

Sisters: Good hearts, good works

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

Reading the obituaries of Sister Mary Luke Tobin, who recently died at 98, inspired reminiscences of her and other women religious. Their numbers are down from 180,000 forty years ago to 68,000 now. Soon few will remember the era of habit-garbed nuns.

Mary Luke Tobin, known as “Mother Mary Luke” of the Community of Loretto, was one of the great troublemakers and spreaders of the Spirit. After the Second Vatican Council all religious orders were subjected to study and self-study, and I was on a team of five with her and worthies such as a college president and a university provost. Each visiting and appraising team was to include a Protestant outsider. I felt inside when, at the end of one long day, our hosts at a religious order of men offered drinks. Father John Courtney Murray had his usual scotch and soda. Mother Mary Luke expressed curiosity about martinis, and was soon sipping one “with the boys,” among whom she more than held her own. I am aware of how she backed or fronted for countless causes of justice, and modeled the religious life that today is passing away. But the personal touch was also memorable.

Once, at the Loretto Mother House in Kentucky, where she helped start a center which put Thomas Merton to work, I was invited to give the homily at mass on Corpus Christi Day, a festival not on the Protestant calendar. During the mass I glanced to the transept to my right, where in the front row a gathering of very senior nuns were kneeling. Over the railing they dangled enormous rosaries. I thought they were defying this Protestant interloper for messing up their way and day. Not at all; they were retaining a practice they’d known for decades. After mass they could not have been friendlier. It was their way.

Shortly after Vatican II, I spoke at the inauguration of the president of Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Afterward a nun came to me, almost shrouded in her habit, and handed me a piece of paper which said something like this: “On St. Martin’s Day would Martin Marty come to give the Martin Marty Lecture in the Marty Chapel at Mount Marty College, Marty, South Dakota?” Of course he would, and did.

Neither the Mount Marty nor the Loretto sisters were soft and retiring. On a visit to another Benedictine site, a sister whom I'd met years before took me on a tour of chapel windows designed for a Native American congregation. She sweetly reminded me of how sensitive the artist was to "Indians," as she called them, noting that the windows depicting the sacraments always featured an Indian figure. When we got to the ordination window, I learned that I'd been set up by the mild talk. She all but spit out what she thought of it: "they" were ordaining a white man. After that understandable venting she returned to the hospitable mode.

Women religious who were college presidents, like the late Candida Lund and Mary Ann Ida Gannon, embodied the virtues and strengths which may be passing way. I thought of that while reading Kenneth Briggs's informative and disturbing *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns* (Doubleday) and Suellen Hoy's fine history, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago's Past* (University of Illinois Press).

I suppose that as a non-Catholic kid I was supposed to be suspicious of the nuns about whom our Catholic friends talked. Somewhere along the way the hermeneutics of suspicion left me. I embrace my recollections of these "good hearts" and their good works—and wonder how their work will be replaced.