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Grail Beginnings

The Germinal Ideas and the Pioneers

Have acquired beautiful site with several buildings near Chicago. Will you arrange to start work at earliest convenience?

This telegram from Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago arrived at the Tiltenberg, International Grail Training Center near Amsterdam, on December 30, 1939. To send a team to the United States had been part of the Grail plan for a long time. Professor Jacques van Ginneken had founded the group in 1921 as “a society of unmarried Roman Catholic laywomen . . . at the disposal of the Church to help with the spreading of the Kingdom of God over the whole world.”¹ He had often spoken to the enthusiastic young members of the society about the three forces struggling to win the modern world—America, Russia, and Christianity. Clearly, the Grail,² with its goal of world conversion, needed to be at the heart of the action, that is, in America.

A team of five had been carefully chosen to start the Grail in America: Joan Overboss, fresh from Germany where Hitler had just suppressed the Grail movement; Lydia Mulders, an artist; Ans Coebergh van den Braak, a youth leader; Mary Louise Tully, a young American in Holland for training to become the first United States Grail member; and as leader-in-charge, Lydwine van Kersbergen, PhD, recently returned from establishing the Grail in Australia. When the Bishop’s cable arrived, they intensified their preparations—collecting materials to take with them, following special courses that might prove useful, completing tasks or turning them over to others. Margaret van Gilse, the International President of the Grail, was uneasy as war appeared to be looming closer and closer. She insisted that Lydwine and Joan set out without waiting for the others.

On March 30, 1940, Lydwine van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss boarded the boat train in The Hague, the first step on their journey to

America. A group of Grail members was on the platform to see them off. In the excitement of their departure, the two travelers did not notice that Margaret van Gilse had been called aside to receive a cablegram from Archbishop Gilroy in Australia, informing her that Judith Bouwman, the leader of the Grail in Australia, had been killed in an automobile accident. Another woman might have delayed the departure, considered sending Lydwine back to Australia to take charge of the young, inexperienced team there. But Margaret did not say a word to anyone until after the train had pulled out. When Lydwine and Joan arrived in New York, they found Margaret's letter waiting for them with the news of the loss of one of the movement's most dynamic and creative leaders.

A few initial contacts had already been made in the United States, but they must have seemed very few to the two newcomers. In the whole of the United States with its 22,000,000 Catholics, they were acquainted with just five people: James Coffey, a young priest of the Brooklyn diocese, who, while studying at Louvain, had visited Holland and fallen in love with the Grail. He was now the newest assistant in a large Irish Catholic parish in Brooklyn. John and Anina Tully, parents of Mary Louise, who were at their home in La Grange, Illinois, trying frantically to get news of their daughter who was still at the Grail Center in occupied Holland. Helen Mann, wife of an international banker, whom Joan had worked with in Berlin and who was now living in Manhattan. And Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, auxiliary bishop of Chicago, who had been sent to Europe in 1938 by Cardinal Mundelein to survey European youth movements and had been well received at the main Grail center. He had seen one of the mass dramas with several thousand young women expressing their convictions through color and movement, singing and choral speaking. The bishop was duly impressed and urged the Grail to come to the United States. The next year Lydwine and Alberta Lucker, a German Grail leader, had come to the States as delegates to a Congress of *Pax Romana*, the international organization of Catholic university students. Lydwine took the opportunity to go to Chicago, visit with the Tully family, and see Cardinal Mundelein. "We talked about the lay apostolate," she told me, "and he said that he had always wanted it in his diocese. He invited the Grail to come to Chicago at our convenience. I should have asked for a written statement but I did not think of that at the time."³

During the *Pax Romana* Congress word came that Hitler had invaded Austria. The Congress broke up as the European delegates hastened to return to their own countries. On May 10, 1940, Hitler's armies crossed into Holland, Rotterdam was bombed, the Queen and the Dutch government went into exile. Events had proved the soundness of Margaret van Gilse's intuition: Lydwine and Joan had left Holland on one of the last boats

to sail from Rotterdam before the German invasion. The two newcomers in New York were cut off from their home base.

There they were, staying in the hostel run by the Sisters of Jesus and Mary on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan: two Dutch women, one of whom, Joan, did not yet speak English. Their seed money of Dutch guilders had been rendered worthless by the invasion; their patron, George Cardinal Mundelein, had died before their arrival; in the inter-regnum until a new archbishop would be appointed, Bishop Sheil had no authority to act. He kept them waiting three weeks before he came to New York to talk with them. He did not offer any financial aid. Instead he urged them first to stay on in New York and “get to feel the swing of the city.”

It was not an auspicious beginning. It seemed particularly chilling to Lydwine van Kersbergen, who, when she had arrived in Australia to begin the Grail “Down Under,” had been received by an impressive delegation of Australian and New Zealand bishops eager to welcome the Grail team and to offer housing and funds to help them get started.

Who were these two women? With what were they armed? What gave them the courage to get into their car—a gift from the Tully family—and drive to Chicago? Two things: the vision of the founder, Jacques van Ginneken, and their own experience of how these ideas worked out in practice.

