

Sister recalls council experiences

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

As the Catholic Church marks the 25th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council, Sister Mary Luke Tobin has added reason to remember the occasion.

She was there.

The Denver native was one of 15 women invited to audit the council's third and fourth sessions, in 1964 and 1965, respectively.

In 1964 Sister Tobin learned of her invitation to the council not through official channels, but while at sea traveling — uninvited, she thought — to Rome.

At the time, Sister Tobin was superior of her order, the Sisters of Loretto, which she led from 1958 to 1970. Recently, she also had been elected president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

"The sisters' conference wanted me to go to find out what I could learn on the outside (of the council sessions)," Sister Tobin recalled in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "I was on a boat when a reporter from *The New York Times* called me to ask what I thought about being invited to audit the council."

Sister Tobin, now the coordinator of the Thomas Merton Center in Denver, said she and the 14 other women invited to audit were setting a precedent.

"That (being invited to audit) was an important step," Sister Tobin observed. "It was the first time, officially, that women were included in a council."

Although invited only as an auditor, she soon found her role changing.

"We did not have a speaking role on the floor of the council, but what did evolve is that some of us were invited to serve on some of the commissions that elaborated the documents that the bishops were to vote on," she said.

"We (the women) didn't make any big contributions because we were new to it all," she continued. "We were just getting our toes wet, getting used to being on a commission."

"It would be different today," she added with a laugh, "because we've had 25 years of experience of being involved."

When Sister Tobin arrived at the council, the bishops and the commission members had already been meeting for two years, working on the 16 documents that would set in motion the monumental changes in the church that followed the council.

The official sessions took place in the fall of each year, with the bishops returning to their dioceses and regular duties during the rest of the year. Work on the documents, largely done by commissions, continued throughout the year.

This work was made necessary, Sister Tobin said, because the bishops had rejected preliminary documents prepared for them by Vatican officials before the first session in 1962.

"The bishops said, 'If we are going to talk about the church in the modern age, we have to do it in a different way,'" Sister Tobin reported.

"After they got to the council the spirit of enthusiasm built ... the sense that change was going to take place," she continued.

"That's how I think they came up with the sense of the church as the people of God. That was the essential statement of the council. Everything else flowed from that."

Fleshing out this new understanding of the church was done by the commissions, Sister Tobin noted. The bishops heard drafts of the documents during the main sessions held each morning, and would comment and make suggestions for their revision. The commission members would later incorporate the suggestions into the documents as much as possible.

During the two years she attended the council, Sister Tobin worked on two commissions: the commission on the laity, and the commission on the church in the modern world. The latter, she said, "was the one I would have most valued working on anyway."

Commission members writing about the church in the modern world devoted part of their discussions on the rights of all human beings. As a result, the

council fathers condemned discrimination in any form, including against women.

Although the council was considering statements that, at the time, were unprecedented in terms of granting rights to women, the statements did not go far enough for everyone at the council, Sister Tobin said.

Sister Tobin said that the issue of women in the church remained one area that the council ultimately failed to address adequately.

"It was dealt with in a very minimalist manner," she said. "There was a statement in the *Document on the Church in the Modern World* that included women. It said that any form of discrimination must be eradicated. (In terms of women,) that still hasn't been accomplished."

As the council was in progress, the media played a key role in disseminating the changes being discussed, Sister Tobin said. Each day, bishops met with reporters to talk about the topics being addressed.

"The journalists at Vatican II did a great deal to get those documents published," she said. She recalled in particular one priest who, using the pseudonym "Xavier Rymme," wrote articles for the *New Yorker* magazine in which he described what was going on behind the scenes at the council.

"It was exciting," she said. "You waited every week for the *New Yorker* to come. The American people were following what was going on very closely."

Because of media coverage, the U.S. bishops returned from the council to find that the people in their dioceses were aware of what had transpired in Rome, and were ready to express opinions and to ask questions.

"There was probably no way for the bishops to hide once the openness happened," Sister Tobin observed.

The American bishops were affected not only by

media reporting, but also by the contact they had had with theologians working at the council, she noted.

"I think they mingled with great theologians and heard new ideas," she said. "It was a great education for the American Catholic bishops."

The council not only opened the eyes of some U.S. bishops, Sister Tobin said, but also opened the eyes of the church to the world. "The council opened the doors to the world, so that the problems of the world became the problems of the church," she said.

This new openness made it easier for the post-conciliar church to address a variety of social issues, Sister Tobin noted, citing specifically the issues of war and peace. "The American bishops have done a better job of addressing that since, but the council did open the door to that," she said.

The council also called for greater openness to other religions, and even to freer discussion of theological issues within the church, Sister Tobin said, remarking that these changes were among the most significant made by the council.

"You have to remember the time," she explained. "We didn't even have a document on religious liberty. We just had the one, holy Catholic Church. We got out of Vatican II that whole idea of religious liberty."

