

The Sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery

THE BENEDICTINE STORY OF
“EDUCATION FOR SERVICE”

By Michael G. Cartwright & Rebecca Blair '80



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Mary Luke Jones O.S.B. '71

The fall of 1968 marked the first semester at Indiana Central College for Sr. Mary Luke Jones O.S.B. At the time she entered Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, during the mid-1960s, the faculty who taught the sisters' academic classes were members of Our Lady of Grace Monastery but were affiliated with St. Benedict College in Ferdinand, Indiana. Yet, with the closure of St. Benedict in 1967, the continuing need for postulant¹ education remained unmet. Along with her peers, Sr. Mary Luke learned of an opportunity to complete her education at Indiana Central College, the small college nearby associated with the Evangelical United Brethren denomination (later United Methodist), a factor that raised a great amount of skepticism concerning the nature of the educational experience and the campus atmosphere among some of the sisters at Our Lady of Grace.



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While the nearby campus of Indiana Central appeared to offer a workable solution to the academic conundrum, because of its proximity to the Benedictine Community, its institutional focus on education for service resonated more familiarly with the instruction found in *The Rule of St. Benedict*, which focuses on ways one should live humbly in service to others within community. In a delightful ecumenical vignette, two members of the monastery, Sr. Mary Lucien Dippel and Sr. Mary Frederic Turner, who had graduated in 1966, described for the dubious sisters their experiences on the Indiana Central campus as students in the nursing program preparing to serve at the St. Paul's Hermitage Retirement and Health Care Center. Asserted Sr. Mary Lucien on this occasion, "We went and nothing happened to us!"

With the matter of education settled by the certainty in Sr. Mary Lucien's account, Sr. Mary Luke and the other Benedictine students took up academic life at Indiana Central. Curiously, her enrollment at the College corresponded with the making of her "first profession" within the monastery to live a life of obedience, stability, and fidelity to the monastic way of life. In doing so, she provisionally committed herself to live in relationship with the particular monastic community of Our Lady of Grace, the assumption of the vow of stability, as she sought "conversion of life"

in the context of the accompanying vows of celibacy and poverty. Such an orientation corresponded in sentiment with the communal responsibilities incumbent upon students to take up within the college and civic communities as clearly implied by the College motto, "Education for Service."

During this period, faculty, staff, and students witnessed what to their eyes must have seemed an unlikely sight: a group of young women dressed in the garb of Catholic nuns stepping out of a red van, burdened with books and other academic paraphernalia, every morning at a predetermined spot on campus, with the whole process reversed every afternoon.

Sr. Mary Luke recalls that the campus community readily offered these young women unreserved hospitality. One public example of this hospitality came in the form of an invitation to the Benedictine students to sing at a campus event. Apparently, the spiritual verve and religious dedication of their debut performance resonated throughout the College, since they continued to hit the road as one of the campus musical groups, known as "deputation teams," who visited Indiana United Methodist congregations in musical witness to their Christian faith. Always in demand, they developed a repertoire of songs to perform at events on and off campus. In fact, on several occasions, President Gene Sease joined the "Singing Sisters" to accompany them on the bass during their rendition of the favorite, "God Loves a Cheerful Giver." Ultimately, the group's popularity prompted them to record four albums and a compact disc, all of which remain available for sale in the gift shop at the Benedict Inn Retreat and Conference Center in Beech Grove.

The genuine warmth of the relationship between the Benedictine women and members of the campus community is indicated in the enthusiasm and openness with which their musical ministry was appreciated and enfolded within community life. Sr. Mary Luke recalls yet another example of warm acceptance which occurred in a sociology class taught by Dr. Marvin Henricks. During the week following Easter,

Henricks rose to begin his lecture when he spotted one of the Benedictine sisters out of the corner of his eye. He paused, his eyes twinkling as he asked, "Oh, by the way, what were you all doing on 'The Popeye and Janey Show' (a local children's cartoon and variety show) on Good Friday?"

Though the sisters rightly felt a bit cowed by Henricks' comment, they still refused to let Henricks get away with such an effortless jibe. They responded by innocently asking how it could be that Professor Henricks had come to be *watching* Popeye and Janey on Good Friday.

The physical visibility of the Benedictine sisters also raised the visibility of Catholicism as a theological prompt to ecumenical dialogue. In fact, such dialogue had begun much earlier than might be imagined. In the summer of 1968, President I. Lynd Esch arranged a meeting with Sr. Mary Philip Seib, the Prioress of Our Lady of Grace Monastery, to discuss theological concerns on the part of both the Catholic and Protestant communities that might attend the enrollment of the Benedictine students. For example, the matter of the chapel requirement necessitated a solution amenable to both traditions. President Esch offered to exempt the sisters from the Chapel requirement, but the Prioress responded to his offer by observing that she did not think the experience of Protestant worship would harm or offend the postulates in her care. Indeed, Sr. Mary Luke remembers attending many hours of chapel at Indiana Central along with praying the daily office within the Beech Grove Benedictine Community. Still, the unorthodox situation of the Benedictines' presence spurred rumors that they and other Catholics were routinely locked in the library during the Chapel hour, a rumor unsupported by available historical facts and the Sisters' recollections.

