

Remembering Luke:

An interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL

Conducted by Mary Frances Lottes, SL, with Mary Swain, SL

Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL, who died August 24, 2006 at age 98, was among the most significant figures in twentieth-century American Catholicism. As president of the Sisters of Loretto, head of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the only American woman auditor at the Second Vatican Council, Director of Citizen Action for Church Women United, and founder of the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange, she was a tireless advocate for renewal of religious life, an activist for justice, peace and women's rights, and a leader in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. To begin this special memorial issue of The Merton Seasonal dedicated to Sr. Luke, her coworker and close friend Sr. Jane Marie Richardson, SL was interviewed by her Loretto colleague Sr. Mary Frances Lottes, SL, with the assistance of Sr. Mary Swain, SL. Jane Marie Richardson studied theology in Rome and Paris, and was the founder and longtime director of Cedars of Peace, a contemplative retreat center in Nerinx, KY. She is a former member of the Board of Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society, has served on the ITMS Nominations Committee and By-laws Revision Committee, and was co-founder of the Louisville Chapter of the ITMS. She is the editor of The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani (1992), the transcripts of Thomas Merton's conferences for contemplative prioresses given in 1967 and 1968.



Jane Marie Richardson, SL

Mary Frances Lottes, SL: How did your relationship with Mary Luke begin? How did you get to know her so well? What do you think it was that drew the two of you together?

Jane Marie Richardson, SL: That's a marvelous question, and probably the most difficult question in many ways that you will ask me. I first knew Luke in any kind of depth when she was on the council of the Sisters of Loretto. She wanted to ask some questions about some of the memories I had of different places where I had worked. She was trying to get filled in on my background, and so I brought her up to date on where I had been and what I had been doing, and she seemed very interested. She always listened so well. I was a little shy because I wasn't exactly used to trying to talk about myself to some one like that. One of the things that I remember so well, one of the things that impressed me so, was her walk, her gait. She was always moving, always going. That was, I thought, an indication of her mind. Her mind was so sharp and so acute, but also so informal, so down to earth – extremely intelligent but extremely human, this wonderful person with two feet flat on the ground. The experience of accompanying her to Rome during the Second Vatican Council, I think, solidified a lot of my personal experiences from earlier on. I was observing Luke – a great deal of that was having the objectivity to realize really how truly gifted she was, how her intelligence was so practical. She was such a wide reader, such a great people person, so her sources were just beyond count. I suppose all of that was an indication of her real

love of life. She was one of the most alive persons I think I've ever met, in terms of her immediacy to what was going on here and now. She seemed to understand immediately the person with whom she was dealing – the group or company – and have a sense of immediate contact, a sense of immediate understanding, of immediate openness to what was happening or what was being said and discussed.

MFL: Jane, with all of the reading that she did, have you any sense of what it was she was reading? Was it new thoughts, was it new events?

JMR: Oh absolutely. She could glance at a paper, at a book. She could hold a book and sort of leaf through it in a half an hour and tell you about the book and how it progressed. That astounded me, really: her ability to perceive with a minimum of input, whether in a situation, in a book, in reading, in a discussion. She had an amazing sensitivity to individuals' strengths and weaknesses, possibilities, so there was an almost instantaneous grasp of another's attention.

MFL: Jane, you were with her on the ship going to Rome for the Council.

JMR: She wanted to be there even though she had no official position at that time.

MFL: Why did she want to be there?

JMR: That's an example of her acute perceptiveness. She was able to see possibilities not only in other people but in herself, and in the Church, and I think she really saw it as a groundbreaking and a powerful opening of new possibilities.

MFL: Do you remember how she reacted when she got that word that she was invited to be an auditor at the Council?

JMR: Well when she looked up, as best I can remember, she was just kind of beaming, and she said, "The guys are waking up."

MFL: Is that what she said?

JMR: Well I don't know if those were her exact words, but it was something like that. She was so quick – her eyes were sparkling – her face was so wonderfully alive.

MFL: She wasn't intimidated.

JMR: Oh my heavens no! She was already on her way to Rome! [laughter] It was underlining and emphasizing her own perception that women should be there. It wasn't her. She wasn't self-centered.

MFL: So she attended the sessions, and this was the third session of the Council, and she would go daily to all of the sessions?

JMR: They sat on the sides; the bishops were lined up in the two aisles in the center. Any guests, the auditors, any newsmen, were on the sides.

