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# Eternal Hope: The Story of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and Other Women who Participated in Vatican Council II

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*Eternal Hope*  
The Story of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and Other Women who  
Participated in Vatican Council II

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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This Paper was written under the direction of

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Signature of Director

Sr. Mary Collins, OSB

*Eternal Hope*

Description of the Project:

Today the thought of having a church council with no consultation with women seems unimaginable, but in 1962 it was hardly noticed. Surprisingly, women were present at Vatican II although their presence took until the third session for this to occur. They were a minority among the 2,500 Catholic bishops who attended from around the world. Vatican II is the most significant event in Roman Catholic history since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and women make up about half of the Roman Catholic Church's membership, there is very little information available about the participation of women at these sessions. Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L. was one of fifteen women (this later expanded to twenty-three before the end of the fourth session in 1965) who were invited to attend the third session of the Second Vatican Council. Her story, how the participation of women in the council came to be, what their contributions were in the council, and the output of the council in regard to women are intrinsic to developing an understanding of this council's revolutionary effect on the role of women in the church.

*This paper may not be duplicated.*

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Signature of Student Writer

May 11, 2007

Today the thought of having a church council with no consultation with women seems unimaginable to most people, but in 1962 it was hardly noticed. Surprisingly, women were present at Vatican II, although their presence took until the third session for this to occur. They were miniscule among the 2,500 Catholic bishops who attended from around the world. Vatican II is the most significant event in Roman Catholic history since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and while women make up about half of the Roman Catholic Church's membership, there is very little information available about the participation of women at these sessions. "In the thirty years since the council, only three articles have been published which focus solely on the women of Vatican II and their activity."<sup>1</sup> This statistic, noted in a 1995 publication, has not changed significantly since then. Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L. was one of fifteen women (this later expanded to twenty-three before the end of the fourth session in 1965)<sup>2</sup> who were invited to attend the third session of the Second Vatican Council. Her story, how the participation of women in the council came to be, what their contributions were in the council, and the output of the council in regard to women are intrinsic to developing an understanding of this council's revolutionary effect on the role of women in the church.

## **Vatican II**

The fact that Vatican II even happened was a surprise to the world. Pope John XXIII, 76 years old when he was elected, never expected to be chosen for the highest position in the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, he had purchased a ticket to return home after the conclave. All of the previous twenty ecumenical councils had been called in response to crises. Nonetheless, Pope John XXIII thought that the church needed to step into the modern world,

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Marie Ciernick, *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Women of Vatican II: Recovering a Dangerous Memory*, ed. Pierre M. Hegy (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 149.

even though he wanted to remain faithful to the Church's basic principles. Pope John XXIII called the council only one hundred days after being elected.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous stories written about how even the top officials in the Roman Curia did not know about the pope's intention to announce the council.<sup>4</sup> Theologians of the time like Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, and Charles Journet had been presenting new ideas about how the Church could define itself. These theologians welcomed the council with hope for the opportunity to discuss the Church's teachings and origins of its ritual and doctrine. "Vatican II occurred at a crucial moment in history both in terms of a socio-historical juncture for humanity as a global community and also for the interrelated emergence of a world-church."<sup>5</sup> In the process of meeting, the bishops came to realize that they were not the only people that formed the church, but rather that there was the other 99.9 percent of the membership that was often forgotten-the laity. They also became aware that among the participants there were no women.<sup>6</sup> Yes, the women were included in the numbers for laity, but men were already attending the conference with some lay men and many ordained men present. This council came to take the role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church in a much more serious way than ever before.

Vatican II solemnly began on October 11, 1962, under the leadership of Pope John XXIII after a period of preparation led by the pope himself. He was assisted by numerous theologians,

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<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* with a foreword by John W. O'Malley, S.J. trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Marie Ciernick in *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 67 and 68 notes that the first recognition of women came from the men of the press corps and the lay auditors. These men set up offices and invited women to run them. Women began protesting their non participation at the council during the first and second sessions. One bishop responded to their requests saying that women would be welcome at the Third Vatican Council.

the Roman Curia, and bishops. Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963 and after a gathering to elect a new pope, the bishops questioned if the council should continue. Many doubted that the council would continue, but the newly elected Pope Paul VI (Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini) had been a member of the Central Preparatory Commission for the Council and strongly believed in continuing the work that Pope John XXIII had begun.<sup>7</sup> The Council actions thus continued after a few bumps in the road.

