

Digital Commons  
@ LMU and LLS

## Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice

Volume 9 | Issue 3

Article 5

3-1-2006

# Sister Mary Emil Penet, IHM: Founder of the Sister Formation Conference

Joan Glisky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

### Recommended Citation

Glisky, J. (2006). Sister Mary Emil Penet, IHM: Founder of the Sister Formation Conference. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 9 (3).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0903092013>

This Focus Section Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, please email [CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu](mailto:CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu).

## **SISTER MARY EMIL PENET, I.H.M.: FOUNDER OF THE SISTER FORMATION CONFERENCE**

JOAN GLISKY, I.H.M.

*Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, Michigan*

*Mary Emil Penet, I.H.M., (1916-2001) used her talents and charisma to shape the first national organization of American women religious, the Sister Formation Conference (SFC; 1954-1964), facilitating the integrated intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and professional development of vowed women religious. In the decade preceding Vatican II, her leadership generated a renewal among religious communities focusing first on preparing young sister teachers, then sisters of all ages, whatever their ministries. Her educational contributions affected sisters' development and ministries, their contribution to Vatican II aggiornamento, and later touched the lives of female college students, seminarians, and Catholic laity.*

I am happy to inform you that the reports of the committee on your preliminary oral examination were very satisfactory. The examiners indicated that your work in the department of Philosophy has been of outstanding quality and that the examination itself was considerably above average. (R. Henle, personal communication, November 3, 1949)

So wrote Robert Henle, S.J., to Mary Emil Penet, I.H.M., as she drew her philosophy studies to a close at Saint Louis University. Rumor used to go about the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) Congregation that one member of the examining committee offered the left-handed compliment that "Sister Mary Emil has the mind of a man."

A year later, Penet defended her dissertation with the same able wit and wisdom that she had evinced at her orals. On June 5, 1951, Penet was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Saint Louis University. She titled her dissertation *Property and Right in Representative Catholic Moralists of the Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (1951). No mean achievement, it was comprised of over 688 carefully annotated pages followed by 27 pages of bibliography. As a ground-breaking study of singular scholarship and thoroughness on the early development of the understanding of property and

right, Penet's dissertation is nonetheless surprisingly readable, displaying a compelling style.

Penet herself later noted,

My doctoral dissertation, although done in the department of philosophy deals exclusively with a survey of the moral theologians in the Church on the general subject of subjective and objective right....I actually surveyed the whole development of the topic of the obligation of property-owners in Roman-Catholic moral theology from the Fathers to the present day. (1980, p. 2)

Earlier, she remarked, "Much of the material has not been covered in any later writings, to my knowledge" (1975, p. 1).

The seminal and unexamined character of her study grounding the right to private property in the common good was adverted to as recently as 1990 when John C. Cort sought, unsuccessfully, Penet's assent in incorporating her doctoral thesis in a book he planned as co-author. He wrote,

I thought to myself, "If you knew more theology, you should write a book on the theology of justice." And last Friday the light dawned and I realized I had a friend who did know the theology and had written a thesis on the subject which was gathering dust unpublished and unrecognized as the brilliant piece of work I am sure it is. (J. C. Cort, personal communication, December 10, 1990)

In her autobiography (written with the disability of a stroke impeding her ability to type) Penet mused,

i [*sic*] was given three years to get a doctorate, which i [*sic*] did by dint of getting myself excused from some requirements and typing myself, a 700-page thesis. besides [*sic*] studying philosophy, i [*sic*] spent this time studying sisters, of all ages and many congregations and comparing the difficulties of their getting educated with that of the jesuit [*sic*] scholastics, with whom i [*sic*] was in philosophy classes. i [*sic*] did this because i [*sic*] was interested and because i [*sic*] had learned, how, i [*sic*] don't remember, that i [*sic*] was destined not for marygrove [*sic*] but for the monroe [*sic*] campus. (1985, p. 2)

Marygrove College is the college established by the IHM Sisters in Detroit, Michigan; the young sisters pursuing their degrees studied at the Motherhouse in Monroe, Michigan, an hour's drive to the south.

