Tobin

By Rose Annette Liddell, SL

In his Christmas 1966 Circular Letter, Thomas Merton referred to Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, the Mother General of the Sisters of Loretto, as “our Council Observer and our pride and joy.”¹ In turn, Sr. Luke has called Merton “just a good, warm, and terribly insightful friend.”² The friendship between these two giants of the twentieth-century American Church has been important not just for themselves but also for the many other lives that each of them has touched.

Merton relates the beginning of the relationship in his journal entry for October 2, 1960, the day after he had brought his friend and former professor Dan Walsh to the Loretto Motherhouse, located in Nerinx, Kentucky, twelve miles from Gethsemani, “to see if they could use him as a philosophy professor, and it appears that they can. Very impressed with the place. . . . Mother Luke, energetic, bright, capable, warm, a wonderful person: the Mother General of Loretto. One likes her immediately.”³ Sr. Luke recalled the encounter as “quite a visit,” with “All the white-veiled novices . . . leaning over the balconies in an effort to catch a glimpse of this great man,” and more importantly as “the start of a friendship that lasted over the next nine years” (Wilkes 95-96).

This first meeting led to correspondence and occasional visits, such as the one Merton made to Loretto almost exactly a year later, on October 4, 1961. He remarks in his journal the next day:

Yesterday was memorable for a visit to Loretto, and what a visit! I had been invited to their Sesquicentennial celebration and begged off, as I should not be at such things. Otherwise the invitations would never end. And the Sisters well understand. This time I went over privately, but to my surprise it turned into a celebration nevertheless. But one from which I think we all derived joy. . . . The community has a wonderfully simple and sane spirit, the first completely American congregation of Sisters. . . . It was utterly wonderful, and I am completely grateful for their love. Never anywhere . . . have I felt so much at home, so much with real friends with whom there could be a complete and unreserved understanding, at least about the religious life and its problems. The wonderful, salutary honesty of Loretto and of Mother Luke! This is a treasure beyond estimation, and it manifests something that is absolutely dear to me about Kentucky – this part where I am – and shows me really why I am here (*TTW* 167-68).

In turn, Sr. Luke found Merton’s unpretentious warmth and basic humanity a precious gift: “Merton was delightfully simple, very human



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and very affable And I've never seen him with anyone whom he didn't immediately put at ease. He had a very genuine way of relating to people, a delight with every human person" (Wilkes 96). Merton scholar Bonnie Thurston suggests that the relationship was a crucially important one for Merton: "In Sr. Luke Merton found not only an intellectual equal and a woman spiritually in sympathy with his vocation, but a fellow worker for peace and justice. . . . Their proximity and the normalcy of their relationship was of great benefit to Merton. It was a friendship of true reciprocity, perhaps Merton's first with a woman that could be so described."⁴

Through their friendship a closer relationship developed between the two religious communities, and visiting speakers at one house would often come to give a talk at the other as well, including Dom Henri LeSaux, Daniel Berrigan, Paulist Father Thomas Stransky and others.⁵ Merton himself occasionally came to Loretto to speak; Sr. Luke recalled: "Sometimes we asked him to talk to the novices; sometimes, to the older sisters; and sometimes, to those of us who were responsible for charting our course of renewal. He came when he could, and although he always protected his solitude and his seclusion, he and we enjoyed those occasional conversational exchanges."⁶ In her memoir, *Hope Is an Open Door*, she records part of a presentation to the Loretto novices on prayer, in which Merton told them: "Don't let your prayer be a fight against reality. And the first reality you've got is yourself, and that's where prayer begins. It begins with you and you don't have to go from you to God, because God is in you" (*Hope* 71). When the community celebrated the sesquicentennial of its founding in 1962, Merton volunteered to commemorate the event with a booklet, *Loretto and Gethsemani*,⁷ in which, Sr. Luke notes, he highlighted "the similarity between the founders of Loretto and those of Gethsemani. Rugged and brave pioneers, they had faced the hardships of the Kentucky wilderness with equal courage. Merton wrote, 'We are not only neighbors in a valley that is still lonely, but we are equally children of exile and of revolution'" (*Hope* 77). Luke later brought Merton the draft of the new constitution for the Sisters of Loretto to look over: "I took them over to him one afternoon and said, 'Would you look through this and read it? It's our whole constitution. Then comment on it?' And he said, 'Yes, of course.' He did about an hour and a half tape on it. He said, ' . . . As far as I'm concerned it's the best thing I've seen.' . . . [H]e affirmed what we had already done" ("Growing" 50).