MFL: Now how did she connect? Did she communicate with those bishops?

JMR: Not there, in the sessions themselves. They were confined to a discussion among the bishops, but the going in and especially the coming out from the sessions were what began to form various groups. Certain persons began to stand out, certain bishops and also certain auditors. Rosemary [Goldie] was there – there weren't that many women so when there was an opportunity for the group to be less formal, there was an interest in what women were thinking on the part of some of the men journalists and even on the part of some of the bishops. In the afternoon there were optional sessions about what had happened in the morning session, and that gave an opportunity for persons to go back and forth a little bit and discuss a little bit, and that was certainly a chance for women to say things.

MFL: Did she meet anyone in those sessions, those informal situations, that she became connected with and kept in touch with afterwards and were part of her life?

JMR: Yes there were. Fr. [Godfrey] Diekmann was wonderful. He admired Luke very much and appreciated her being there. He was just thrilled that she came uninvited. Diekmann had a great regard for Mary Luke. That was very clear, and he was not only willing to talk with her, he liked to talk with her, because she was so acute and intelligent and such a woman of the Church. I think he had a great respect for her.

MFL: Do you remember that conversation that they had when she and Diekmann were both watching people – they came in groups . . .

Mary Swain, SL: It was that offertory procession, when four artists would walk up to the altar, and then four poets, and then four women, and she said –

JMR: “Women are not a category!” – she was just so really angry at them. She was a little amused, too, because there was some amusement in the situation itself. But she said, “We are not a group in the Church – we are not a category!” That was very important because that statement itself said so much about Luke – her acuity, her ability to summarize significant things in very few words. Certainly that was one of the best ever!

MFL: Did you observe any new qualities or gifts emerging from Luke during that period?

JMR: I think everything that those of us of Loretto had sensed more and more when she was serving on the council – it was such a joy to see this at work in the global Church, for the international community. It was clear that a number of American bishops had respect for her. Those afternoon sessions – they were press meetings really but they kind of zeroed in on what had happened in the morning, what was really significant, what they were going to print up and pass over the world press, and Luke obviously was great there because she was free to speak and she had been invited to speak: that was for Luke, I think, the real entrée into meeting some of these bishops, and actually they were wonderful with Luke, because she knew how to question them, and she was so delightful. They listened.

MS: And perfectly comfortable doing it.

JMR: Absolutely, absolutely.

MFL: Who was the cardinal she met with and they had that exchange?

JMR: Oh, Antoniutti – the head of the Congregation for Religious.

MS: He said, “Sister, I want you to know that everything I’m doing is for the good of the Church.”

JMR: And she said, “Well, Your Eminence, everything I do is for the good of the Church.” The circumstances in which that happened, and how quickly that happened – her comeback was just marvelous.

MFL: Jane, Mary Luke was our leader, our superior general – our president – for twelve years. That was during the sixties, the troubled years. Somehow we seemed to get through those years. How would you see her leadership influencing us in the midst of all of that turmoil?

JMR: I feel that Luke herself, through the experience of being at the Vatican Council, experienced a tremendous affirmation of how she thought about the Church, how she lived the Church, how she taught about the Church. Everyone could understand her, I think, because she understood where people were coming from, whoever they were. I think she had such a love of the Church long before the Council, that her ability to just step into the situation – she was prepared and her love of the Church put that together – her knowledge and her love just made her such a source of

inspiration and information.

MFL: In the community, the Sisters of Loretto, somehow she communicated that all of these changes were good. Some people didn't like them and yet she was able to help them see that they were good. How did she deal with the people that were in opposition to those changes?

JMR: If there was a chance for a conversation, I think she used her astuteness to speak to them in such a way that they were not blamed, put down in any way, or looked at with any kind of frown, but on the contrary she knew how to draw them out a little farther by the questions she asked, by the allusions she made to something they may have said or written, or she had heard about them. She was able to use knowledge she had of others, bishops and so on, to bring it around to women's position and the need of change in that area.

MFL: How did Luke influence you, and help you to develop your own life and your gifts?



JMR: I think as president she had a great deal to do with my being able to go off to study in Rome, which was a life-changing event, obviously. It was also a revelation of Luke's ability to sense what was needed in the future. Luke acted from a perspective of possibilities in situations, in persons, in the Church, and so I think that that being said, she wanted to prepare us as a community as best she could in terms of providing education opportunities and obviously that was in whatever area. I think our sisters began to be better educated in many ways early on and I think that applied across the board, so when it came to the Church, the Church was always in the forefront of Luke's thinking.