The account of Penet's attainments at Saint Louis University exemplify personal acquisitions equipping her for the work she was about to accomplish for Catholic education in the United States and in other countries as well. Intellectually highly endowed, extraordinarily focused, thorough and persistent, articulate, and obedient to the claims of the call and the tasks

given her, she put all these gifts, skills, virtues, and interests to work in initiating and structuring the Sister Formation Conference (SFC).

The particular emphasis of the SFC and the movement flowing from it was, as the name indicates, sister formation, but the flow of the realized changes expanded in widening circles, rocked many boats, and lapped on many shores of Catholic behavior and outlook.

## **EARLY SISTER-TEACHER PREPARATION**

Nothing happens in a vacuum. The call for improved sister teacher preparation and integrated development of women in religious communities began years earlier. In fact, long before any organization such as SFC existed, sister teachers had planted themselves in the soil of an immigrant church in the United States. Since 1727 and the arrival of the Ursuline sisters in New Orleans, religious women have been engaged in education in America. Whatever their background, both European-founded and American-initiated communities lived in inventive response to the needs around them, using whatever resources were available. Generally, sister teachers were not unlike their public school peers, attaining a minimum of training to fit them for teaching children in a developing country.

Progress in establishing schools, curricula, administrative oversight, financial support, buildings and equipment, and a cadre of educators followed the trail of land exploration and settlement from east to west coast in the United States. In a newly forming country it is not surprising that one of the first teacher training schools, or normal schools as they were called, opened as late as 1827. It was not until 1839 that Horace Mann established the first state normal school (Unger, 2001).

By 1860, there were only twelve state normal schools from Massachusetts to Minnesota. The fact that thirty years later there were ninety-two, indicated that the normal school idea was gaining ground, yet even at that...“the normal schools were, as a rule, meagerly financed and poorly equipped.” The academic standards of such institutions were on a par with those of contemporary high schools. (Kelly, 1948, p. 354)

As in the 19th century, 20th century educators continued steps toward teacher professionalization consonant with the development of the nation's self-identification.

## **PERSONAL PREPARATION**

When in 1937, Elizabeth Gertrude Penet entered the convent, she had already achieved some distinction. She adverts to her discovery in childhood

of the public library and all its books which she “devoured at the rate of a book a day in the summers, and as near to that as possible during the school year” (1985, p. 1). She was double promoted in the third grade at St. Charles School, Detroit, which she attended through 12th grade. Sister Marie Gatza, I.H.M., heard from her aunt, Sister Alexandra Gatza, I.H.M., that Alexandra used to get down on her knees and pray before undertaking any class at St. Charles High School with Elizabeth Penet in it (M. Gatza, personal interview, 2004). Perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, such an assertion made clear that early on Penet gave evidence of her giftedness.

In a competition with students from other schools taught by IHMs, Penet won a year’s scholarship to Marygrove College and received another the following year as well (*Chronicles*, 1932).

At Marygrove, Penet met Dr. George Hermann Derry, first president of the college, and absorbed his charismatic and forceful teachings. Her mimeographed student text from his orientation classes and from his courses on social justice carry her occasional notations. He described the first lecture he gave to the incoming freshmen on Monday, September 26, 1932, in the following way:

Newman, in the introduction to the “Treatise on the Idea of a University,” says, “The first step in intellectual training is to impress upon the student’s mind the idea of System”....The first idea in System, is to get hold of the purpose – the mobilization of all our powers, or “personal power.” A power is an art. The end of our courses is “The Marygrove Girl” equipped with these seven liberal arts. All studies are directed toward this seven-fold goal. (Derry, 1932, p. 2)

“i [*sic*] was much influenced by dr. [*sic*] derry, [*sic*] all of whose teachings i [*sic*] emraced [*sic*]” (Penet, 1985, p. 1). Penet’s later development of educational goals for religious women of the United States echo Derry’s teachings.