A new dimension entered their friendship in 1964 when Sr. Luke, then President of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, was appointed an official auditor (or auditrix!) at the last two sessions of the Second Vatican Council. Merton reflects in his journal for September 26, 1964, "Mother Luke (as I rather expected) is one of the women observers at the Council – the only American. Wonderful! This has great implications for the nuns, and it may lead to an opening and to considerable progress. Anyway I can hardly think of a better person for this."⁸ On November 1, he wrote to her: "It was not really a surprise to me that you were chosen as observer from the better half of the human race, hitherto represented exclusively at the Council by the Blessed Mother, I suppose. But in any case I congratulate you warmly, and the more so because the honor done to you redounds upon us your friends and neighbors. It is all the more clear than ever that if the Church wants to get the best out of America she has to look to Kentucky."⁹ On her return, she came to Gethsemani and gave the monks a talk about her experiences at the Council, even returning a second time to speak to those who were unable to be present at the first gathering ("Growing" 52-53). Merton commented in his journal for December 10, 1964, "Talking to her made the session very understandable, even the last couple of days, which were pretty ferocious" (*DWL* 178). Merton

was also able to share his own insights and concerns about the Council with Sr. Luke, especially in relation to Schema 13, which would become the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, for which she was a sub-committee member, and on the Decree for Religious Life. As she later recalled, “he did occasionally ask me to hand a letter or document to somebody, or he inquired what did I think about so and so. . . . So I brought back . . . whenever I could the data that was handed out there” (“Growing” 46).



The connection between the two was strengthened by their mutual concern for the necessity to integrate contemplation and action, and to bring the wisdom of the Gospel to bear on pressing issues of the day, above all war and racial justice. This, for Sr. Luke, was Merton’s particular gift to the Church and the country: “It was encouraging to observe the integration of Merton’s action for justice into his profound life of faith and with the expression of that faith in prayer. His own development records his coming to an acute awareness of the human reality, in which he saw not only ‘God alone,’ but also all people as glorious manifestations of God. Once this ‘vision’ possessed him, he spared no effort or words in speaking out against social evil – especially against the oppressions of racism and war” (*Hope* 88).

After moving into the hermitage in August 1965, Merton wasn’t sure how much contact he would be able to maintain with Sr. Luke and his other friends, but they continued to correspond and to meet from time to time. When he arranged for the “retreats” with contemplative prioresses in December of 1967 and May of 1968, he invited her to participate in the gatherings, and to share her experiences at the Council in the context of the efforts for the renewal of religious and contemplative life. Sr. Luke remarks, “I was the neighbor and that’s why I was invited. . . . He invited me as a neighbor and I was glad either to help out in some way or just to be there. . . . One of the things about that, I think, is that he called on me to share what I had learned at the Council. He wanted me to tell about my experiences so I could share them with those sisters and tie this in. He felt that they needed to take their lives in hand” (“Growing” 48). It was through her agency that the transcripts of these meetings were eventually published as *The Springs of Contemplation*. In her preface to the volume she writes, “I have a lasting impression of Merton’s welcoming warmth and ease of manner, which delighted all of us and created an atmosphere of good humor throughout the few days of each gathering. . . . Merton didn’t know how to be stiff or formal with others, and his ability to be a friendly resource filled these days with special enjoyment.”¹⁰

The last meeting of the two friends took place on July 23, 1968, as Merton records in his journal: “This morning Sister Luke and 4 others from Loretto came over and we had Mass – celebrated most informally outdoors at the lake, early, in the cool of the morning. It was very nice indeed. Coffee afterwards and good conversation. When the sun got high and hot they left.”¹¹ Sr. Luke later recalled a charming detail of the occasion: “Well, nobody remembered the water. One of the sisters went over and took a leaf that had dew on it. And she brought it to him. Well, he *loved* that, you know. He flicked the dew into the cup. We all enjoyed it immensely!” (“Growing” 52).

After Merton’s death, Sr. Luke continued to work on behalf of their shared commitments to justice and peace, first with the ecumenical group Church Women United, and then by founding

the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange in Denver. In an interview in 1978, she recalled Merton as saying, “I’d like to see a center started where creative exchange could take place among contemplatives, activists, intellectuals, persons of various professions and disciplines, people whose ideas can help each other grow toward new insights.”¹² From that idea the Center, twenty-nine years old this May, was born. Sr. Luke invited Daniel Berrigan, SJ, also a close friend of Merton, to give the inaugural address to open the Center. (In 1998, Berrigan returned to celebrate the twentieth anniversary.) In his talk, Berrigan emphasized what made Merton’s witness so powerful and so authentic: “From the Bible he was able to draw his images and resources which enabled him to speak the truth ahead of time. . . . It was the fact that Merton was

