

## **Faithful Witness of Women in the Church**

Faithful Women: Open to Possibilities. Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL

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### **From Gold Miner's Daughter to Mining the Renewal of Religious Life**

As we consider “faithful witness as women in the Church” I believe we would be remiss if we did not include Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL (Sister of Loretto) who was a key player in the renewal of religious life. Her attendance at the third and fourth sessions of the Second Vatican Council as one of only fifteen international women invited as an official observer made history and cracked open the door for more dialogue with, and input from, women in the Church.”

While we know more about Sister Mary Luke's life from around 1964 with her election at the age of 56 to lead the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) the precursor to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), I was able to acquire a portion of an unpublished biography that tells us about her early life.\* I believe that it gave me good insight into the early years of the woman who would eventually walk the halls of the Vatican and be privy to the discussions, deliberations and decisions of the Second Vatican Council that would change our lives and the lives of the church. What was her early life like?

Ruth Marie Tobin was born on May 16, 1908 to William and Mary McGovern Tobin in Denver, Colorado. Her older brother George was born in 1901 when their father was working successfully in Denver real estate. In 1905 the lure of the Nevada Gold Rush enticed William to purchase the Mayflower Gold Mine in Goldfield, Nevada. He had a very colorful mining career and was well known throughout the state.

The quality of education in Denver was far better so the Tobin family maintained two households, one in Colorado and the other in Nevada. Summers were spent in Nevada with vacations to a variety of different locations, a favorite being the beaches of California. When the Tobin children were ready to begin their education their Catholic Parish in Denver did not have an elementary school so Ruth Marie and George attended the local public schools. Religious training was left to the Sisters of Mercy who staffed the Parish Religious Education Program and of course, her parents.

Sources indicate that Ruth Marie was a voracious reader and her favorite high school class was English. Through her love of reading and her excellence in English it is easy to surmise that she had a keen mind, an organized thought process and the ability to communicate well in speech and in writing. She was taught to look at the world through a variety of lenses and encouraged to dream about “possibilities.”

Ruth was very attracted to the art of dance. After convincing her parents that dance was an art and not a frivolous pastime, she was given permission to take dance lessons starting in the middle elementary grades. She chose ballet and she excelled, to the point where she was asked to teach the Beginner's Class at the dance studio during her last year of high school. Ruth continued to teach the class through her first two years of college.

Ruth Marie's experiences of religious women were limited to her Sunday School interactions with the Sisters of Mercy. The thought of a vocation to Religious Life did not cross her mind until her local pastor raised the question during her senior year of high school. She writes, "*his question presented something entirely new and wonderful. I could call it a grace-filled moment. All of a sudden, becoming a nun made sense, and nothing else did...whatever it was-invitation or inspiration or impetus- I wanted to do it.*"

After much thought and prayer she approached her parents who were reluctant to give their permission. They asked her to wait and attend college, thinking it was an idea that would pass over time. Ruth agreed and she attended Loretto Heights College in Denver, a woman's college operated by the Sisters of Loretto. At the end of those two years, persuaded by Ruth's unwavering resolve, her parents, "*finally gave up and let me trot off to the Sisters of Loretto.*" This was only one of many indications that she was a determined seeker. On her application she was asked what motivated her request to enter the Community. Her response was simply "*To serve God.*" Just what that service would mean in the future was unknown, but on June 8, 1927, at the age of nineteen, Ruth Marie Tobin entered the Sisters of Loretto. On December 8, 1927 her Novitiate began, and she took the Religious name, Sister Mary Luke.

Her formation with the Sisters of Loretto was challenging. Ruth knew that this was where she was supposed to be after a particularly poignant moment of true community with the others around her. Loretto education was rigorous and the Sisters believed that their preparation needed to be well rounded and complete. They were being prepared to form the minds and hearts of young people with a particular focus on the education of women.

For the next twenty-three years, Sister Mary Luke taught at four Loretto-staffed schools: one elementary school, two co-ed high schools and a private girls' high school. Indications are that she was a very popular history teacher as well as school administrator.

The manner in which she dealt with pastors as well as running the day to day operations of the school affirmed Mary Luke's gifts of organization, clear and concise methods of communication and her keen mind. These very same gifts led her to her election to Council in 1952 and then two terms as Superior General of the Sisters of Loretto in 1958 and 1964. As a leader in her Congregation she was very instrumental in the adoption of the Divine Office as their official prayer and in the establishment of more stringent norms in the preparation of the Sisters for their ministry in the schools. No Sister was responsible for a classroom of children without a four-year degree. All of these changes were accomplished years before Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council. Her vision was futuristic and she continued to dream of "possibilities."

Sister Mary Luke's gifts and talents were also recognized nationally and in 1964 she was elected the National Chair of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) during the time of the Second Vatican Council. The Board of CMSWR decided to send her to Rome to "hang around the halls of the Council to see what she could learn." While she was traveling by ship to Rome she discovered that she was selected as one of fifteen women who would officially attend the Council. This was totally unheard of during this time in history. Luke saw this as an, "*unexpected sign of hope...signaling at least a minimal awareness of the questions women were*

*asking and some recognition of their secondary status in the Church...at least it was a beginning."*

Sister Mary Luke's role was not to be entirely passive as she was selected as one of three women to participate in the planning commissions for the preparation of two of the documents. The first was on the Church in the modern world and the Second was on the role of the laity. Here in the halls of the Vatican she listened to and participated in the conversations and deliberations of these two very important documents. She had firsthand knowledge of what Church Leaders across the world were thinking and struggling with in their own countries.

Topics such as, inclusiveness, disarmament, justice, ecumenism, Religious Life and Women in Church and society were discussed. After the Council ended in December 1965 she would return to Rome on two occasions to discuss the implementation and decisions regarding women religious. Innovation was a big part of these discussions.

Coming home, "mining" and communicating her experiences to the Sisters of the United States and the wider Church was her mission. Her natural God-given gifts of organization, clear and concise communication, and keen mind, were put to good use as she spoke and wrote about her experiences, the process of the Council and the decisions that were made.

Over the years Sister Mary Luke was influenced by the lessons she learned at the Council...those that cracked open the doors and those that still needed to be refined. Faith in God's abundant love brought her a deeper understanding of her vows, the dignity and value of every person guided her relationships and the movement towards justice -locally and globally- spoke to her of the tremendous challenge of promoting understanding and meeting human needs. Lessons she tried to communicate throughout her life.

There is so much more to this story. Much more than can be written in a small article. It is my hope that I may have piqued your interest enough to want to read Sister Mary Luke Tobin's book, Hope is an Open Door. True to her gifts, this book is concise and clear, and just slightly over one hundred and forty pages.

As far as her early life, I hope that one day soon we will be able to read a published biography by her Congregation. I am particularly interested in her friendship with Thomas Merton. In the meantime, I must express my gratitude to the Sisters of Loretto for permitting me access to the unfinished biography. \*

*\*I first read "Hope is an Open Door" as a young Sister in Formation. I was very taken with Sister Mary Luke Tobin after reading the book and marveling at her leadership qualities and the vision of her walking the halls of the Vatican. In my mind I pictured her as a tall, stately woman who walked with an almost regal air of grace and poise. In the summer of 1996, while visiting with a Sister-friend in Denver, I was invited to a picnic with the Sisters of Loretto. Lo and behold, sitting before me was Luke, my hero, and as she rose to welcome me to the event my smile broadened as I realized that this great woman was even shorter than I was!*