

Merton and Loretto: Background of Tape Recording

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Among its many calls to reform and renewal, Vatican II mandated the updating of religious communities in the Church. Loretto – and the Conference of Major Superiors of Women – was particularly fortunate to have had Sister Mary Luke Tobin as leader during those days. Luke had been named as one of seven women auditors invited to the Council. When she returned from Rome, she asked me, along with others, to help create, collate and refine the work of our constitutions' renewal.

Particularly pertinent and enriching to this work was the friendship which Luke enjoyed with Thomas Merton, begun in the late 1950s. Since I had accompanied Luke to Rome and had also met Merton, she asked me to accompany her on a number of visits to the abbey of Gethsemani, both before and after the Council sessions, to meet with him about possible and proposed changes in religious life. Merton proved extremely generous and encouraging, as the work of evaluating our lifestyle and updating our constitutions became clearer.

At issue for us were concerns about broadening our apostolic work, freeing up our way of living together in community, updating our formation and education programs, and greater respect and encouragement concerning individual needs and gifts. Religious women, like all women, needed consciously to reclaim their God-given dignity and worth. Issues on the world scene were both grave and exciting. The Vatican Council and Vietnam were strangely antithetical events, yet both challenged us to think and live more honestly and deeply before God and one another.

So, after developing a rough draft of what we hoped would become our basic constitutions, we showed the work to Merton for his critique and suggestions. His comments were encouraging, enlightening, con-

structive. Later, when we had refined our work as a community, we again asked for his evaluation. He was enthusiastic about the final draft, noting its simplicity, conciseness, and solid faith foundation.

I believe that Merton made the tape for us because he cared a great deal about Mary Luke and about all of Loretto. When the Trappists came to Kentucky in 1849, they originally settled on property owned by Loretto. In 1962, on the occasion of Loretto's 150th anniversary, Merton wrote: 'we are both hidden in the same mystery of Our Lady's Sorrow and Solitude in the Lord's Passion'.¹ I believe, too, that Merton made the tape for the benefit of many other religious groups of women, knowing it would be widely shared. This, in turn, would open up to him a potential and legitimate avenue for being in contact with many women, a genuine need in his life.

1. Thomas Merton, *LORETTO and GETHSEMANI: In Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of the Congregation of The Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, 1812-1962* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1962), p. 3.