

Lignum Habet Spem: Dominican Sisters of Catherine De Ricci.

Narrated by Sr. Carol Davis, OP.

Featuring Sr. Nancy Garson, OP, and Sr. Aimee Ryan, OP.

Guest voices include: Sr. Carol Gaeke, OP, Congregational candidate Terri Schell, Mark Butler, OPA

Archival audio featuring Sr. Anne Lythgoe, OP

CAROL DAVIS

Hello and welcome to *Building Peace*, a podcast by the Dominican Sisters of Peace celebrating the lives and stories of resilience of our sisters and associates from 1822 to today. I am your host, Sr. Carol Davis.

Today's show takes us back to the 1870's, where we meet a woman who might have become the consummate New York "It" girl. Born into a wealthy Manhattan family, one historian writes that Lucy Eaton Smith "gave herself freely to the pleasures of society, and soon became a general favorite." But as her biographer Katherine Burton writes, the "Catholic faith draws its chosen in many and varied ways. For Lucy the path led through music."

(Intro Music)

Legend tells the story of an orange tree carried by Saint Dominic from his native Spain and planted at the Santa Sabina Monastery in Rome. It is said that the 800-year-old tree regenerates itself, even coming back to life after a killing snowstorm. It is also said that every time a new branch or shoot springs up, the Order of Preachers experiences a new development.

At this point, you might be wondering, what is the connection between a socialite from New York and a legendary tree dear to the heart of all Dominicans? That's a good question - and one that can be answered by some of our own Dominican Sisters of Peace.

To get a better understanding of Lucy Eaton Smith's journey, I sat with Sisters Nancy Garson and Aimee Ryan.

NANCY GARSON

"Hi there, I am Sister Nancy Garson, Dominican Sister of Peace and archivist for the congregation."

AIMEE RYAN

“I am Sister Aimee Ryan. Nancy and I entered Dominican Life as Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine De Ricci.

We know that Lucy came from a wealthy family from New York State. In her youth, Lucy lived in New York City, but she also enjoyed visiting her grandmother in upstate New York.”

CAROL DAVIS

Lucy’s New York City was filled with reconstruction after the Civil War. She grew up dodging the crowds in bustling streets as her hometown expanded with an influx of immigrants and watching as skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty grew before her eyes. But it wasn’t the busy Manhattan streets or the ever-changing skyline that led to her personal journey - it was the sound of music.

AIMEE RYAN

“While Lucy did not have a religious affiliation and did not practice, she was moved by the music she heard from St. Vincent De Paul Church, in Manhattan. The grand melodies pouring out from the church hooked her heart and drew her to attend mass.”

NANCY GARSON

“She was drawn to the Church by the music, and one day after Mass, she felt compelled to kneel at the altar. Seeing her attraction to the Church, a Catholic friend introduced her to Paulist Father Alfred Young. Father Young encouraged her religious education, and Lucy became a Catholic in 1865.

CAROL DAVIS

Lucy’s conversion caused her family some concern. Catholics were still a target of prejudice in the United States at the time, and they feared for her future. But Lucy’s search for spiritual growth meant more to her than social status, and she continued to look for ways to increase her faith and to find peace for herself, as she was not well physically.

Like many women of her age and social standing, she had the means to travel, and took a steamer to Europe in the early 1870’s. Her intention had been to seek treatment for her lingering illness, but once there, Lucy was gripped by a spiritual hunger that led her across the continent. She wanted to learn all she could about her adopted faith.

AIMEE RYAN

“Lucy traveled from convent to convent and was introduced to the Dominican Order. Nuns have always been an important part of Dominican life and culture. Given her own health issues, she found a kindred spirit in the Dominican saint, Catherine De Ricci.

Saint Catherine de Ricci was an Italian mystic, the prioress of her congregation, and a respected advisor to princes, bishops and cardinals in her day. During her novitiate, Catherine experienced spiritual ecstasies so dramatic that those around her questioned her health – and her sanity!