MFL: Jane, she first sent you to study at Regina Mundi in Rome and then in the middle of that she asked you to transfer to where?

JMR: Institut Catholique in Paris.

MFL: Now what do you think was behind that?

JMR: I think she thought the theology in France was ahead of the theology in Italy, and certainly was farther away from the Vatican: if they wanted to proceed in a little different way, there was a little more freedom. So that was wonderful – that changed my life in many and various ways. Just the fact of going to Rome initially changed my life – it opened a life to me. Going to Paris – I think at that time I was a little surprised that she did it because it meant when I came back to teach I wouldn't have a degree, a certificate, from Regina Mundi, but I don't think Luke cared too much about certificates. I think she thought that the theology that was being taught in Paris was much more open and much more developed. The French theologians, the school there, would reflect that and so would better prepare someone to be more up-to-date in Church thinking than Rome would.

MFL: After she finished her term with the Sisters of Loretto as leader in 1970 – what did she do with her leadership qualities after that time when she wasn't in an elected leadership position?

JMR: Obviously her speaking engagements around the country were a more visible follow-up of her time, and they continued into the '70s quite significantly, so that she was able to pass on so much of the spirit of the Council and interpret it. She had the ability to speak to groups who were eager for news but who wanted the practical part of it – what is it going to mean for us? What has it opened up for us? What possibilities has it given us that we didn't have before?

MFL: It seemed like from then on she was involved in local politics, local activities, social

concerns – right out there all the time, and every time we read her life we say how she went to Vietnam, she went to all of these places all over the world to get this message out.

JMR: That’s right. Luke was not an academic. Luke was an action-oriented woman. She was extremely intelligent, of course, so her way of learning and knowing and sharing was down-to-earth. It was available to anybody who would listen. She was able to express significant truths and understandings and teachings in ways that people got it. It was no wonder that she was invited all over the country to all these groups and they loved her because she was not a heady person. She had a combination of gifts that made her so earthy and available and people so attracted to her. You didn’t have to have a theology degree or any formal study in theology for Luke to explain what went on at the Council. She never left things in the clouds. She had the gift to bring it down concretely to people who wanted to be women of the Church, though she also influenced many men and many men leaders.

MFL: How would you describe her relationship with Thomas Merton? How did that come about and what was it that attracted them to each other?

JMR: I think Luke, so noted for her activism, and her immediacy in coming up with responses and possible ways of changing things that needed changing – the ordinary public could not perhaps have recognized the depth of her faith and her love of the Church, her real ability to grasp a great deal with a little input. I think Merton saw all of this in Luke early on and recognized that she was an unusually gifted woman, that her gifts were such that they were extremely pragmatic, which is not always true of many gifts. But with Luke those gifts were immediately at her fingertips. I think that Merton in his own keen awareness and intelligence and grasp of persons and situations, saw that in Luke very, very quickly. Any time that I was privileged to be with them, they could communicate – and I don’t think this is an exaggeration – so much with the way that they looked at each other. If they were talking about an article, if they were talking about something they’d heard, they had such an appreciation of each other’s gift of getting to the heart of the matter with a very few words.

MFL: The first song you ever wrote – “Valiant Woman” – dedicated to Mary Luke Tobin – what inspired that? What did the word “valiant” mean to you? Why was that the word that captured you?

JMR: I think “valiant” is that attribute of how she just was able to go through so much over a long period of her years, with the ups and downs and all the rest, and the responsibility. She maintained an upbeat attitude about it that wasn’t cheap; it wasn’t just a front; it wasn’t just occasional. She had a quality about her person that when I found the word “valiant” it seemed to me to hold strength and a certain kind of wisdom, a down-to-earth wisdom. Luke had her own contemplative life: she could never have done what she did, she could never have had the influence she had over persons in the highest positions in the Church, and the lowest positions in the Church, if she had not had some kind of quality that enabled her to respond to persons in various situations, unless she had had a kind of inner strength and wisdom that were combined, and maybe that’s what I think “valiant” suggests.

MFL: Would you use the word “contemplative” for Luke?

JMR: I think Luke was a great contemplative, because she thought as deeply as she prayed and she prayed as deeply as she thought.