

## A Brief History of the Grail in the United States

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### I. Events and Developments

Two Dutch Grail members, Lydwine Van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss, brought the Grail to the U.S. in 1940, just before the Nazi invasion. They came at the invitation of Bishop Bernard Shiel of Chicago, who turned out not to be as dependable as the women had hoped. The Grail spent its first four years near Chicago, primarily at Doddridge Farm, a property owned by the Archdiocese of Chicago. The Archdiocese required them to run programs for children, even as they trained young women for the work of the lay apostolate, the Grail's primary concern. During these years, a Grail "traveling team" also conducted programs for young Catholic women around the US.

In 1944, the U.S. Grail moved to a farm outside Cincinnati, with the encouragement of the archbishop there, John T. McNicholas. McNicholas named the new center "Grailville." The US Grail had become involved with the Catholic Rural Life Conference and increasingly saw its mission to be deeply connected to the Catholic "back to the land" movement. The family of the first American Grail member, Mary Louise Tully, provided the down payment for Grailville and the Catholic archdiocese loaned us the rest. At Grailville, as at Doddridge Farm, "the Mass was the absolutely central part of each day" (Kalven, 64).

Throughout the remainder of the 1940s and in the 1950s, significant numbers of Catholic women, many from cities, came to Grailville for the summer, or for a yearlong program called "The Year's School of Christian Formation." The three factors most fundamental to life at Grailville in those days were 1) the "family pattern" of life, in which everyone lived, worked, studied, prayed and played with the same group; 2) a subsistence

economy, in which the community was approximately 85% self-sufficient in food year round, and everyone shared in the manual labor and 3) the Roman Catholic liturgy, including the singing of lauds, vespers and compline, which was the primary unifying factor of the community (Kalven, 83-89).

The US Grail also placed more emphasis on the inclusion of married as well as celibate women in the movement than the Grail in Europe did. The nucleus of the Grail was not established in the US until 1951. In 1972, for the first time, the president of the US Grail (Dorothy Rasenberger) was elected rather than appointed.

By 1963, the Grail had established twelve city centers across the country, including in Brooklyn, Detroit, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Louisiana, and Toronto. At their height, two hundred women lived in Grail city centers, conducting programs on the family, education for world community, service careers for women, Christian culture (with a special emphasis on music and the arts), and the formation of religious educators for Catholic schools and parishes. I myself became involved in the Grail at the Philadelphia Grail Center beginning in 1965. During this period, the Grail also trained and sent scores of women as lay missionaries to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The experiences of these women shaped the identity of the US Grail for years to come, stimulating, for example, the Grail's increasing involvement in social liberation and intercultural communication.

By 1962, an estimated 14,000 women had participated in Grail programs in the U.S.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had an enormous impact on the U.S. Grail, as it did on virtually every Catholic group. As a result of the Council's emphasis on dialogue between Christian denominations (ecumenism), and the US Grail's own pioneering ecumenical efforts since its earliest days, the 1966 US Grail General Assembly voted to

welcome its first two Protestant members. In a related move, Semester at Grailville (1968-1975), a group-process-oriented, credit-bearing program for college women of all religious backgrounds (and none) replaced the Year's School of Christian Formation as the primary program at Grailville. Then, in 1975, at another General Assembly, the US Grail welcomed two Jewish women into membership and subsequently severed its official affiliation with the Catholic Church. A significant number of Grail members continued to be Roman Catholics, however, and Grail centers in San Jose and the Bronx had strong connections with the Catholic Church for years to come. On the other hand, by the end of the 1970s, religious—eventually spiritual—search rather than membership in any particular religious tradition had become the accepted framework of U.S. Grail participation.

By the end of the 1960s, the US Grail had also become involved in the women's liberation movement, and, in particular Christian feminism. Throughout the 1970s, the Grail, primarily at Grailville, sponsored a series of path-breaking programs in feminist theology, with noted feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schuëssler Fiorenza, Dorothee Soëlle, Beverly Harrison, Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, and others, leading, or in some cases, participating in, Grail programs on this topic. These developments culminated in a six-week credit-bearing summer course, Seminary Quarter at Grailville (1974-1978) that provided training in feminist theology, ethics, and worship to women seminary students before such subjects were available at most seminaries and divinity schools. I myself co-authored, with another Grail member, Eleanor Walker, and a Protestant seminary professor, Linda Clark, the first book on ecumenical Christian feminist worship, based on a week-long program during Seminary Quarter 1978.

Another aspect of feminism in the Grail and especially at Grailville was the commitment to the land, and to the connection between women and the land, a commitment which preceded the second wave of feminism, the contemporary environmental movement, or the communes of the 1960s and 70s. From the outset, and particularly with the establishment of Grailville, the Grail placed women's work on the land at the center of its vision. In the 1990s, it continued and ramped up this commitment with activities like "New Women, New Earth," a four month program exploring ecofeminism in theological perspective, summer garden internships, permaculture, wetlands, and other forms of environmental education and action. Given the encroaching reality of climate change and other environmental crises, some of us see this historic commitment to the environment as the center of the Grail's mission and work in the years to come.