Having finished high school by age 15, Penet completed her college years at age 19. In another singular step, for a woman at least, she moved a mile east of Marygrove College to the University of Detroit Law School. After a year at the Jesuit university, deciding that law was not to be her field of choice and finally assenting to the pull toward religious life, she withdrew from law studies. On July 1, 1937, Elizabeth Penet entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, cradled in Monroe, Michigan.

The usual entry process of postulate, 2-year novitiate, followed by profession of temporary and final vows flowed into the ordinary patterns of teaching at various schools staffed by the IHM sisters. Unlike most of her IHM companions, Penet began teaching immediately at the secondary rather than the elementary level. Frequently, her credentials in teaching Latin were eclipsed by the need to replace a business teacher, or to fill a vacancy in teaching government. This experience of teaching different levels and sub-

jects without advance preparation was unfortunately all too common in religious communities. Penet noted in her autobiography that she experienced the tensions of balancing teaching, contemplation, and the many duties of manual labor given a young sister.

At St. Mary High School (1942-1947) in Akron, Ohio, Penet's friendship with Sister Mary Patrick Riley developed. Riley, 21 years Penet's senior, was deeply invested in concern for the education of the sisters (Clanon, 1997; Riley, 1952). This providential mentoring and Riley's election to a leadership role on the congregational council precipitated the movement of Penet from high school teaching to doctoral studies at Saint Louis University and into teaching in the Marygrove College extension at the Monroe Motherhouse.

Employing her now finely honed teacher skills, her freshly attained insights, and her long-time convictions, Penet taught the young sisters foundational courses in philosophy: metaphysics, philosophy of man, and ethics. She developed a new course on the virtues, or characterology, a study so impressive that some of her sister-students have admitted to carrying their class notes from location to location for over 50 years. Penet's years on the Monroe campus (1950-1957) concretized for her the struggles and demands placed upon young entrants in the formative period of their religious and intellectual development as they prepared for the ministry of teaching that had called the Immaculate Heart of Mary order into being in 1845 (Kelly, 1948).

## **CALLS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Following World War II, the pioneer era of the American Catholic Church drew to a close; expansion and stabilization developed (Dolan, 2002). Recognition of new needs for a new time was felt and articulated, even within sometimes seemingly impenetrable convent walls.

As early as 1941, *The Education of Sisters*, the dissertation of Sister Bertrande Meyers, a Daughter of Charity, had been published. This probing study exposed the serious need for improved sister education and ministry preparation but little changed. In 1948, change came through the College and University Department of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). A new section was formed, the Teacher Education Section, thanks in large part to the leadership of Sister Madeleva Wolff, C.S.C., President of St. Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana. A year later, Wolff delivered a stirring and memorable description of the plight of the young sister, "The Education of Sister Lucy" (1949). Wolff called for adequate preparation for "Sister Lucy" before she began her teaching; like Meyers, Wolff deplored the inequities of the current practice of sisters gaining a degree over many summers, the 20-year plan.

During 1950 and 1951, the NCEA College and University Department reflected the tensions between the need for extended sister-teacher preparation and the pressures from clerics, superintendents, and even superiors to fill staffing needs. Burgeoning Catholic school populations, the strictures of finances, and the pleas from pastors and parents for more sisters all stalled the needed action.

Though there were 179,657 Catholic sisters in the country in 1950 (Stewart, 1994) and approximately 90,000 of them were teaching sisters (Beane, 1993), 90,000 sisters were not enough to meet staffing needs.