### **Women at the Council**

Looking back at history, we can be dismayed at the limited avenues of participation for women in society and in the Church. Considering these barriers it should not be surprising that women were not invited to the first session of Vatican II. Knowing the challenging and rejuvenating nature of the council, the lack of invitation to women for the first part of the council presents a difficulty in understanding the council's goals. This council was called to give a fresh look to the Church, and it is disappointing that women were not quickly invited to participate. It is extremely exciting to read the end results of the council and know that women were involved in helping to develop the final documents. Sister Mary Luke Tobin, one of the women invited to the council tells that, at the 1963 session, Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium addressed his fellow bishops on the topic of women attending the council. "The cardinal stood up and said, 'here we are talking about the church, and half the church is not here.' The bishops looked at each other, a bit puzzled and wondered which ones of us didn't show up?"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* with a foreword by John W. O'Malley, S.J. trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Murphy, "Creativity and Hope: Sister Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II," *America* 173:13, pg. 9 (4 pages) October 28, 1995 [ebsohost]; available from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9511070012&site=ehost-live>; Internet: accessed 30 March 2007. Also note Helen Marie Ciernick in *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 69-70.

Paul VI was disappointed when no women were on the first list of lay auditors in 1963.<sup>9</sup> Up until two days before the announcement was made declaring that women would be invited to the council, the spokesmen for ecclesiastical circles in Rome stated that no women would be at the council.<sup>10</sup> Pope Paul VI pushed the issue forward and broke through the curial opposition in order to have women auditors present at the council. Pope Paul VI invited the women to participate in sessions that were of interest to them; the women could not figure out what would *not* be of interest to them and decided they would miss none of the council's happenings. The women auditors chose to be a part of every moment of the action and to be the strongest "symbolic presence" they could be. Paul VI had emphasized to them the symbolic nature of their presence. In 1961 Pope Paul VI, at that time Giovanni Battista Montini, archbishop of Milan suggested "that at least one Roman Catholic Church leader (the future Pope Paul VI) was finally acknowledging its discriminatory practices in regard to women and the need to reverse them."<sup>11</sup> He stated that women must come "closer to the altar, to souls," and to the church in order to gather together the people.<sup>12</sup> Nothing more is known about what the future pope meant by this statement. In 1949 though, the Vatican had explained in an instruction that, if there were no altar boys available, women, including consecrated women, could give the responses from a distance. If they were to come too close to the altar, they would be committing a grave sin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Women of Vatican II: Recovering a Dangerous Memory*, ed. Pierre M. Hegy (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pg 149.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Marie Ciernick in *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 70.

<sup>11</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



“All moralists agree that a woman coming closer to the altar beyond the communion rail, would commit a grave sin.”<sup>14</sup>

Only a small number of women participated in the council, making up less than one percent of the total gathering, but this makes it even more important that all of us learn about their presence. Carmelite Donal Lamont, the bishop of Rhodesia, an Irish native, put it kindly in saying:

It would be an egregious error to think that bishops came to the council determined to keep women out. We were all formed in the straight jacket mentality of Vatican I. With no previous experience of women’s involvement in Church structures, it never occurred to us that they should be there. However, under the guidance of the Spirit, a new awakening took place-like spring coming to the Arctic, thawing the barque of Peter out of its ice-locked moorings. Many of us welcomed new possibilities and exclaimed, ‘thank God our time is now. Women’s coming was part of these ‘signs of the times.’<sup>15</sup>

It is illustrative to look at the experiences of these women at the council to understand how revolutionary the participation of women was. The twenty-three officially invited female auditors came from fourteen different countries. Thirteen were laywomen and ten belonged to religious communities. The leadership of Vatican II invited the following women leaders to attend: the president of the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations which represented thirty-six million women, the executive secretary of The Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate, the founder of the International Movement for the Apostolate in the Independent Milieux, the superior general of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a representative of the Secular Institutes, and three auditors from the United States.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Häring, letter of December 11, 1994 quoted in Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M. *Guests in Their Own House* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Women of Vatican II: Recovering a Dangerous Memory*, ed. Pierre M. Hegy (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 149.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.