Jacques van Ginneken

Van Ginneken was a Dutch Jesuit, born in 1877 in a small town, Oudenbosch, in the South of Holland, to a prosperous family (his father owned a brewery). There were French and Celtic influences in his background, which perhaps accounted for his exuberant, charismatic personality. He was a brilliant scholar, who earned a doctorate in philology at the secular University of Leiden and was the only Jesuit to be elected to the prestigious Royal Academy of Science. He read widely in many fields and pioneered in bringing other disciplines—psychology, ethnology, biology—to bear on philology. He was a man of amazing intuitions—he foresaw planes speeding through the stratosphere, and in one of his conferences he even remarked that one day men would go to the moon.⁴

He was a popular and persuasive lecturer; in fact, so popular were his Saturday lectures in the Great Hall of the university that some of his colleagues, annoyed at his ability to draw large crowds, instituted a ruling that only formally enrolled graduate students be allowed to attend. He had strong opinions and strong convictions, which he was always ready to translate into action. His studies in psychology issued in experiments in psychological testing and attempts to use the tests in job counseling. At the time, Dutch Catholics were just emerging into public life after centuries of

post-Reformation oppression. They tended to keep to themselves in a fortress mentality, very much on the defensive in relations with non-Catholics. Van Ginneken's impatience with this "fear Catholicism" led to his organizing with Gerard Brom the Committee for the Conversion of the Netherlands and to his popular retreats for non-Catholics.

He "lived Catholicism in a Netherlands style, which united the exuberance of the South with the decisiveness of the North," Gerard Brom wrote of him. At heart he was "an ambassador of Christ,"⁵ a priest dedicated to the apostolate and haunted by the question, "Why has the world not been converted?" Surely God's grace is always present; the failure must be on the part of our response, on the lack of leadership willing to risk everything in the one great work. He wanted Catholics who would take the initiative, who would be willing to embrace and use all modern means and who would risk everything to bring the Gospel into the contemporary world. Pursuing this idea, he founded in rapid succession four lay communities, each intended to work actively with a specific population: the Ladies of Bethany in 1919; the Knights of St. Willibrord; and in 1921 the Crusaders of St. John and the Women of Nazareth. The Ladies of Bethany were to work among the dechristianized young people in the big cities; they disappointed him by forsaking their lay status to become a canonical religious community. The Crusaders of St. John were to work with boys to help them learn a trade after leaving school; they eventually became a secular institute. The Knights of St. Willibrord were for "the drawing-room apostolate" among the well-to-do elites; and the Women of Nazareth were originally to work with girls after they left school, a goal that soon was broadened to take on worldwide dimensions. He began speaking of this worldwide movement of young women and the great things they would accomplish. A listener asked, "How many members do you have?" Undaunted, the ever-optimistic van Ginneken replied, "None yet."

Four ideas were particularly dear to his heart and soon captured the imagination and fueled the energies of the first Women of Nazareth: namely, the elbow of time, the three forces struggling to unify the world, the contribution women could make in this struggle, and the practice of the Cross as the key to spiritual energies.

His analysis of world history led him to the conviction that Western civilization was in crisis. The old order was breaking down. He compared it to a huge domed church crumbling into ruin. But the crisis was also an opportunity, for in such "an elbow of time," there is a fluidity that makes major changes possible. He foresaw a relatively short period, perhaps fifty to seventy-five years, in which the world would tremble in the balance, able to be turned in a new direction by a group with vision and determination. "Rejoice that we are living now," he told the young women gathered at the

Tiltenberg, the training house outside Amsterdam, in 1932, “because we have the chance to give the world a push.”⁶

Moreover, in this time of feverish unification of the world by modern transportation and communications, he saw three forces struggling for control: Russia with her communism, America with her capitalism, and Christianity. He was not under any illusion about the strength of Christianity. “Catholicism would not even be mentioned in any ordinary objective history,”⁷ he remarks. But there is a new factor on the world scene, the rising force of feminism. He explained that

economic and technical conditions have been the cause of a new matrilineal culture which is now coming into existence, now—to put it in a more correct way—a civilization with a more feminine orientation is about to materialize. The cause of all this is the invention of machinery. Machinery does two things: in the first place, it brings the woman out of the home into the factory where she earns money, a good deal of money, sometimes even more than a man. And, on the other hand, it takes a great deal of the housekeeping out of her hands.⁸ Housekeeping has fallen to pieces, and in another generation, it will have gone completely, except for the upbringing of the children. And that asks only a few years after which the Montessori school takes over.⁹

The lecture elaborates in detail how the old domestic crafts—providing fuel, light, and water; gardening, cooking, canning, and preserving food; spinning, weaving, sewing, knitting, laundry—have all moved to the factory. As a result of these trends, he envisaged a rising matriarchy, holding the balance, able to turn the world in a new direction:¹⁰

If only we could stop considering the man as the only force in public life. . . . Feminism is working in that direction. . . . Oh, if that feminism would succeed . . . if indeed that becomes true, we will have mobilized that half of humanity which up till now did not count, and this half will make its choice of party and will become itself a great party, a great force. . . . Feminism is a terrific rising force and if it will go at the speed which ethnology proves, it may well happen that we return to our former matriarchal culture . . . then woman will get the greatest chance to let the conversion of the world succeed.¹¹