NANCY GARSON

Of course, the other Sisters eventually became aware of the spiritual basis for her behavior. She became a respected administrator and was elected Prioress at the age of 30. St. Catherine died at 67 after a long illness.

CAROL DAVIS

We will include some study resources about her in the show notes. Like Lucy, you might be inspired by her story!

In 1872, Lucy sought the spiritual guidance of Dominican Friar Pere Aquilanti in Germany. He was to become instrumental in guiding Lucy to find and follow God's call.

As she traveled across the Continent and immersed herself in prayer and study, Lucy realized that God was calling her to minister to the spiritual health of women through retreat ministry. She met with her advisor Pere Aquilanti one last time in 1876, prepared to tell him that she is going to become a Cenacle Sister:

AIMEE RYAN:

The Cenacle Sisters were a congregation of women in France that ran retreat centers. Pere Aquilanti told Lucy to take the Dominican tradition, and her desire to heal the spirits and souls of the women around her, home to the United States and begin her work there. He took her to the window and showed the orange tree, so much a part of Dominican Legend, and told her that she was its newest branch.

CAROL DAVIS

While in Europe, Lucy became a Third Order Lay Dominican, which is a lay person who attempts to live out the order's charism in the world. We've talked about "Associates" in previous episodes, so let me make a clarification. The big difference is that Third Order Dominicans are affiliated with the international order, where Associates are affiliated with a local Congregation.

Back to our story ---

When Lucy returned home to New York, she was ready to, in the words of Catherine Siena, set the world on fire, and reached out to the Order in the United States. Sadly, she found herself disappointed with their lack of immediate response to her mission.

NANCY GARSON:

“You have to keep in mind that at that time the Dominican Provincial was dealing with the effects of the Civil War, sending Dominicans to go out west to the new frontiers, working to assist Catholic immigrants – he did not have money or the energy to fund a another Dominican congregation.”

Lucy was instructed to join a group of Dominican Women in New York with the hopes of merging ideas and living her Dominican Charism in community with an existing congregation. She joined forces with the Dominican Congregation of Our Lady of the Rosary, now referred to as the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, who were providing a much-needed ministry to support the orphans of New York.

NANCY GARSON

“Tending to the orphans was a 24/7 ministry. As much as she tried it was very hard to merge the two visions. The ministry was very necessary, of course, but Lucy was called to spiritual work.”

CAROL DAVIS

Nine months later, Lucy left the Sparkhill Sisters. She moved to upstate New York and stayed with her grandmother, spending her days in ministry to the poor and teaching catechism.

She had been living with her grandmother for four years when she visited a church in Glen Falls and noticed an unoccupied building nearby. She saw this as an opportunity and approached the pastor of the church for permission to found her congregation there. Father Louis St. Ange was intrigued by the idea of retreat ministry, but what his parish really needed was a school. This was the beginning of a bargain - Lucy would found and run a school, but she would also use the unoccupied building to begin her new foundation.

Father Louis contacted his local Bishop, Bishop Francis McNeirney of Albany about starting a Dominican community in Glens Falls, New York. He approved the new foundation and would support it for the remainder of his life.

On May 24, 1880, Lucy Eaton Smith received the Dominican habit and made vows, taking the name Mother Mary Catherine De Ricci of the Sacred Heart.

The new community of three, including Lucy and two companions, truly lived the Dominican “mendicant” spirit - begging for assistance to help them carry out the will of God. They were blessed by the generosity of their neighbors in Glen Falls, who supported them in the Congregation’s early years.

In her original draft of the congregation’s constitution, Lucy wrote:

CAROL GAEKE

The house must be one more of prayer than of action.

CAROL DAVIS

She was determined to create a place of spiritual healing open not only to religious, but to all women.

CAROL GAEKE

How many a mother, sister, or even a wife, hesitates before some moment of hard duty...hesitates - struggles, and then turns from that duty because no kind voice came to encourage her to bear the cross.