These women were Mary Luke Tobin, Catherine McCarthy, and Claudia Feddish. McCarthy, of San Francisco, was serving as the president of the National Council of Catholic Women. Feddish, of Uniontown Pennsylvania, was the Superior General of the Basilian Sisters of Saint Macrina.<sup>17</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin was the president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious. Tobin's experience and reflection on the council are especially useful in understanding the significance of these invitations.

### **Sister Mary Luke Tobin**

Mary Luke Tobin entered the Sisters of Loretto community in 1927 at age 19. In 1964, she was the newly elected president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious. Curious about the events at the council, Tobin boarded a ship for Rome. While aboard, she received a call from the *New York Times* regarding her appointment as an auditor. This phone call was the first indication that she had been officially invited to the council. Another woman invited to attend had a similar story. This woman found out from her hairdresser who had read about her appointment as an auditor in the newspaper. Even in 1995, when reminiscing with a reporter from the periodical, *America*, she responded with profound satisfaction in remembering the moment she heard the news of her invitation. Sister Mary Luke Tobin chronicles her hope in her book, *Hope is an Open Door*. She writes about the invitation and her hope:

This door, swinging open to admit fifteen women from different parts of the Roman Catholic world, represented an unexpected sign of hope. It signaled at least a minimal awareness of the questions women were asking and some recognition of their secondary status in the church. True, fifteen women among twenty-five hundred bishops was hardly a "quota," but it was a beginning.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>18</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin, S.L. *Hope is an Open Door*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 19-20 as quoted in Helen Marie Ciernick in *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary

Tobin was indomitable and had definite plans of finding a way to participate in the council even without an official invitation. When asked about what she would have done in Rome if she had not received an official invitation to attend the council, Tobin said that she would have “look(ed) around and listen(ed) around, talk(ed) in the corridors, see(n) who I could meet and what they might be willing to tell me about what was going on.”<sup>19</sup> She continued that the women had not expected invitations at all. Tobin was just being sent on a “private fact-finding mission by the leaders of the American religious communities for women to find out what might be said about women religious at the council and what changes they should anticipate.”<sup>20</sup> Women in the Church had been heavily conditioned that they shouldn’t expect to participate in an event as big as this council and thus it must have been quite a shock when they were told of their invitations.

Beyond serving as the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Sister Mary Luke Tobin acted as a member of international commissions for world solidarity and was a participant in nonviolent actions for peace and justice. She was a founding member of Network, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby. Sister Mary Luke Tobin and Thomas Merton were friends and she served as coordinator of the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange. The most important events that defined her life were the two sessions of Vatican II. “The principles that shape her philosophy of tolerance, religious freedom, the primacy of the

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Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 72.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

individual conscience all were debated in its [Vatican II] meetings and articulated in its documents, and she [Tobin] returns to them often in conversation.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Contributions**

In their role as auditors, the women could not speak, but in the council’s commissions on the documents, their impact was significant. Sr. Mary Luke Tobin joined five other women as a full voting member of the mixed commission for *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Bishop Emilio Guano, as the chair, and Redemptorist Bernard Häring, as the secretary, led the commission. Häring is considered the greatest moral theologian of the twentieth century. The membership of the commission consisted of sixty bishops including a few bishops from the East European countries and from the Third World. Paul VI approved the list and Bishop Guano was pleased with that. Bernard Häring said to Bishop Guano, “This step, important as it is does not change much, since fifty-five percent of the world’s Catholics have no representation whatever.”<sup>22</sup> Guano asked Häring what he meant. Häring responded in saying that he had forgotten the world of women. He said that he thought they should allow women into their commission if they have no place even in the commission on religious life. Women auditors were never invited to participate in the commission for preparing the documents concerning religious life although they make up approximately 80 percent of the religious. Guano responded in a positive manner and Häring went ahead and invited the women to participate. The women participated just as the men did and according to Häring made excellent contributions in preparing the text and in understanding the world.<sup>23</sup> Women also actively participated in the commission on the laity and in many drafts in committee.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 126.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 125-127.

