

Lydwine van Kersbergen's interview with Carol White – May 10, 1990

CW: Greetings to all of you at the General Assembly at Grailville. This is Carol White and I'm speaking to you from Rotterdam in the Netherlands where I have the very good fortune to be your representative, interviewing Lydwine van Kersbergen.

Lydwine, would you like to greet the folks at the GA?

Lydwine: Dear Grail members and friends, 50 years ago Hitler had just invaded Holland. Joan Overboss and I arrived in New York. My congratulations to each one of you at the anniversary of the Grail in America. I send you my very best wishes and my fervent prayers for many more years of a fruitful apostolate.

CW: Today is May 10th as we make this recording, which is just a few days after Lydwine's 85th birthday, so she has much to look back on in her life. But I'll ask now, Lydwine, to begin: why did you go to the United States?

Lydwine: Joan Overboss and I came to America because Father van Ginneken had visualized from the beginning a world wide lay movement of Catholic women dedicated to the cause of Christ. One day, when we were together, only a small group of young university students, he divided the world among us. Liesbeth – India, Deborah – Australia, Yvonne – England, Lydwine – America. That was not just a little thing, you see. No, each one of us took this very seriously and accepted his direction as a life's vocation. That world-wide, universal vision fascinated me, although as yet nothing had been realized.

CW: When you think back on all your adventures in the United States, Lydwine, what are the *memories* you cherish the most?

Lydwine: Carol, it's not easy for me to make a choice. Part of my heart is still in America. They were the most *beautiful*, the most *fruitful* years of my life, and there are many many memories which I still cherish. But let me try to mention a few.

Firstly, **my cooperation and working together with Joan Overboss.** Here I would like to pay special tribute to her as her incredible sense of humor, her optimism, her confidence in the Lord, made all difficulties (and there were many) disappear in the early period of the Grail.

Another fine memory is **the fine spirit of the young women who started to work with us at Doddridge Farm.** There I experienced among these American girls a spontaneous generosity, a youthful energy, and a spirit of adventure which supported Joan and me in every way possible. May I mention a few names. If I forget some, please forgive me. To my mind come Catherine, Louisa, Barbara, Margaret, Josephine, Gabrielle, Janet, Mary Anne, Mary Alice, Jane, Judith, Patricia.

As I mentioned already before, the beginning at Doddridge Farm was far from easy. Bishop Sheil had sent a telegram to Holland: "Acquired beautiful site with several buildings near Chicago. Start as early as convenient. "

At our arrival the wooden barracks, very hot in summer, icy cold in winter, were overrun by mice; mice mice everywhere. After that plague was overcome, we had to run camps for children from the slums of Chicago, 100 children every 2 weeks, and we were not trained for that work at all. Then the bishop sent us a group of delinquent boys to look after the estate. They refused to do any work except appropriating the cars of our visitors and going joy riding. They caused us tremendous problems.

In between these camps, we tried to organize courses for college girls. One day during such a course, the bishop telephoned me. "Doctor Van, 100 sailors are coming with their sweethearts. Have the swimming pool ready, and potato salad for all of them." With Joan's sense of humor, we made the best of it. Joan went to the Mundelein Seminary with the girls and Father Ehmann and I received the sailors.

When the bishop ordered the permanent boys' camp under our supervision, we left Doddridge Farm. We had to. And most of the aforementioned girls with us, not knowing what the future would be and where we would land. The day exemplified then already that commitment to Christ, convinced that all would work out well.

Another memory I cherish is the **friendship and support of the married couples** who started a family-based community around Grailville. As you know, after Doddridge Farm, we finally, after many tribulations, could buy an estate near Cincinnati which is Grailville now. And we could start there a training and formation center for young women.

Grailville is built on five main ideas:

- the concept of the Lay Apostolate, the active participation of the laity in the building of Church and society – an idea new at that time,
- the vision of a strong women's movement: women guiding women,
- the living of a radical spirit of Christianity centered in the victory of the Cross,
- the conviction that there can be no spiritual renewal without a cultural renaissance, and
- the building of community.

Of course there were **all the women who were at Grailville in the Grail, as leaders in charge**, to mention only a few: Eileen, Dorothy, Jeanne, Anne, Eleanor, the Audreys, Mary Brigid, Dolores, Mary Imelda. As members, as students, I cannot possibly name all these. As visitors, all these women I owe my gratitude for what they have done, the work, and living out the Grail ideals.

But I hope that you will allow me to **express my special thanks to the many families**, the Kanes, the Sheas, the Hutzels, the Schickels, the Rogans, the Hills, the Faulkners, the Holmillers, the Sissons, most of whom started living around Grailville, giving their talents, each in their special field, sometimes instructing, guiding the students with their lectures and insights, but always trying to give an example of a true and holy married life. These couples formed a federation of their own aiming to share ideas, goods and labor, so, like the Grail, they tend to the land, not so much in search of self sufficiency, but rather as an

opportunity to cultivate a whole and holy life. I still cherish my friendship with all of them, a bond which I have kept through all these years.