And here precisely is the task for the Grail. To organize these young women and make use of their gifts and talents for “the conversion of the world.” On the one hand, he is quite pragmatic:

The world has (I shall make a rough guess) some ten million women too many, who have no longer enough to do, and we shall organize these women and we shall convert the world with them.¹²

These women, lacking a purpose in life, finding time heavy on their hands, he saw as ripe for a movement to give meaning to their lives. On the other hand, beyond the pragmatism, he also had a boundless faith in the potential of women, a potential that he maintained had never been tapped either in society or in the church. "You have been given all kinds of deep and wonderful talents which up till now have not been exploited in the Catholic Church," he told the young women. His faith was grounded both in his personal experience—his father died when he was a small child; he was raised by a family of capable women—and in his studies of history and anthropology, including Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht*. Women can change the world because they have already done so. He reinforced this conviction by his broad sketch of women's contributions throughout history, beginning with women's discovery of the seed, of spinning and weaving, of pottery and fixed dwelling places, and coming down through the Bible, the medieval queens and abbesses, the missionary nuns, to the twentieth century.

His notion of conversion of the world was not as triumphalist as it sounds to contemporary ears. While his retreats for non-Catholics did result in bringing people into the Catholic Church, his ideas of the apostolate focused rather on permeating both public and private life with Christian values. His notions tended more toward transformation than toward imposition of an orthodoxy.

And what is your task? To counterbalance in the world all masculine hardness, all the angles of the masculine character, all cruelty, all the results of alcoholism and prostitution and sin and capitalism, which are ultra-masculine, and to Christianize that with a womanly charity. What else is that than the conversion of the world?¹³

How was the Grail to organize the millions of young women and through them create a stream, a veritable torrent, of love and self-sacrifice to change the world? His method was a radical one: by living an intense Christian spirit *in the world*. The leaven must be in the dough. The Women of Nazareth must achieve the widest possible contact with the world of young women, in the factories and the universities, in workshops and offices, in the department stores and the banks, in the radio and film studios. They must learn to radiate the joy of their faith, not shut up behind convent walls, but in the midst of contemporary society, as laywomen, not set apart by dress or enclosure, vows or special rules and customs. It was a point of pride with the group that he was speaking of the importance of the

lay apostolate already in 1921, a year before Pope Pius XI wrote his encyclical on the topic. In naming the group Women of Nazareth (WoN), he intended to stress their lay character, for he observed that no organized group in the Church had attempted to live the life which Mary had lived in Nazareth, a laywoman carrying out her tasks in her family and community.

Moreover, the WoN were to make use of all that modern science and technology had to offer. He had no patience with the siege mentality of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Catholicism, on the defensive against liberalism, democracy, and technology and occupied in constructing Catholic institutions as safe havens from the world. On the contrary, he urged the WoN to utilize all modern means in their work, mentioning particularly automobiles, airplanes, radio, film, cabarets, theaters, stadiums. They should establish their own film studios, design and build their own airplanes, emblazon the Grail symbol in neon lights over the doors of the Grail houses.

They were also to make full use of their womanly beauty and charm. He complains that the Church has not recognized this aspect of women's gifts:

If she wanted to do good, (the Church) has shut her up in great cloisters behind thick walls; and has thought that every woman who walked along the street in a nice dress was a permanent danger to good morals and to all decent piety. It's of tremendous importance for the Grail movement that you should appear in the streets as well-dressed women. You must be women from all classes and attractive women. If we want to win the world and you are not charming, we can not use you.¹⁴

He looked to the early church as an example of the lay apostolate, when the faith was spread throughout the Mediterranean world by the slave women in the households, the soldiers on the Roman roads, the noble ladies in the palaces. To keep this idea alive, many of the first WoN took names from the New Testament: Lydia, Persis, Damaris, Syntiche, Thecla.

But how to assure that in the midst of the world with all its preoccupations, distractions, and temptations, the WoN would not only be able to hold to their quite different values but to bring the witness of a radiant, irresistible Christian spirit? He fell back on the only means he knew—the traditional spirituality of the counsels set forth in a document modeled in large measure after the Jesuits. He explains:

You are actually religious at heart, but you remain lay people for the sake of the other lay people, in order to influence them and safeguard them.¹⁵ You are the quasi-religious nucleus of the lay apostolate. That does not mean that you should be only half reli-

gious, but it means that you form one big organization with the lay people. . . . You should bring more and bigger sacrifices than the religious, but you should not come inside the framework of ecclesiastical canon law which always prescribes a religious habit that would only be a hindrance to you. If the WoN should become a religious order, a partition would automatically arise between you and the Grail and the Grail would become like a Third Order. The new thing is that the laity form a hierarchy—the Round Table (the council of the chief Grail leaders), the leader of a city, the leader of a house, and so on . . . like the army.¹⁶