CAROL DAVIS

Lucy believed that those who do God’s work need a place of retreat and refreshment. She was an early proponent of what we would now call “self-care,” and believed that this self-care should be centered around spirituality and the Gospel.

In 1886, Mother de Ricci’s sister, Isabel “Lillie” Smith, joined the community. Lillie, who took the name Mary Loyola, was a force unto herself, and a strong support for her sister. She was instrumental in helping the community move to Albany in 1887, where a Motherhouse and novitiate were built. The congregation’s active works included giving retreats, religious instruction for women and children, Bible study and literature classes, and maintenance of a woman’s guest house. In 1889, the sisters became officially affiliated with the Dominican Order.

Lucy continued to expand her ministry, opening a second house, Our Lady Star of the Sea, in Saratoga Springs in 1891. This expansion made Lucy realize that the work she was doing was just the beginning of a larger ministry. In 1892, just two years before her death at age forty-nine, Lucy wrote:

CAROL GAEKE

I have planted a something for the Church in America. The great religious movement of the country will pick it up, and ... some capable hands will cultivate and develop what is not mine, but God’s.

CAROL DAVIS

After the death of Foundress Lucy Eaton Smith, her blood sister Mary Loyola succeeded her as head of the Congregation. It was a difficult time for Dominican women religious in that diocese, as the bishop had mandated that the congregation become cloistered - in other words, confined to their convent. For a group of Dominican Sisters, who by tradition worked among God's people to fulfill their ministry, this was very limiting.

NANCY GARSON

"We went through rough times in the beginning and being made cloistered was a challenge. But you know what got us out of the cloister? Going to Cuba!"

CAROL DAVIS

While the Spanish American War lasted less than one year in 1898, it left thousands of black children orphaned in that nation. Blacks were the backbone of the Cuban liberating army and fought side by side with American forces during war. As a result, many children of color were left alone, living on the streets, and tragically, finding people to care for them was very difficult.

Bishop Sbarretti of Havana requested that Mother Loyola send assistance to help care for these black children orphaned by the war, and she responded by establishing a community in Havana. Hearing of this, President Teddy Roosevelt wrote in Donohoe's Magazine:

MARK BUTLER

In inviting the Dominican Sisters of the American Congregation of St. Catherine de Ricci to Havana to inaugurate the first charity ever founded for the colored people of his diocese, Mgr.

Sbarretti has availed himself of the services of Sisters who represent a thoroughly PROGRESSIVE type of American Religious.

AIMEE RYAN

And progressive they were. The de Ricci Sisters were one of the few congregations who concentrated their ministry on the spirituality of women. No matter what physical ministry they chose to undertake, care of the spirit was the center of the work. Spirituality was so integral to the vision that it was like the very air that the congregation breathed.

CAROL DAVIS

Despite having invited the Sisters to open an orphanage, neither the Bishop nor the Cuban government were willing to fund the De Ricci Sisters' ministry to these children. In the true mendicant tradition of the order, Sr. Loyola wrote to everyone she could think to ask, begging for financial support. One major contributor was Catherine Drexel, a Philadelphia heiress who went on to found the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

NANCY GARSON

Of course, as is often the case, if you do one thing well, you are asked to do another. Less than six months after we opened the orphanage, the Bishop asked Mother Loyola to staff an academy in Havana.

CAROL DAVIS

Mother Loyola and the Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci ran both ministries successfully until the Sisters of Providence of Baltimore were able to take over the orphanage. In 1902, the Congregation founded the American Dominican Academy in Havana, and later opened academies in Cienfuegos and Miramar.

These academies gave students the academic qualifications to enter an American college or to work in the business world. Just as important in that era, all students were required to take a four-year course in homemaking, which was necessary for young women who were making their society debut as young as the age of 15.