Sister Mary Luke Tobin holds dear to her heart one particular statement from the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent.<sup>24</sup>

These words become a touchstone for her. Tobin describes her feelings about this statement:

(It is) a powerful statement that you can't undo. It is a pronouncement by the highest authority of the church, an ecumenical council of all the bishops, and their statements cannot be gotten around. They are written in concrete.<sup>25</sup>

She has tried to live out this statement from *Gaudium Et Spes* her whole life and strongly speaks of her desire that "Every form of discrimination against persons, whether because of nationality, religion, race, or gender, must be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's will."<sup>26</sup> She believes that women are not asking for favors but are asking for rights that they hold in common with men and nature. She states, "There's one human nature and it's shared by men and women (and) the church includes all of us as human persons, and we have to have that recognized."<sup>27</sup> Tobin considers the church's need to face the world and incorporate the world as the most important teaching to come from the council. "The church in the modern world, in the fast world or the medieval world-the church is the people; the people are the church."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Gaudium et Spes-Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World" quoted in Margaret Murphy, "Creativity and Hope: Sister Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II," *America* 173:13, pg. 9 (4 pages) October 28, 1995 [ebscohost]; available from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9511070012&site=ehost-live> ; Internet: accessed 30 March 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin quoted in Margaret Murphy, "Creativity and Hope: Sister Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II," *America* 173:13, pg. 9 (4 pages) October 28, 1995 [ebscohost]; available from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9511070012&site=ehost-live> ; Internet: accessed 30 March 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin as quoted in *Voices from the Council* eds. Michael R. Prendergast and M.D. Ridge (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 2004), 308.

Each day there was a press conference and Mary Luke Tobin served as the expert on women religious. She sat with the other theologians and experts. The other women auditors also attended these conferences. This gave the women an additional public exposure on their way to greater recognition in the Church.

### **Reception of Women**

The council either trivialized or ignored the women present. Tobin recalled how there were three basic categories in defining the bishops' reactions to women at the council. These three categories were: (1) A minority of "good guys" appreciated the women being there, (2) The majority acted indifferently and appeared scared and even shied away from the women (3) Some bishops clearly disapproved of the women being there and avoided them completely.<sup>29</sup> "Half jokingly, a bearded archbishop exclaimed that the only place he had felt safe was in the hallowed male enclave of St. Peter's but now women had invaded even that."<sup>30</sup> One woman auditor recalled how an elderly bishop covered his eyes when the women walked past him as they processed to communion.

Even in the simplest human interactions of sharing a cup of coffee, the church's bishops did not know how to react to the presence of women. After the work time at the council came a little bit of fellowship. This allowed time for the women observers to meet with the bishops informally. This arrangement lasted for three days after the arrival of Sr. Mary Luke Tobin. On the third day after her arrival, a bellhop intercepted her on the way to the coffee bar. She was directed to the newly created women's coffee bar. The bishops' coffee bar was called Bar Jonah

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<sup>29</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 97.

<sup>30</sup> Carmel McEnroy, *Guests in Our Own House* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 100, quoting Daniel M. Madden, "Women at the Council," *Catholic Digest* (April 1965): 18.

while the women's coffee bar came to be known as Bar None. The wife of one of the first male conciliar auditors described the coffee bar saga in this manner:

When the women came, there was a great dilemma. They were entitled to free refreshments like everyone else, but the council fathers did not want to admit the women to the bars-not because they didn't like women-but because it was so overcrowded that very close contact was unavoidable, and you couldn't have women squeezed in between bishops, etc.<sup>31</sup>

The bar for the women was opened under the tomb of Pope Clement XIII and two marble lions guarded the entrance. No men were allowed to enter at the beginning, not even the husbands of the women. Eventually the bar desegregated, although men were only allowed to come in if a woman invited them. The desegregation of the bar was a seemingly simple step for the church in acknowledging women, but this was especially important to the married couple invited to participate in the council. The church that was comfortable discussing its role in the modern world struggled with allowing women to have coffee with their husbands and be around bishops.