The concept of a quasi-religious nucleus of the lay apostolate was a bold idea, attempting to unite opposite poles—religious and lay, “strictest spirituality and freest worldliness,”¹⁷ WoN and the Grail, a highly trained elite and a mass movement of young women. But is it really lay, or are the nucleus members nuns in disguise? “Lay” in Catholic terminology has two distinct meanings: (1) the laity are those who are not ordained, that is, not clerics or priests; and (2) the laity are those who are not religious, that is, not bound by vow to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Since the institutional Catholic Church insists that women cannot be ordained, all women are lay in the first sense. However, the religious orders create a second distinction, that between religious and secular. In setting up the WoN and the Grail, Father van Ginneken spoke of a return to the early church, before it was clericalized, when all the women were “completely apostle and completely lay.” His concept was an attempt to break down the wall between religious and secular, the wall that reserved holiness to the professionally religious, that is, nuns and priests. The Grail and its “quasi-religious nucleus” claimed the fullness of Christian life for the laity, specifically for lay women. An early Grail slogan proclaimed the lay apostolate as an “all saints movement.” Moreover, another slogan, “Women should lead women,” claimed the full responsibilities of leadership for women—taking the initiative, setting goals, choosing means—under the guidance of the bishop, to be sure, but definitely not subject to the parish priest. Father van Ginneken is careful to explain that the WoN and the Grail form one big organization under lay leadership, not like the Franciscan Third Order where the priest moderator makes all the decisions.

In working out the structures and spirituality for the movement, Father van Ginneken drew on traditional forms. Structurally, the WoN as the nucleus of the lay apostolate were to lead the movement, infusing the spirit out of their lengthy spiritual formation, and fulfilling the major functional roles. They were also to safeguard the international unity of the movement. The WoN was organized in a pyramid structure, with the international president at the top of the chain of command. She appointed the

national presidents who in turn appointed leaders of centers, teams, and other projects. There was always someone clearly in charge of even the smallest project. A novitiate of three to five years prepared the WoN for an oath of obedience, a promise of poverty, and a private vow of virginity for as long as they remained members. These pledges could be dissolved by the international president, but the intention was that the individual dedicate herself to Christ in the WoN for her lifetime. This structure, with its emphasis on an oath rather than a vow of obedience, was carefully calibrated to maintain the lay status of the WoN and to establish them as a mere *pia unio*, pious union, outside the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. To the often asked question, “Do you take vows?” we members could always reply in good conscience with a definite “No, only our baptismal vows.”

Spiritually, the WoN were to be as dedicated, as willing to sacrifice—or even more willing to sacrifice—than the members of the most austere religious order. At the same time, they were to be free to wear fashionable clothes, to make use of all modern technology, to take any job, to travel and work alone. Initially these polarities were expressed in dress: in the training house members wore a quasi-religious habit, a white robe and veil with a blue sash; in the work, they wore attractive modern outfits. Father van Ginneken was at pains to explain that they should never think of their in-house costume as their real costume, nor their modern dress as a disguise. Both forms of dress were equally theirs.¹⁸

For the training of the WoN, he drew on the traditional monastic model with an additional emphasis on “an extremism of religion,”¹⁹ “without compromise.”²⁰ Training centered on the total surrender of self to God through a life of joyful self-denial and mortification lived under strict obedience to the duly constituted authorities. Obedience was understood in the Ignatian sense of conforming not only one’s outward action but also one’s mind and will to the directives of the leader. Moreover, nothing was to be done out of routine or *pro forma*. Rather WoN were urged to use initiative and ingenuity in discovering new ways of prayer and mortification. Father van Ginneken admired the spirit of sacrifice and devotion to a cause which he saw in communism, in fascism, even in the capitalists’ dedication to the pursuit of profit, and he frequently urged the WoN to practice an extremism of love, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the cause of world conversion even greater than that of their secular counterparts. “We will have to exceed our opponents in their heroism of hate with the radiantly happy heroism of love,” he exhorted his listeners.²¹

Was the original foundation really lay? The answer is clearly “yes” in terms of canon law. The oath put us outside the sphere of the Sacred Congregation for Religious with all its regulations. But I would contend

that this was more than a legalistic device; it was a deeply held value. Our self-understanding was emphatically lay, although it has taken many decades to work out the implications of the term. I find it evidence of a lay consciousness that the in-house costume was soon abandoned. A magazine article featuring a picture of Dutch members in their “habit” was an embarrassment to us in the early days in the United States. From my present vantage point, I see that the tradition we inherited was both dualistic (spirit/matter, church/world, soul/body) and hierarchical. I see our history as a struggle to work our way out of both dualism and hierarchy, a struggle to develop a lay spirituality, an evolution growing out of insights and values in the original vision.

Both Lydwine van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss were deeply imbued with Jacques van Ginneken’s vision and had taken part in the demanding training for “the quasi-religious nucleus of the lay apostolate,” but they interpreted the vision differently according to their very different personalities and their quite different experiences in the burgeoning movement in Europe.