Released from the confines of cloister, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci continued to expand. A group of wealthy women from Philadelphia had vacationed at the Saratoga Springs house and were impressed with Mother Loyola's strong skills in organization and resourcefulness. Working with Philadelphia's Archbishop Ryan, the women invited Mother Loyola to open and staff a home for destitute women in Philadelphia. She agreed on the condition that they were given enough space that they could also hold retreats.

The growing influx of immigrants and single working women into the city proved the demand for this ministry. The de Ricci Sisters moved to larger and larger quarters in Philadelphia, then on to New York City. As in Philadelphia, the demand for homes for working women was so high that the Sisters had to move to a larger building, which they funded by begging for money in the city's large office buildings until they were established.

These "residence ministries" were not simply boarding houses. The de Ricci Sisters created a true community, offering classes to help their residents learn languages, literature, housekeeping and career skills, and of course, to enrich their knowledge of the Bible.

The Congregation continued to identify areas where women were coming for career opportunities, and opened a new home in Dayton, OH, in 1912. Just a year later, during the Great Ohio Flood, Sisters were just able to save the Holy Sacrament before taking shelter in the attic of the house. The residents of the home remained loyal to the Sisters, staying through the flood to give their support and prayers, and writing letters to document the experience.

DEE HOLLERAN

The floor is covered with about 6 inches of sticky and oily mud. You cannot imagine the conditions. We read about floods in the paper but do not realize what it is until we see some of the real thing.

CAROL DAVIS

As the nation changed, so did the Sisters of St. Catherine of de Ricci. In the true Dominican tradition, the Sisters adapted their ministries to meet the needs of the day. The de Ricci Sisters were also influenced by events in their personal lives.

NANCY GARSON

The de Ricci sisters prayed for those whose lives were affected by alcohol abuse from the very beginning of the foundation. Lucy - Mother Catherine de Ricci- had a brother who was an alcoholic and was personally aware of the damage it caused in the family.

Maybe as a result of this, we started running 12-step retreats in the 1940's. We still have 12 step retreats at our retreat house in Niskayuna, NY.

CAROL DAVIS

The congregation was also an early adopter of programs for Adult Children of Alcoholics, survivors of sexual abuse, HIV patients and their families, and persons with disabilities. As these challenges became more public and more people sought help to cope with them, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci offered places of rest, reflection, and hope in retreat houses in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Florida. By 1960, the retreat house at Elkins Park, near Philadelphia, was the largest retreat house for women in the United States.

As the Congregation expanded their retreat ministry, they also expanded into Catholic religious instruction. In 1951, they opened a catechetical center in Schenectady, then another in Altamont, NY in 1956. The Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci opened and staffed catechetical centers in upstate New York for nearly 20 years. But this was more than just teaching the catechism or even Bible study - the umbrella of catechetical work included visiting the sick and the dying, planning parties for young people, teaching art, music and crafts, producing plays and musical programs - whatever we could do to meet the needs of the families who were part of our church communities. Later, this broad experience came in handy when Catholic schools began to close, and parishes saw a need for directors of religious education!

This time of growth and expansion in the 1950s was a time of relative stability in the world, in the Church, and in the Congregation. And like all of those institutions, the 1960's brought chaos to the doors of the St. Catherine of de Ricci Sisters as well. But part of chaos is opportunity, and the Sisters of the Congregation found opportunity in the changes that came as part of Vatican II.

In the words of Pope John XXIII, the Church needed to be updated - to become relevant to a modern world. The liturgical renewal would breathe life into the church, and the Congregation was ready to be a part of that new life.

Shortly after the decrees of Vatican II were announced, the Congregation formed a Renewal Council. The Sisters were eager to study the life of the Congregation and of its individual members in light of the new documents and see what changes should be made.

The Congregations retreat houses went to work implementing the principles of Vatican II, integrating more music and art as well as expanded participation of lay people in the liturgy.