Resistance to active participation in the council by the women auditors was not only limited by the men who did not want them there but by women who didn't want to cause any waves. Sister Mary Luke recalled how the superior of a religious community in Rome invited the women auditors to tea. Refreshments were served and then the superior got down to business advising the women to act as a group to support whatever the Pope wanted. Tobin responded, "Pardon me? That's not how I understand my role. I think I'm here to represent women and to follow their insights."<sup>32</sup> She continued describing the event with the superior in an interview she had with Margaret Murphy from the periodical, *America*:

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<sup>31</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin quoted in Margaret Murphy, "Creativity and Hope: Sister Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II," *America* 173:13, pg. 9 (4 pages) October 28, 1995 [ebsohost]; available from

Actually, I don't think the Pope himself intended what she was suggesting. I wouldn't have dared to go home and meet with my own group if I had kowtowed to that. Well, the poor nun probably had decided that the better part of wisdom was to counsel us not to express any opinions contrary to what the Pope might say. But this wasn't the purpose of the council. It wasn't to hear what the Pope had to say, but to come together and listen to each other.<sup>33</sup>

This one example shows how even women in strong leadership positions were not open to changing the status quo of women.

Even the council's closing rites patronized the women's contributions. After all of the contributions that the women had made, they were still looked at through the lens of tradition. In the closing rites, individual groups such as historians, musicians and artists were invited up for special recognition. One of the groups recognized was the women in attendance at the council. Sister Mary Luke Tobin was adamantly against this misrepresentation of women's role at the council. She thought that women had made contributions as musicians, theologians, artists, and scholars not just by being women there. She described how she turned to Godfrey Dieckmann, O.S.B. (then editor of Worship) and told him that the presentation was all wrong. She told him: "No, Godfrey, they're honoring women for their role in the church. Women don't have a role in the church; they're either members or they're not."<sup>34</sup> She explained her position on the issue by saying that "everybody can make a contribution to the church, but it's not women as women who are to be honored. There's mutuality and a sharing in the church and gender is not a differential in that."<sup>35</sup> Dieckmann understood then and encouraged Tobin to help educate others.

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<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9511070012&site=ehost-live> ; Internet: accessed 30 March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Murphy, "Creativity and Hope: Sister Mary Luke Tobin at Vatican II," *America* 173:13, pg. 9 (4 pages) October 28, 1995 [ebscohost]; available from

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9511070012&site=ehost-live> ; Internet: accessed 30 March 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



Tobin did not take Dieckmann's suggestion lightly and returned home to report to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and to many mother houses throughout the country. Sister Mary Luke emphasized the introduction of vernacular language in the liturgy, the statements made on ecumenism, and the definition of the church as the People of God. She understood that change would not come quickly, but until the very time of her death, she always lived with eternal hope. Tobin believed deeply in a quote by the theologian Karl Rahner, S.J. He stated, "The church always runs weeping after the cart of history."<sup>36</sup> Rosemary Ruether, a theologian, gave the example of the church's reluctance in taking a stand against slavery. This took about 1,900 years. Tobin always came back to the patience required for true change to take place.

### **Action of the Women**

Tobin strongly led her religious congregation in their own "mini" Vatican II after her return. Already in 1964, the general chapter had met and begun making changes to the practices of the community. Every sister in the community had a degree, many had graduated from graduate school and six had their Ph.D.'s. The Sisters of Loretto operated two colleges and they educated themselves by reading the latest writings from theologians. The sisters prepared for the general chapter meeting by following the pattern that Pope John had used in preparing for the Second Vatican Council. A central planning committee and four sub commissions were set up dealing with the theology of religious life, community living, the habit, and the apostolate. Superior General Tobin, on July 16, 1964, called the General Chapter meeting at the Loretto motherhouse in Nerinx, Kentucky to order saying, "The Sisters of Loretto will go on record, as a result of this chapter, as supporting the program of Pope Paul VI that the church should seek