Throughout its years in the US, the Grail was also strongly committed to social transformation and liberation, with Grail teams working in inner-city neighborhoods and parishes, and Grail gatherings focused on the work of Paulo Freire, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, and other socialist and liberation thinkers. Grail members marched in Civil Rights demonstrations and took at least one busload of college girls to Louisiana to participate in Civil Rights actions there. I myself served with the Grail team at St. Thomas the Apostle Community School in Harlem in the early 1970s, at a time when people were pretty regularly shot on the streets.

In recent years, these primary Grail emphases: women, the environment, social transformation, and spirituality, have continued and have taken on new forms. One important development has been the Grail's work as a non-governmental organization at the UN, especially our bringing young women from around the world to participate the UN

Commission on the Status of Women every March. Many Latinas who have enriched the life of the US Grail were introduced to the movement thanks to the heroic labors of Sharon Joslyn and Mary Kay Louchart over three decades in the South Bronx. The Cornwall Grail has built strong ties with the local area even as it has welcomed New York area Grail members for education and community-building experiences. In California, the Grail developed 35 units of affordable housing on the old San Jose Grail Center property even as it continued the Grail Family Services (now the San Jose Grail Family Services) to support the primarily Latino community there. In New York City, a new Grail group, Politics and Spirituality was established in XXXX. And across the country, from Boston to Berkeley, from the South Bronx to Claremont CA, Grail groups continue to meet. Since 2008, thirty-nine new members have joined the US Grail.

## II. The Wider Context

It's important to be aware of these events and developments in the history of the Grail in the United States. But you can't grasp the significance of this Grail history without knowing something about the wider context in which it occurred.

Historians tell us that the development of the Grail was part of something called "The Catholic Revival," an international phenomenon that extended from the 1830s in Britain through the 1950s here in the US. Now talking about the Grail and Catholicism is a tricky business, because a lot of Grail members are not Catholic, and don't want to have Catholicism forced on them. As a lifelong Catholic, I am increasingly discouraged by the Catholic Church's right-wing politics and obsession with sexuality.

It would be a mistake to think that Catholicism was always this rigid and right wing,

however, or that the Vatican, the bishops, and the conservatives are all there is to the Catholic tradition. In point of fact, until the 1960s, the Catholic Church was for many a countercultural institution, an alternative to the violence and breakdown of community brought on by modernity and industrialization.

This anti-modernist movement actually extended beyond the boundaries of Catholic Church. It centered on the idea of a return to the communal values and practices of the Middle Ages. For example, Henry Adams, grandson of one American president and great-grandson of another, became a medieval historian and taught at Harvard. In 1904 he published a book called *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, a celebration of medieval unity as embodied in two great French cathedrals. In 1907, he published *The Education of Henry Adams*, a book that uses the Virgin Mary as the symbol of the counter-cultural medievalism. Also in that same first decade of the twentieth century, James J. Walsh, a professor at Fordham University, published another widely popular book, *The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries*. Catholics were still referring to that book in the 1950s.

Adams, a Transcendentalist, never converted to Catholicism, but a number of European and American intellectuals did--or to extremely Catholic wing of Anglicanism--because they perceived them as offering a more transcendently unified way of life than the modern world did. One of these converts was John Henry Newman, an Anglican priest and academic, who went on to become a Roman Catholic, and a cardinal, in the mid-19th century. Newman was much admired and quoted in the US Grail before Vatican II. (I can still hear Catherine Shea, one of the great married women of the earlier US Grail, announcing with enthusiasm "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN").

Two other converts to the Catholicism of the Catholic Revival were the famous French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, and his wife, the Russian-born poet and mystic, Raissa Maritain. The Maritains spent much of World War II at Columbia University and the Catholic parish at Columbia, Corpus Christi. T.S. Eliot, an Anglo-Catholic whom many consider the greatest modernist poet of the twentieth century (bearing in mind that artistic modernism was in a strong sense a critique of industrial modernism) was also strongly influenced by the call to return to the Middle Ages; the structure of his famous poem, “The Wasteland” is, for example, modeled in part on the story of the Fisher King in the Grail myth.

Another aspect of the international Catholic Revival was an English movement called Distributism, an economic philosophy based in the great Catholic papal social encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, calling for a return to the small-property ownership of the Middle Ages (as distinguished from capitalism or communism) and to working the land. Another influential British convert promoted Distributism to Catholicism, G. K. Chesterton.

In the US, two major cultural and literary figures converted to the Catholic Church because of its counter-cultural witness. One was Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker, whom some scholars believe was the most significant American Catholic of the twentieth century. The other was Thomas Merton, whose best-selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* explains, among other things, his decision to become a Catholic monk because monastic life came closer to life in a medieval village than anything else he could find.