The Congregation also took the Council's call to minister to the poor to heart. In 1965, the Congregation sent four sisters to establish a mission in Cali, Colombia. In keeping with the Council's more open view of Non-Christian Religions, Superior Sr. Mary Louis, who had also ministered in Cuba for years, told the Catholic Standard:

DEE HOLLERAN

While we will be using new methods and modern equipment, we are not going to Colombia to make Americans out of the people. They have their own Latin culture and native background that must not be destroyed.

CAROL DAVIS

At home, the Dominican pillar of study took on new significance. Many Sisters had struggled to prioritize higher education in preparation for ministry... new thinking made it possible for Sisters to study full time.

The Congregation also made more room for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in ministry. For many years, a ministry was accepted by entire houses or communities, and Sisters followed the direction of their Superior or President when choosing their work. The vow of obedience took on a new dimension after Vatican II, and Sisters could choose ministries unique to their talents and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. While the traditional apostolates of retreat, residence and religious education were maintained, Sisters also chose other ministries like music, education, social work, or communications to follow their own call to holiness more fully.

At the time of the Congregation's centennial in 1980, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci were serving God and God's people in a wide variety of ways. Retreat houses in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; Kendall, Florida; McLean, Virginia, and Schenectady, New York offered spiritual direction, religious and other types of counseling, and religious education programming. The Lucy Eaton Smith Residence in Philadelphia offered safe lodging for working women in the heart of the city.

One woman told Philadelphia's Hidden City blog:

TERRI SCHELL

I lived in the Lucy Eaton Smith House for 2 years from late 1969 thru 1971.

What a wonderful experience for a young woman just starting out on her own! I got to live in Center City, at the height of a lot of change, but in the safety of a terrific community of other strong independent women of all ages, cultures & different directions in life. What an education!

CAROL DAVIS

While sisters worked in formal education at every level, campus ministry was a new area for the de Ricci sisters.

Sisters also ministered at the diocesan and parish level around the country, following in Mother Catherine's footsteps by keeping care of the spirit of God's people as the center of every ministry.

As religious vocations began to decline across the nation, the Sisters of St. Catherine of de Ricci, like many religious congregations, saw a decrease in membership.

After a decade-long period of exploration, discernment, and deep prayer, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de' Ricci officially became members of the Dominican Sisters of Peace in 2012.

During the ceremony, de' Ricci President Sister Anne Lythgoe said:

ANNE LYTHGOE

We believe that we possess gifts for ministry in the Church that can make a significant contribution to God's people as we place our mission in a larger context within the Dominican Order."

CAROL DAVIS

And this has proven to be true.

As part of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, the women of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de' Ricci serve as counselors, vocation ministers, retreat ministers, members of congregational leadership and much, much more. Their dedication to the spiritual care of women has added a new dimension to Peace's ministry to the people of God.

Back at Santa Sabina, the orange tree planted by St. Dominic has the following words inscribed at its base:

Lignum Habet Spem

This phrase refers to Job, chapter 14:7: “For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.”

The congregation founded by Mother Catherine de Ricci is certainly a fruitful tree. Under the vision of Mother Catherine De Ricci, it served 13 dioceses, offering serenity, safety and spiritual healing to the people of God’s church and to the women in the world at large. Today, as part of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, the ministries and heritage of the Dominican Sisters of Catherine De Ricci continue to grow as towards a future full of hope.

In our next episode, we’re going to step away from the histories of our founding congregations to learn more how our Sisters have, in the words of Lucy Eaton Smith, found God’s will and our work in the circumstances of the hour. We will look at the social justice efforts of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, both in the past and today.

If you would like to learn more about the Dominican Sisters of Peace, our ministries and how our sisters and associates are still pioneering, please visit our website at www.oppeace.org. That’s the letter O, the letter P, and the word Peace, dot O_R_G.

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Thank you for joining us on Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Sisters in the United States. I am Sr. Carol Davis, and I hope you join us again next time.