Ten Benedictine women would graduate with education degrees from the institution now known as the University of Indianapolis between 1965 and 1997. Each of these women would go on to assume teaching positions within Catholic parochial schools in the Indianapolis



metropolitan area. Sr. Mary Luke taught at the elementary level for six years before assuming the position as principal of a Catholic grade school. In 1986, she moved into an exciting role as the first director of development for the Benedictine Community in Beech Grove. As a testament to the continuing ecumenical relationship between the monastic and college communities, Sr. Mary Luke received the training for this position through seminars and workshops offered by the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

For Sr. Mary Luke, the invitation to assume this new task, offered by Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, the current Prioress of Our Lady of Grace, represented an opportunity to recover a sense of *charism*, the vocational gift one might offer up to the world at large as an expression of commitment and witness. One universally recognizable gesture of such witness may be found in the provision of hospitality. As Christine Pohl, author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* has

observed, “contemporary communities with the longest unbroken tradition of hospitality are those associated with the Benedictine monasteries.”² Pohl further notes that the transformative and generative elements embedded in the practice of hospitality include not simply providing for strangers in need, but rather welcoming them unreservedly into a space that has value for the host, with the expectation that both host and guest will be changed within this relationship—in much the same way that change emerges from caring human interactions in the Gospels.

In June 2001, the Benedictine impulse to provide hospitality became institutionalized in the formation of a program “Women Touched By Grace” sponsored by the Benedict Inn Conference and Retreat Center, a center conceived to provide a space in which ordained women of all faiths might find spiritual refreshment and reflection. This program, directed by Sr. Mary Luke, is supported by a grant through the “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Initiative” of the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment, Inc. As the Benedictine leaders considered the terms of this grant, they

realized that their original intention to welcome members of the monastic community as well as Catholic laypersons could not be realized, but that instead, they could serve the community of ordained clergywomen. In a gesture that mirrors the hospitality shown to the sisters on the Indiana Central campus, the Benedict Inn brought their program to fruition with the intention of serving just this population of “separated sisters.” The “Women Touched By Grace” spiritual renewal program, created by Sr. Mary Luke and a small group of Protestant clergywomen, incorporates common prayer, elements of the *lectio divina*, and silence as a means for a group of thirty clergywomen to experience renewal over a three-year period through a series of six ten-day retreats. As a part of this program, each Protestant clergywoman is paired with a prayer partner from Our Lady of Grace Monastery during the three years. Moreover, the Protestant participants are invited to offer reflection on scripture in the context of prayer to the monastic community. The culminating event of the program in November 2006 is the ten-day pilgrimage of program leaders and participants to Italy to visit the sites associated with the lives and ministries of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica, Benedict’s sister. This trip marks a means of drawing up past traditions and witnesses to inform changing life in the present.

Such continuity in the midst of change forms a way of being for the sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery as well as for the University of Indianapolis community. Just as the revitalized structures on the University campus, such as Schwitzer Center and Esch Hall, adapt historic architecture to current functional needs, so the Beech Grove Benedictines have maintained the singing sisters as the “Beech Grove Benedictines,” continuing to record compact discs of their updated music to share their ministry with new generations of the faithful. Moreover, the administrative roles of the Benedictine women within the church, once limited to school and



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monastery, have broadened to the role of “parish life coordinators” within individual parishes, bringing these women more closely into experiential sisterhood with their Protestant clergy counterparts.

The collaborative inquiry into “Education for Service” that began with the small group of Benedictine students on the little red bus in the 1960s and 70s also continues to bear fruit in the present. In the late 1990s, Michael Cartwright and Greg Clapper worked to bring their vision of a Christian vocations curriculum into being through the founding of the Lantz Center

for Christian Vocations. The Benedictine tradition of spiritual formation powerfully informed the direction of this initiative and those that followed, as Michael Cartwright affirmed in his reflection on the occasion of his installation as the new dean for Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs in 2003. Indeed, through *The Crossings Project*, the University of Indianapolis has offered to Methodist clergy and laity the enrichment experience of Benedictine spiritual practice as a means of reflecting on the Wesleyan concept of covenant discipleship. This trajectory has continued with the hiring

of Sr. Jennifer Horner O. S. B. in 2003 to serve as University co-chaplain and director of the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations and Formation. The paths of service taken by Sr. Mary Luke Jones and Sr. Jennifer Horner attest, at a time when the University community is growing in its commitment to be “ecumenical and interfaith” in the way it goes about achieving its mission of “Education for Service.” The Benedictine story of education for service continues to contribute a great deal to the life of the University of Indianapolis as it discovers its own charism of hospitality.



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NOTES

The Benedictine Story—by Michael G. Cartwright & Rebecca Blair

- ¹ The term “postulant” is used to refer to a monastic man or woman who has not yet made “first vows,” but who has declared an intention to live according to the vows of celibacy, obedience, and conversion of life as specified in the Rule of St. Benedict.