Although the Catholic Revival was in some respects a counter-cultural movement, it was also a diverse and complex phenomenon. While Dorothy Day drew on it to develop the radical anarchist Catholic Worker, other Revival groups and individuals used the return to medievalism

for conservative and right wing purposes. The institutional Catholic Church used its return to the philosophy and theology of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Dominican priest, Thomas Aquinas, as a way to severely repress the intellectual development of Catholic theology. Some European Catholics used the revival to advocate for a return to monarchical structures and extremely conservative politics. The Nazis also used the medieval Grail myth to justify racism and anti-semitism, with King Arthur as the first Aryan.

It's impossible to overestimate the impact that the Catholic Revival had on the Grail both in Europe and the United States. Bear in mind that the Grail was founded immediately after World War I. Although the Netherlands was neutral in what some call the Great War, that war did cause widespread hunger and even starvation there. And even if that were not the case, there's no way that Van Ginneken could not have been aware of the widespread slaughter that took place across Europe during the war. World War I must have influenced Van Ginnekin as he called for the conversion of the world, even if historical work on the Grail movement rarely refers to it. The name of the youth movement begun by the women of Nazareth, the Grail, which eventually became the name of the entire international women's movement, also shows the impact of the Revival's turn to medievalism. In the early years, the Grail women gave the buildings, the tasks, and the program sessions at Doddridge Farm names drawn from the Grail myth (Kalven, 51).

Dorothy Day was connected with the Grail from before the Grail's arrival in the US, through a correspondence with Lydwine Van Kersbergen. She spent Lent of 1944 praying and doing manual labor at the Grail's retreat house in Foster, Ohio, where nucleus candidates also made silent retreats before their dedication. Over the years, Day sent people to the Grail who seemed unsuited to the Catholic Workers' anarchist culture and sometimes came to events at

Grailville, including the one where I met her a few years before her death. One of my prized possessions is a postcard I received from Dorothy Day while I was on the Grailville staff in 1975.

Other figures and aspects of the Catholic Revival impacted Grail members significantly, including Janet Kalven, who celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in May 2013. Janet, a secular Jew, became involved in the Great Books Program at the University of Chicago. The Great Books Program was based in hierarchical neo-Thomist philosophy, and advocated focusing on the great literary works of the western world rather than modernist trivia. This introduction to the Catholic Revival led Janet to the Grail at Doddridge Farm and nearly eighty years of Grail work. She wrote her definitive work on the history of the Grail, *Women Breaking Boundaries*, when she was 85.

Another Grail elder, Alice Dougan, told me that reading Thomas Merton's *The Seven Story Mountain* her senior year in high school inspired her to seek a life of prayer that led her first to join the Poor Clares, a contemplative religious order; but when she realized she was a "doer," she joined the Grail and spent rest of her life in the nucleus, working in Uganda as well as in the US.

My own Grail mentor, Eleanor Walker, had a similar experience. As a Ph.D. student in French at Columbia University during World War II, she decided to become a Catholic based on her reading of French medieval literature. She went to Corpus Christi Church, where Thomas Merton was also baptized, but since she did not know any Catholics, the pastor there put her in touch with the famous neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, who had fled to in the States with his Jewish convert wife Raissa to escape the Nazis. Maritain became Eleanor's godfather, and she went to the Maritain's apartment every Sunday afternoon while they were still in New

York. She later went to Paris on a Fulbright where joined the Circle de Saint Jean Baptiste in Paris, led by great theologian, Jean Daniélou, who sent her to the Grail at the Tiltenberg.

In addition to its influence on individuals, the Catholic Revival shaped the culture of the US Grail. The singing of medieval Gregorian chant was the heart and soul of the early movement, and the basis of the music that we wrote and sang subsequently in English. The work groups at Grailville in the early days—music, art, agriculture—were called “guilds,” after the medieval organizations of artisans. The plays that the early Grail performed in massive stadiums and theatres in Europe and the US—even in Madison Square Garden—were also modeled on medieval plays. Grail programs included study and communal readings of the works of some of the great literary and intellectual figures of the Revival, including Chesterton, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson, Paul Claudel, and others. Leading figures of the liturgical movement, a significant dimension of the Revival, visited Grailville regularly and introduced the participative liturgical style that became the practice of the entire Catholic Church after Vatican II.

Times have changed, of course, and the Catholic Revival is no longer the wider context of the US Grail, or of American Catholicism. It’s important to remember, however, that the Revival’s idealized way of life based in medieval Christianity, divine transcendence, and anti-modernism, inspired in the members of the Grail, the Catholic Worker, and other groups, an intense form of commitment. As the US Grail moves through the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one question that confronts us is how to continue, even as we modify, that early intense commitment to the transformation of the world.