Lydwine van Kersbergen

Lydwine was born Geertruida Catharina Hendrika Maria van Kersbergen²² on May 6, 1905, in The Hague, the sixth of seven children, five boys and two girls. The family were prosperous and devout Catholics. Her father and brothers ran a highly successful horticultural business, breeding new varieties, providing flowers for the major churches and hotels, supervising acres of greenhouses and growing things. “My father loved his family and his plants,” she told me. “In winter, he and my brothers would get up in the middle of the night to make sure the heating for the plants was all right. When I was growing up, I did not like trees or flowers; I felt my father considered them more important than anything else.” Her mother was a major influence in her life. She was a deeply religious woman, who went to daily Mass no matter what the weather and spent her Sundays in works of charity. As a child, Lydwine accompanied her mother, bringing gifts to orphanages, old age homes, the poor. “I did not like these visits at all,” she remembers. “The poverty, the miserable surroundings, the smells, but my mother insisted.”²³ Her mother had control of the family purse and responded generously to the appeals from her many friends among the priests and religious. Lydwine and her younger sister had a happy childhood—their big garden with its swings was a focal point for the neighborhood children.

One of the priest visitors, impressed by her intelligence, advised her mother, “This child should go to the gymnasium,” the secondary school

that prepared students for the university. At that time it was not at all usual for girls to undertake such serious intellectual work. Lydwine was the first girl in her primary school class to go to the gymnasium and the tenth woman to earn a doctorate at the newly established Catholic University of Nijmegen.

A naive nineteen-year-old, after six years in the gymnasium, she entered the university and chose to study under Dr. Jacques van Ginneken, philologist and professor of Dutch language and literature, despite the fact that she had been warned against his unconventional ideas by some of her mother's good Catholic friends. She was immediately impressed by the breadth of his vision and the brilliance of his lectures. In public, he spoke of world history and the current crisis in Europe; in private conferences, he divulged his dream of a woman's movement that could change the world. By 1926 he had attracted five of his students—Lydwine, Mia van der Kallen, Liesbeth Allard, Louisa Veldhuis, Yvonne Bosch van Drakestein—to join the little group of Women of Nazareth that he had founded in 1921. Their fellow students referred to their exodus from the university as “The Rape of the Sabine Women.”

Lydwine's mother, disappointed that her daughter did not become a nun but nevertheless supportive of her choice of this risky new venture in the lay apostolate, demanded that van Ginneken promise that Lydwine would have opportunity to complete her studies. He kept his promise. In between her duties as president of the Grail, first in Holland, then in England, she earned her doctorate in 1936 with a dissertation in linguistics, translating and commenting on a medieval Dutch version of the life of Christ, *Het Luikse Diatessaron*.

An enthusiastic disciple, fascinated by the ideas of her mentor, she nevertheless held her ground with him. In their first encounter, he startled her by demanding, “What dialect do you speak?” “No dialect. I speak the universal Dutch language.” “No,” he insisted, “you speak the dialect of The Hague.” Again, he assigned as her work for a seminar an important current work on the red-light district in Amsterdam, that is, the novel, *De Jordaan* by J. Querida. An indignant Lydwine returned after one week announcing that she did not want to read about prostitutes. He was furious but agreed and assigned the *Diatessaron* instead, which eventually became the subject of her dissertation.

The group of university students, recruited for van Ginneken's new worldwide venture, began a period of serious spiritual formation at “De Voorde,” a country house near The Hague. They also assisted in van Ginneken's retreats for non-Catholics, but their major goal, the idea that inspired their commitment, was to start a university for women in the Dutch East Indies, based on the Javanese culture, with the study of Sanskrit and

Javanese instead of Latin, the arts and culture of India instead of the European classics. However, Bishop Callier of Haarlem, who had approved their plans, died and his successor had other ideas. The new bishop wanted the little group to work with Catholic girls and young women of the diocese of Haarlem. He laid down an ultimatum: either to accept the work he offered them or to disband. One by one, dressed in their best outfits and summoning all their tact and powers of persuasion, they went to plead with the bishop, explaining their missionary calling and the value of their approach to the Indonesian culture, but the bishop was unmoved. Finally, they spent an entire night in prayer. Jacques van Ginneken had just obtained his driver's license, and was immensely proud of it, though he was not a good driver and had already knocked down the gate of the estate and run over the flower bed. In keeping with his heroic approach to Christian living, he tore up his license, vowing never to drive again, if only God would change the bishop's mind. The bishop remained firm. With heavy hearts the group accepted the decision as God's will. With his characteristic optimism, van Ginneken soon saw possibilities in the new mandate: "Are they asking you to educate the young women of the working class? Well, I have an idea! We must turn our girls' education into a movement for the conversion of the world."²⁴

Thus in 1928 the Grail as a youth movement was begun, and Lydwine at the age of twenty-three was launched into a career as president of a swiftly burgeoning, colorful, assertive movement of young women. For this movement Father van Ginneken chose the name Grail, which translates easily into most European languages, and carries the overtones of a heroic quest after a high and far-off ideal. "De Voorde" was transformed into the first Grail Center, with nine others soon to follow in the major cities of Holland.