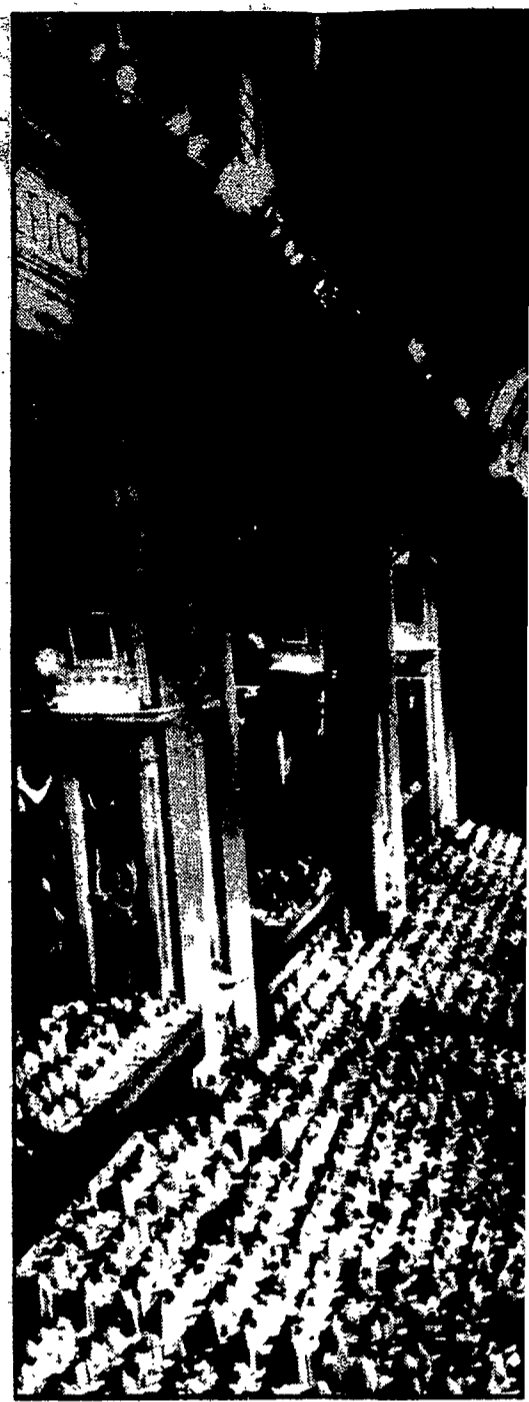
Vatican Council II ended in 1965 amid great celebration, Sister Tobin recalled. "I must say that the Romans know how to put on something," she said. "I really think that people were very moved."

But they were moved by more than just the closing celebrations, Sister Tobin said.

"There was a great feeling of, 'Now let's go home and put this into action.' The spirit was pretty evident," she recalled.

In looking back over the 25 years since the council, Sister Tobin observed that some of the changes

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Milestones

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Eastern churches if it was impossible for them to locate a Catholic priest.

• **Ecumenism** — "The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council." So read the opening statement of the Decree on Ecumenism — "Unitatis Redintegratio."

"Ecumenism" pointed out that all Christian denominations needed to acknowledge their errors and faults if the churches were to begin to move toward unity. The document also noted the value of calling certain Protestant denominations "churches" and called upon Catholics to remove obstacles in the way of Divine Providence when they work with "separated brethren."

• **Bishops** — A key document spelling out the role of bishops was "Christus Dominus," the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church. It called for reform and internationalization of the Roman Curia, the church's central administration, and ordered the formation of national or regional bishops' conferences.

The decree cast the bishop as chief pastor, teacher, priest and guide in the faith of his diocese. The document also spelled out new relations between the bishop and the priests, religious and laity in his diocese. The decree noted the authority of the whole college of bishops over the whole church, always in union with the pope and under his primary authority.

• **Seminaries** — "Optatum Totius," the Decree on Priestly Formation called for major new features of priestly formation including: systematic adaptation of general church norms by bishops' conferences to make the seminaries in each country more responsive to local conditions and needs; Scripture as the cornerstone of academic and spiritual formation in seminaries; teaching of current philosophical trends as well as classical philosophy

to provide a rounded intellectual basis for theological formation; establishment of pastoral formation programs to teach seminarians "the art of exercising the apostolate not only in theory but in practice;" and continuing education of priests after ordination.

• **Religious** — "Perfectae Caritatis," the Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, called all religious to return constantly "to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community" as their first norm for renewal. The second basic norm was "an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times."

• **Non-Christians** — "Nostra Aetate," the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, was an attempt to reverse one of the most shameful aspects of all Christian history: hatred and persecution of the Jews.

The document declared that the church "deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source." It firmly rejected once-common views that the Jews as a people were responsible for Christ's death and that Jews are a people "repudiated and cursed by God." It particularly objected to the use of Scripture for making such claims.

The declaration also urged Catholics to appreciate and talk with Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus and adherents of other forms of religious belief.

• **Education** — The Declaration on Christian Education, "Gravissimum Educationis," affirmed the church's teaching that parents have the primary right and duty to see to their children's education.

The document also called on Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic schools if possible and to support those schools to the extent that they could. The declaration urged the state to subsidize religious schools as well as secular public edu-

cation, so that parents could have a choice in the education of their children.

• **Revelation** — The Bible was the center of one of the council's most important documents, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation also known as "Dei Verbum" (God's Word).

Instead of highlighting differences between tradition and the document that revealed the "close connection and communication" between the two.

"For both of them, flowing from the same wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unit toward the same end," it said.

• **Laity** — The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity — bearing the Latin title "Apostolicam suavitatem" — was the first conciliar document devoted specifically to the laity.

"Christ conferred on the apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and power," the decree says. "The laity, too, share in the priestly, prophetic and office of Christ and therefore have their own part to play in the mission of the whole people of God in the church and in the world." The focus which II placed on the laity in the church is, in fact, shown more clearly by what was removed from the laity decree than by what was left in.

Whole sections of the original draft were referred to other documents that would be included without chapters on the laity — the laity as people of God to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the witness of the laity in the world, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World, lay missionary work to the mission and so on.

The laity decree challenged all Catholics to take far greater responsibility for the church's life and mission.

• **Religious Freedom** — No other document from Vatican II had so clearly an American stamp

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