May I mention one more memory I cherish, the meetings I had with three great women whom Grailville, the Grail, owe much to.

Dorothy Day, a real saint who practiced voluntary poverty and enriched us with her vision about the poor as the ambassadors of God.

The Baroness de Hueck, Catherine as she was called, another saint of quite a different stature who started as a bar maid in Harlem and organized Friendship Houses, centers of interracial meetings and activities.

The Baroness von Trapp, the true advocate of Christian family life, who would suddenly arrive at Grailville by bus with all her children making music, song, and dance.

These three women are already high in heaven now, but I'm sure they're still interested in all what happens among the women in America.

And last but not least, **I have beautiful memories of the many great men who visited Grailville often, and shared their ideas with us.** From Cincinnati they were **Archbishop McNicholas** and **Archbishop Alter**. They gave us a green light to experiment and start new educational projects. And I still remember Archbishop McNicholas coming one summer day to Grailville, blessing with an abundance of holy water every cow in the barn, and blessing with fear and trembling the beehives with the bees swarming around him.

Then there were the Monsignors **Hellriegel** and **Hillenbrand**, the Fathers **Siegmund**, **Rheingold**, **Ehmann**, the pioneers, the giants of the Liturgical Movement in America who broadened greatly our visions of prayer and worship.

There was Monsignor **Ligutti**, visionary and president of the Rural Life Conference, who taught us the disciplines and wholesomeness of living on the land. Even for some short time of training, our faith could naturally and easily be related to all dimensions of our existence. There were many others (list not transcribed) who supported us with their sound practical advice. There was Monsignor **Freking** of the Catholic Student Mission Crusade who gave fourteen of us several months' full hospitality at his Crusade Castle at a time while we were searching for a place to live.

And many fine laymen assisted us at Grailville, among others **Emerson Hynes**, **Caroll Bower**, Professor **Frank O'Malley**. I shall never forget O'Malley's lecture and his magnificent dramatizations of world literature.

And finally we owe a lot to the great man from Europe Dom **Ermin Vitry**, the Belgian monk who combined Gregorian Chant, dance, and music into rhythmic festivals at Grailville and Cincinnati. And the Fathers **Louis Bouyer** and **Jean Danièlou**. The great French theologian, Father Danièlou, spoke only French but we all understood him. **Christopher Dawson** the

famed English historian, **Evelyn Waugh**, the English novelist who, when Catherine Shea asked, "Why did you write your novel *Brideshead Revisited*?" answered, "Just for fun, my lady." **Doctor Pieper**, the German writer about leisure and culture. Many and many others but they all each in their field widened our vision about the liturgy, the land, and culture.

CW: Lydwine, if you could have actually been present in the GA, and if you were asked to propose a toast or to offer a spontaneous prayer for the future of the Grail in the US, what would you say?

Lydwine: Carol, I would say, my dear Grail people, I started the Grail in America because Father van Ginneken in his lectures at the university convinced me then already about the necessity of a strong movement of lay women committed to Christ. He, an anthropologist, explained about patrilineal and matrilineal culture, and he then already predicted that after centuries of patriarchy, the time had to come that women should exert their influence not only in the family and home but in all strata of society.

And now, more than ever, the world, the Church are in turmoil. Communism in Europe has broken down completely. Capitalism of America cannot save us either. Now, more than ever, we need women capable, with intelligence and holy impertinence, knowing their goal in life, developing their talents to the full, living the true evangelical life in Christ, trying in solidarity with all the women in world – of all races and classes – to bring peace, unity, love to their families, to their jobs, to the whole of society.

May the Holy Spirit, the womanist symbol in the Trinity, guide you all in this adventurous undertaking, in a communal spirit of cooperation and total friendship.

CW: Lydwine, do you have some closing words?

Lydwine: Carol, perhaps the last word: my dear Grail members, there are so many among you whom I should love to talk to, to shake hands with, to embrace. I dare not mention more individual names because I am so afraid I will forget somebody. But realize, as I said before, I love America. I love the American Grail women for their openness of mind, for their spirit of truth, for their willingness to accept criticism if said in love, for their spirit of adventure. All of you I close in my heart. I think of you often. I pray for you often. We are together in a common goal: to say it in the words of Father van Ginneken – "to work together for the conversion of the world".

Warm greetings from Lydwine, whose main task is now to look after a very sick sister. Man proposes, God disposes. May I, may all of us, persevere to the end. Greetings, Lydwine.

CW: And, on behalf of the Grail in the United States, I want to thank you for sharing yourself with us today.

Transcribed by Mary Gene Devlin
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