not only a converted child of the culture, but also a biblical person that kept him going, kept him fueled up. For him suffering was not an imaginary concept, but reality” (*Hope* 83). Luke herself put it this way: “Faced by the compelling events of the 1960s, he moved in both private and public expressions to a world-embracing attitude that was truly prophetic” (*Hope* 90). Since its opening, the Merton Center has hosted numerous retreats and lectures that focus on themes that include prayer, contemplation, Buddhism, Sufism, feminism, ecology, Zen, Scripture and spiritual development, all topics close to Merton’s heart. The speakers read like a Who’s Who of Merton scholars: William Shannon, James Finley, Elena Malits CSC, Jim Conner OCSO, Bonnie Thurston, Tom Nelson CM, Jim Forest, Theophane Boyd OCSO and many others. Frequently, Mary Luke herself was the discussion leader. She saw the Center as a group of people rather than a location, those who would want to study all the things that Merton would be interested in as reflected in his writings. Study the writings, yes – but also study his ideas and inspiration. The point was not to look at Merton but in the same direction he was looking, to realize the vision he had articulated in their conversations years before – to bring together the contemplative and the intellectual: “I have tried to follow that out here in Colorado,” Luke related. “It isn’t exactly according to those ideas, because after all we don’t have Thomas Merton out here. But nevertheless something of his spirit has inspired me to start the center in Denver” (“Growing” 56).

As her friends will testify, Mary Luke had many enthusiasms, such as dance, poetry and reading. She would always have a new book or article to show you that you should read. It might be a poem of Denise Levertov or the latest theological reflection. However, there were two areas that were foremost: Merton, and Vatican II. Luke was not only Merton’s friend but became a staunch advocate of his writings. When giving a retreat or talk she would often start out with a quote, reflect on it for a while herself and then proceed to get her audience to think about it and reflect back to her what it meant to them. This procedure helped those listening to think seriously about Merton’s works, not just to hear them.

The location of a “Center” was always something of a puzzle. Wags would tease Luke and say the Center was located in her back pocket. Although the title is a euphemism for the small office on Vrain Street in Denver, the larger events are held at local retreat centers or church halls. The regular monthly meetings are held at Vrain Street since they are smaller as a rule.



Sr. Luke, Fr. Louis

After having run the Center for about fifteen years, and knowing that she was soon to retire to Kentucky, Luke asked me to become the Director of the Center. I had attended the Merton events from the beginning, and Luke began asking me early on to assist with the music for liturgies and prayer events, until she finally said it was time to turn the Center over to someone who shared an equal interest in Merton. My first gathering was held in 1993 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death in 1968. Fulfilling Luke's wish, the Center continues to offer retreats twice a year and holds monthly meetings. It is a place where Merton's ideas and creative insights are studied; it focuses on ways to seek greater depth with the same questing energy that Merton himself had in intellectual and spiritual interests. It has engaged the arts as well through poetry readings, musical presentations, Taize-style prayer gatherings, use of the visual arts, prayer with icons and study of Celtic spirituality. It tries to focus on what is current in the world as Merton would have done. The monthly meeting studies Merton's work more directly. We slowly read and discuss one of his books or a book about him. Many people over the years have been of great help in keeping the Center alive; it would not have continued without the work of Sisters Cecily Jones, Kathleen Vonderhaar and Imelda Therese Marquez. As Luke herself would say, "You couldn't do it without your friends!"

The image of a door was compelling for both Merton and Luke. She wrote, "it was a privilege to share many of the probings and reflections of Thomas Merton, who was exploring the views from his own opening doors" (*Hope* 90). She later reflects, "We know that we do not go through the door alone, or first. First through the door into the kingdom, says Jesus, will go the poor, the blind, the lame, the oppressed. But if we have accepted the invitation to accompany them by compassion, and to relieve their oppression by action, this door will welcome us also" (*Hope* 139). Both Thomas Merton and Luke Tobin surely accepted that invitation, and surely they have each been welcomed through that door.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 93.
2. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 96; subsequent references will be cited as "Wilkes" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 54; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
4. Bonnie B. Thurston, "'I Never Had a Sister': Merton's Friendships with Women," *The Merton Seasonal* 17.1 (Winter 1992) 7-8.
5. "Growing into Responsibility: An Interview with Mary Luke Tobin," conducted by Dewey Weiss Kramer, ed. Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) 45; subsequent references will be cited as "Growing" parenthetically in the text.
6. Mary Luke Tobin, *Hope Is an Open Door* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 70-71; subsequent references will be cited as "Hope" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Loretto and Gethsemani* (Nerinx, KY: Sisters of Loretto, 1962).
8. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 149; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 250-51; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) xi.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 145.
12. Cecily Jones, SL, "Thomas Merton: Ten Years Later – An Interview with Mary Luke Tobin, SL," *Interchange* 2.4 (27 Sept. 1978) 7-8.