As president, Lydwine had the experience of organizing hundreds and later thousands of young women, training leaders, setting up houses, producing the mass dramas with three thousand, seven thousand, ten thousand participants. Mia was the artist who had choreographed the movements for the three thousand in *The Royal Road of the Cross*, but on the day of the performance in Amsterdam's Olympic stadium, Margaret van Gilse realized that Mia, exhausted by the rehearsals, did not have the energy to direct the three thousand women on the field. She gave Lydwine the task of standing at the podium and directing the thousands, while Mia prayed. Lydwine, fit and fresh, made up for any lack of practice by the energy of her direction. That combination of spiritual demands and practical judgment was typically Grail.

To Lydwine also fell the experience of dealing with bishops and priests who were often not at all sympathetic to a woman's movement that claimed

a large measure of autonomy. Bishop Aengenent had proclaimed the Grail to be the only youth movement for girls and young women in his diocese of Haarlem, but he was not always at hand when a crisis arose. Thus, he invited Lydwine to be on the diocesan youth council together with a number of the priests and prominent laymen, but when a priest proposed a rule that council members be at least twenty-five years old (thus excluding Lydwine who was only twenty-four), he did not object. And he left to Lydwine and Mia van der Kallen the difficult task of explaining to three hundred irritated priest moderators what was meant by the Grail slogan: "Women should lead women." Lydwine had experience, too, in defending the autonomy of the fledgling movement against priest leaders of other movements who were only too eager to absorb the Grail as part of their organizations. Her stands did not make her popular with the clergy. "It was good that I left for England," she reflected, "because I had become an impossible person here in clerical Holland."

In 1932 Lydwine was posted to England, again as President of the Grail, to work with Baroness Yvonne Bosch van Drakestein, who had already set up a Grail Center at Sloane Street in London and was attracting young members of the aristocracy to the lay apostolate. Again the Grail turned to mass dramas, among other activities, producing both the medieval miracle play, *Everyman*, and Francis Thompson's poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, in the Albert Hall in London. "We had three Grail Centers," Lydwine recalled, "one for the aristocracy, one for the students, one for the working girls. I think it was the first time in England that the aristocracy, the students, and the working classes all joined together in a project." In the midst of all the activity as head and spokesperson for the Grail, she completed her studies and was awarded the doctorate in 1936, just before she set sail for Australia, head of a team of five, charged to start the Grail in that huge, thinly populated land. After two years of strenuous work to establish the Grail in Australia, Lydwine was recalled to Europe to begin preparations for starting the Grail in the United States.

Joan Overboss

Joan Overboss was not the first choice to accompany Lydwine to America. The original intention had been that Dr. Alberta Lucker, one of the first German Grail members, should be part of the team, since she already had experience in England and had visited the United States with Lydwine in 1938. However, the outbreak of the war changed the plans. Joan Overboss was quite different from Lydwine in temperament and talents. Van Ginneken believed that a strong team required different, indeed opposite, temperaments and talents. The strength of the team depended not only on

the variety of gifts but also on the spiritual discipline, the patience and forbearance, required for generous cooperation between persons who were not naturally attracted to one another. "Joan and I were never great friends," Lydwine remarked to me, "but we respected each other and we knew we had to work together. We succeeded, partly because of our different viewpoints and ways of dealing with our task."²⁵ In a letter to Eileen Schaeffler, she summed up Joan's role. "Joan and I started the Grail in America together—it was a 50/50 deal. She had tremendous creativity and originality, extraordinary generosity, a fantastic sense of humor, which, together with her optimism, enabled us to overcome all difficulties. Without Joan, the Grail would never have become what it is now in America."²⁶

Joan was born Marietta Overboss to a middle-class family for whom the idea of a university education for a daughter would not have occurred as a possibility. Only a well-to-do elite considered sending a girl to university. Joan's parents provided her with a good education at the Hogere Burger School, the first Catholic secondary school for girls in Amsterdam. "We had an excellent training," one of her schoolmates remembers, "five years of thorough study of four languages, Dutch, German, French, and English; economics, government, history, geography, biology, bookkeeping, drawing, embroidery. Afterwards, at eighteen or nineteen, most of us went on to take a secretarial course, or to study physical education or nursing or social work to prepare for a job." Her schoolmate remembers Joan as a strong, vivid personality, good at sports and games, full of initiative and often taking the lead.²⁷

By her own account,²⁸ Joan was teaching catechism to youngsters in Amsterdam and was dissatisfied with the results, when she was approached by a Grail leader ("someone with whom I am now working," she explained in a talk at Doddridge Farm in 1942—presumably Lydwine): "I came to ask if you are interested in the conversion of the world. If you are interested, come next Sunday because we are having an important meeting. We will see what you are and if you are worthy to be taken in." She was challenged by the Grail vision and ideals and soon plunged into the work, starting small groups among working girls in Amsterdam, capturing their interest through sports, music, drama. The method was to begin with the current interest of the girls and then draw them, step by step, into the idea of their task in the conversion of the world. After a few years of this work, there were thousands of young women ready to participate in the mass dramas of *The Royal Road of the Cross* and the *Pentecost Play*. The texts, setting forth the basic Christian messages of the cross and the commandments of love, were memorized, but more important, they were lived out in daily life in the months of preparation. One of Joan's tasks for the first mass drama, *The Royal Road of the Cross*, was to mark on the field of the Olympic Stadium

the white lines that indicated where each participant was to stand, a task that took her from sunset to dawn the following morning to complete.

