Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



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August 10, 2023
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We often say in religious life circles that we stand on the shoulders of the women who went before us. In fact, there's a song to that effect which we use frequently in our rituals of remembrance and prayer.

> I am standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before me
> I am stronger for their courage, I am wiser for their words
> I am lifted by their longing for a fair and brighter future
> I am grateful for their vision, for their toiling on this Earth
>
> ("Standing on the Shoulders" by Joyce Rouse aka Earth Mama)

This song never fails to bring a tear to my eyes, no matter how familiar. Just recently, on our community Founders' Day, we were invited during the prayer service to name the women on whose shoulders we stand, those sisters who had the greatest impact on our living out our vocation as Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace.

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As I reflected on the women that came to mind, I realized there were commonalities. Each of them was fully alive with our charism of peace through justice. Each was passionate about the future of religious life. Each saw and named my own gifts, even when I was blind to them, and encouraged me to take risks and show up in the service of our mission. Their companionship continues, even though they may have passed away. I remember their words and witness. I feel their love and support every day.

I "met" one of the sisters, Sr. Dorothy Vidulich, through her literary work, long before I encountered her in person. On my very first visit with the sisters in 2004, on the evening before I attended a vocation retreat, I stumbled into the library at St. Mary-on-the-Lake in Bellevue, Washington. There on the shelves I found a copy of Dorothy's book, *Peace Pays a Price: A Study of Margaret Anna Cusack, the Nun of Kenmare*. A biographic treatment of the life, ministry, and vision of our founder, this slim volume also showcases Dorothy's prophetic perspective. I read it in one sitting, devoured it really. Dorothy's words and the story of Margaret Anna caught the attention of my mind and heart. Although my discernment journey was turbulent, I knew deep within that I was called to be a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace the moment I

read Dorothy's book.

Two years later, when I arrived at the novitiate in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Dorothy and her partner in crime, Sr. Jeanne Keaveny, had just moved next door after many years in Washington, D.C. Their rooms on the fourth floor of the motherhouse became a sanctuary of sorts. You would often find me and my novitiate classmate ensconced in their sitting room, engaged in lively discussion and debate about the state of the world and the future of religious life. Jeanne had been a provincial during the Second Vatican Council and Dorothy had been her assistant. Dorothy later worked as communications director for Network and as a National Catholic Reporter correspondent. They were both very involved in movements for peace through justice.

I will forever treasure the privilege of hearing their stories firsthand. In their retirement, they shared the dreams they still held for a promise not yet fulfilled. Their mentorship during those early days was priceless and still inspires me to continue to work for our shared vision for a more just world and church.



Sr. Jeanne Keaveny, left, and Sr. Dorothy Vidulich in an undated photo. (Photo courtesy of Susan Francois)

Dorothy passed away in 2012. Jeanne left us in 2015, 10 months after I began my first term in elected leadership. I spent a lot of time in her infirmary bedroom during those first months of leadership. A former leader herself, she continued to mentor me. I remember clearly telling her one day that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. "Good," she said. "That sounds about right. When you think you know what you are doing, that's when you are in trouble." This has been the most helpful leadership advice I have ever received. Jeanne also left me homework. Literally. When the sisters were clearing out her room after her death, they found a pile of books she left for me, including works by Sr. Ilia Delio, Fr. Richard Rohr, and Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu, along with a note reminding me to keep up to date on theology.

Dorothy also continues to mentor me. I have long had a book on my shelf that Dorothy wanted me to read: *Hope is an Open Door* by Sr. Mary Luke Tobin. Mary Luke was Dorothy's friend, and Dorothy was very proud of her co-membership in Mary Luke's Loretto community.

I was recently drawn to pull the book from the shelf. Only then did I notice the post-it note on the inside cover: "Please return my 'treasure' — No rush! D." I must have had this book on my shelf for over a decade, but I am now finally returning it to Dorothy (in a way) with this column.

I believe I was meant to read Mary Luke Tobin's book only now, during this time when Pope Francis is calling the church to synodality. As president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Mary Luke was one of 12 women auditors present at the Second Vatican Council, and the only American woman religious. The experience filled her with what she described as a "wave of euphoria," which led her to inspire and enact change in religious life and work for justice in the church.

> The Spirit is calling us forward on the synodal journey today, during our own era of change.
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"What a season for change was with us!" she wrote. "In retrospect, I am glad for the euphoria; it generated courage and impelled me and those working with me here in the United States to become the change agents for a renewed religious life in the church." Writing in the early 1980s, Mary Luke reflects on the resistance to the

changes. "I believe that the currents of change set in motion by the council will indeed proceed, in spite of temporary setbacks. … To me, it seems that the event of Vatican II was a special epiphany of hope for the church in our time. The council was a door opened wide — too wide to be closed."

The Spirit is calling us forward on the synodal journey today, during our own era of change. The door is opening wider, even if there is still resistance on the part of some in the church, including bishops.

I am grateful to my friend Dorothy and the Holy Spirit for acquainting me with another spiritual friend in Mary Luke Tobin. Truly we are standing on the shoulders of visionary women. It is time for us to do what is ours to do to bring forward their dreams with our own for the common good.