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

relevance to the modern world.”<sup>37</sup> The chapter focused on how the convent was not leaving the world but living in the world and acknowledging that God created all creation and it is good. Prior to changes in religious communities, many sisters entered and in their vows said, “I am accepting this world-despised, somber habit.”<sup>38</sup> Tobin’s leadership was extremely effective in implementing change in her community, but this was not the case for other sisters who returned home. Religious communities thus endured many difficulties as they grew to understand what they were facing in changes. Moving from a submissive role to making personal decisions, but still living in community, took many adjustments.

The question remains; what happens now after such an important council in the Church’s history? Sister Mary Luke Tobin, in an interview in 2004, questioned if we should have a third Vatican Council. She stated,

We haven’t brought to life the action and the inspiration of Vatican II; we haven’t brought it into the life of the people of the church. Until the people begin to understand what Vatican II was about, we haven’t done our work.<sup>39</sup>

Our call is now to bring to life the wisdom and teachings of the second Vatican Council before anything else. The difficulty is trying to teach the people that *they are the church*. Tobin insists that people take responsibility for living the faith. “People have to stand behind every act and every issue that is brought up regarding the church, or you won’t have any church at all.”<sup>40</sup>

The council made some strides in providing opportunities to women, but the interpretation of documents by some bishops has curtailed the efforts in some dioceses.

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<sup>37</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 188.

<sup>38</sup> Carmel McEnroy, R.S.M., *Guests in their Own House* with a foreword by Bernard Häring 18 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 190 as quoted in Daniel M. Madden, “Women at the Council,” *Catholic Digest* (April 1965):18.

<sup>39</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin as quoted in *Voices from the Council* eds. Michael R. Prendergast and M.D. Ridge (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 2004), 311.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

Following tradition is easy; implementing change is difficult. Twenty years after the council, Sister Mary Luke Tobin still had her hope and glowingly positive attitude about the progress that the council made and had the possibility of making.

For me, in regard to the status of women, Vatican II was an opening, although just a tiny crack in the door, to a recognition of the vast indifference to women and the ignoring of their potential for the whole body of the church.<sup>41</sup>

Women in the course of the Second Vatican Council moved from lack of recognition to acknowledgement as a category dependent upon the power and leadership of men. The women auditors did not just observe the council; they helped to determine the content of the documents. They studied and prepared in order to participate in the discussions intelligently. Tobin spoke at the press conferences. They were not just symbolic presences, but participants and determiners of the commissions' direction. Men and women who wanted the women auditors to follow the majority's viewpoint did not diminish the spirit of these women; the women auditors instead chose to do what they thought was best for women and the entire Church body.

### **Conclusion**

The story of Sister Mary Luke Tobin did not end with her being invited to attend the Second Vatican Council as an auditor. She returned home and served her own religious community in leadership positions and worked to educate other religious communities and everyone she met. Tobin's unquenchable hope that progress would be made in the equality and position of women in the church continued until her death on August 24, 2006 at the age of 98. In reality, her hope does not end there as her story should serve as a model for all women who

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<sup>41</sup> Sister Mary Luke Tobin as quoted in Helen Marie Ciernick in *Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council*, as in *Women and Theology* eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and the College Theology Society, 1995), 72.

think that hope is lost. The Roman Catholic Church made progress in the Second Vatican Council in all areas and, to this day, forty years later, we are still working to enact all of the council's teachings. Women who entered into territory which had only been walked upon by men deserve to be commended and remembered for their contributions. It is easy for us in a world where women serve in the church's mission in every capacity except ordained ministry to minimize the twenty-three auditors' contributions in pioneering recognition of women's call to share in the mission and ministry of the church. Their contributions are much more than just names, but rather they are pioneers in the church's history. It would be a tragedy to minimize, ridicule, or forget these brave, intelligent, and faith-filled women's role in our ecclesial life. Hope is not lost; the Church must keep it alive while remembering (re-membering) our past.

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