The mass dramas and the dramatic appearance of the three-hundred-member Grail delegation at the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin impressed many of the bishops and invitations poured in, asking the Grail to start work in England, in Germany, in Australia. Joan was chosen, along with Ruth Bernard, to join Mia van der Kallen in starting the Grail in Berlin in June of 1932, at a time when Hitler was preparing to take power. Hitler took over the government in January of 1933, and in that same month the Grail performed *The Rorate Play* in the Sportspalast in Berlin with twelve hundred young women. The Christian youth groups were not yet forbidden but they were harassed by the Gestapo. Three hundred young Dutch women had come to help with *The Rorate Play* and were marching through Berlin to the cathedral when they were stopped by the police. Joan, who was leading the group, immediately started singing a popular song, “Wir lassen uns nicht halten,” “We won’t let ourselves be stopped”; the police laughed, applauded, and let the group through.²⁹

From 1932 to 1939, Joan worked in Germany under increasingly difficult conditions as the girls’ section of the Nazi movement took over the education of the young women. With her wit, charm, and courage, she managed for a long time to get permissions from the Nazi officials to continue Grail courses and activities. Finally, in August of 1939, the Grail was ordered to disband. Margaret van Gilse sent Lydwine to Germany to meet Joan and help her close down the Grail Centers. The Gestapo were already searching one of the three Grail houses in Berlin. The two women went quickly to the other two houses to collect and burn all important papers. It was crucial not to let any membership lists fall into Nazi hands. Then with heavy hearts, they got into their car and drove back to Holland, stopping from time to time to read Pope Pius XII’s encyclical on Naziism, *Mit brennender Sorge*.

Joan was a daring and creative person, with a strong feeling for new ways of thinking and acting. She was a risk taker, a radical with a revolutionary spirit and the courage to follow her intuitions. A passionate person, she brought intensity and absorption to whatever she undertook. With her warmth and humor she could enliven any group she entered. She was an excellent storyteller who could recount the most ordinary event in a way to enchant her listeners. She did not have a particularly good voice, but she was a most effective song leader, able to catch up a group in her own zest and enjoyment of singing.

Lydwine and Joan made a good team to start the Grail in the United States. They were both young—Lydwine was thirty-five, Joan thirty-one—and brimming with vitality and enthusiasm. Lydwine was tall, almost six feet, a stately, dignified figure. Joan was medium height, rather stocky, with

a jaunty and humorous air. Lydwine came from The Hague, which was a staid, sober, dignified official government city; Joan was from Amsterdam—a lively, irreverent, humorous, earthy city. The difference between the two cities, rather like that between Philadelphia and Brooklyn, was reflected in their temperaments and upbringing. Lydwine, with her strong liberal arts background, was an impressive speaker, able to inspire her listeners with a vision that demanded dedication. Joan's approach was more informal—she was usually ready with a witty comment.

While Lydwine and Joan were in full agreement on the task of women in the conversion of the world and on the importance of a solid spiritual formation for the lay apostolate, their views tended to diverge increasingly as they entered more deeply into American Catholic life. Lydwine's experience in Holland, England, and Australia had made her adept at dealing with the bishops, reassuring them about the soundness of the lay apostolate; she tended to think in terms of working within established guidelines and within the existing Grail structures. Joan, out of her experience in Germany, had worked in opposition to government structures and both temperamentally and experientially was inclined to question authority, whether in the state or the church or the Grail. In the first years at Doddridge and Grailville, I did not detect these differences of approach. Our two leaders seemed to me to be absolutely united and in full agreement on all issues. I marveled at the way Lydwine could glance at Joan across the room and Joan would know immediately what Lydwine had in mind and would proceed to carry it out. However, once Joan started in Detroit, their underlying differences became quite pronounced and were a source of tensions and conflicts that we did not have the means to resolve.

Reflecting on the first years in the United States, Lydwine remarked: "It was good that Joan and I were cut off from Holland during the war. Otherwise, I would have been going to Holland often to discuss things, and more Dutch women would have come. But, as it was, we had no contact for four or five years and had immediately to rely on the Americans."³⁰ Thus, the Grail quickly took root in the lives of American young women and it was soon possible to rebut charges that Grail innovations were "European."

Mary Louise Tully

The third member of the team, Mary Louise Tully, "the first American," was still in Holland when Lydwine and Joan arrived in Chicago in May, 1940. The two Dutch women were invited to stay with the Tully family, since Doddridge Farm, "the beautiful site" of the bishop's telegram, was by no means ready for occupancy. John Tully, Mary Louise's father, was an

Irish Catholic, Notre Dame graduate, close friend of Archbishop O'Hara. He was a successful businessman, a banker, and a founder of the Thomas More Association, which promoted Catholic books. Her mother, Anina Melcher, a convert and former schoolteacher, was active as a leader in her community. After Mary Louise graduated from the College of St. Teresa, in Winona, Minnesota, her parents took their three daughters on a European tour. Mary Louise, who had read about the Grail in *Commonweal* and *Ave Maria*, was eager to meet this new group. Through Frank Sheed, John Tully secured an invitation to tea with Baroness Yvonne Bosch van Drakestein at the Grail Center in London. The Baroness, in turn, gave the Tullys an introduction to the Grail in Holland. From her early teens, Mary Louise had wanted to help convert America. "I didn't think in terms of domination, but in terms that it would be good for people, give them joy and love. I wanted to give my life to God, but not as a nun. I thought nuns were too much removed from ordinary people."³¹ She was impressed with the people she met, with the articles in the English *Grail Magazine*, with the vitality of the plays, most especially with the fact that these young women were proudly and confidently witnessing to their faith in a public way.

In September of 1938, Mary Louise returned to England as a Grail guest and soon made the decision to become a trainee. She was on retreat in Holland when England entered World War II, so she stayed on in neutral Holland. The formation program continued despite the approach of the war. "I was ripe for that lifestyle at that moment," she recalled.³² "I am grateful for that time of almost total silence, centered on the Eucharist. It does something to you—like living in a different country." She was in Amsterdam in May of 1940 to see the Nazis occupy the city "with beardless youths on motorcycles." She helped other Grail members destroy Grail records, tearing them into bits and flushing them down the toilets. Soon it was clear that if she stayed on in Holland, she would be a danger to the other Grail members. As a U.S. citizen, she was free to leave, but it was difficult to find transportation. Every day she went to the American Express Office, carrying her suitcase and hoping to be able to buy a bus or train ticket. Finally, she was able to join forces with a Jewish family and by a devious route make her way across southern France to Spain and then to Lisbon where she boarded a freighter to New York. When she arrived in New York, she had just enough money for bus fare to Chicago.

Early Days at Doddridge Farm

The summer months were not an easy time for Lydwine and Joan. The Tullys were terribly worried about the fate of their daughter. Every night, after listening to the war news on the radio, they would quiz their guests:



Figure 1. Joan Overboss, Lydwine van Kersbergen, and Mary Louise Tully in a planning session at Doddridge Farm, Libertyville, Illinois, September 1940.

“How far is the Tiltenberg from Rotterdam?” as they tried to calculate whether the day’s bombing had come close to their child.

Then, too, there were difficulties in their situation at Doddridge Farm. The property had been standing vacant for quite some time and was in poor condition—leaky roofs, broken windows, plumbing out of order, mice nesting in the mattresses, and squirrels scampering in the rooms. The committee charged with overseeing the renovations did not plan efficiently; money was wasted; some repairs were badly done. The group of teenagers from a home for underprivileged boys, sent by the Bishop to help with the clean-up and the landscaping, were unruly, poorly supervised, and often destroyed more than they repaired. When Mary Louise returned at the end of August, she found Lydwine and Joan dividing their time between her family home and Doddridge Farm, as they worked to get the buildings furnished and to make them habitable.

A second American, Mary Catherine Leahy, arrived at Doddridge that first summer. Recently graduated from Bishop McDonnell High School in Brooklyn, she had heard about the Grail from Father James Coffey. “I have a girl for you,” he had told Lydwine when he met her in New York, and

promptly arranged an interview for Mary Catherine. The Leahy family were recovering from the depression. Catherine had a job as a waitress in a department store, which allowed her a one-week vacation. She responded eagerly to Lydwine's invitation to visit at Doddridge Farm, and after her arrival, took Lydwine's advice: "My child, you cannot decide anything in a week." She immediately gave up her job and stayed on for the summer.³³

By the end of August, 1940, there were four women residing at Doddridge Farm, two Dutch, two American. They were conscious that they were pioneering, on the cutting edge. They were women in a hurry, impelled by a sense of urgency, based on van Ginneken's idea about "the elbow of time." In 1932 he had estimated the window of opportunity for significant change at fifty years; in 1940 Lydwine had crossed out fifty and penciled in seventy-five. Either way, time was short and they needed to move fast. However, they were deeply convinced that an effective lay movement required serious, in-depth formation of lay leaders and were committed to take the necessary time for that. They knew that they were introducing a new element into American Catholicism—attractive young women who were serious about living a committed Christian life and were not nuns. They went about their work confidently, steadfastly refusing to be slotted into existing categories, patiently correcting misconceptions that were reinforced by an article in *Time* magazine about "nuns in mufti."³⁴ "Mufti" literally means not in uniform, or in this case, not in a religious habit. The reporter who coined the phrase, impressed by the red flowered dress Mary Louise was wearing, evidently thought we were nuns in disguise. In fact, there are nuns in mufti in the Catholic Church, women who are fully qualified vowed religious, but who live in the parental home, hold a job, and wear ordinary dress to facilitate their contacts with others. They maintain secrecy about their religious commitment. That was emphatically not the Grail idea. We were laywomen, striving to demonstrate that holiness was for everyone. Our effectiveness depended on the principle of "like to like." We wanted our very being to say to the young women we met, "See, we are lay like you, we are striving to lead a full Christian life in the world and you can do this too." The article haunted us for years—every reporter writing on the Grail and doing any research quickly found it in the *Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Four women in a hurry to change the world—what were their hopes and plans?