The sisters, however, had an ally in Pope Pius XII who spoke frequently of education during his tenure. At the First International Congress of Religious Teachers in September 1951, Pius XII addressed the issue of educational standards for sister teachers:

It is Our fervent wish that all [your schools] endeavor to become excellent. This presupposes that your teaching Sisters are masters of the subjects they expound. See to it, therefore, that they are well trained and that their education corresponds in quality and academic degrees to that demanded by the State. Be generous in giving them all they need. (1957, p. 50)

This address, "Counsel to Teaching Sisters," was the impetus for discussion at the April 1952 NCEA Conference in the Teacher Education Section at Kansas City.

Riley had been scheduled for a panel presentation to the gathered educators and superiors, but a death in her family took precedence, and she asked Penet to take her place. Thus began Penet's leadership role in sister formation.

## **SISTER FORMATION CONFERENCE**

Penet galvanized those present with her assessment of the need for integrated sister education. She proposed (a) withholding sisters in formation from active ministry until completion of their undergraduate studies; (b) hiring a set percentage of lay teachers in the schools; and (c) researching nationally the financial and educational situation within religious communities. Again there was demurring – who would do the survey? Immediately a committee of volunteers arose from among the sisters attending. A survey committee with Penet as chair was constituted by Sister Mary Florence, S.L., Sister Mary Richardine, B.V.M., Sister Gerard, O.S.F., and Sister Mary Basil, S.S.N.D. Without delay, they set to work to shape the survey and gather the data.

By May 1952, the committee had sent the survey to the General

Superiors of all religious communities having even one school in the United States, a total of 377. Response to the survey proved generous and heartfelt; findings were startling and sobering. With the content of 255 responses (67%) tabulated, the situation of at least 81% of the teaching sisters of the country became clearer. Only 13 communities had a degree program for their sisters. Penet reported,

It is a fact that...118 replied that they had no facilities of their own for a four-year training program for their teacher members....Those who had no community facilities indicated in a number of cases that because of their remoteness from educational centers, or the prohibitive expense...they were absolutely dependent upon some kind of outside assistance. (1953a, p. 2)

A smaller follow-up survey representing 23,000 sisters gleaned financial data. This picture, too, was woeful, and supported Penet's call for larger, more able communities to help the smaller ones. Penet led the survey committee in presenting their findings to multiple concerned groups – superiors, bishops, and superintendents. At the 1953 NCEA Conference, Penet addressed the attendees, calling for action based on the findings (Beane, 1993). In her report, Penet emphasized collaborative initiatives from the sisters themselves to define and meet their needs:

Sisters are afraid. They do not wish to be mercenary. They are trained to endure. They have been too timid to act in isolation and they have no institutionalized manner of acting together. Perhaps we could give them a way to act together....The sisters need a time and place to meet, to talk and to agree about these matters....I venture to say that we will see improvement...when we put over the idea that the Sister is responsible for the standards in her vocation. (Penet, 1953b, pp. 2-3)

Shadowing the entire situation was the widespread assumption Penet described later,

As a matter of fact, the unwritten understanding – neither canonical nor logical, but almost unbelievably strong – was that the young sister belonged to the works of the diocese or parish, if not from the day of her entrance into the convent, then at least from the end of her novitiate on – and time devoted after that to education was seen as somehow “taken” from the children waiting to be taught. (1964, pp. 20-21)

By January 1954, the General Executive Board of the NCEA, witnessing the thorough work of the survey committee and the stirring it precipitated among communities, approved the establishment of the Sister Formation



Conference. Originally, Penet, active in the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards (TEPS) founded by public school educators responding to parallel needs, had proposed a Catholic counterpart to be called Sister-Education and Professional Standards (SEPS), but she affirmed the conviction of many that there was a larger issue here, a task for the sisters of integrating religious, intellectual, and ministerial development. The name Sister Formation Conference seemed to capture that goal more fully.

The survey committee became the core of the Sister Formation Conference. They planned for yearly, 2-day, regional meetings in the six already existing NCEA regions. These proved crucial to the success of the Conference.

Sister teachers in formation drew primary attention, but it was soon apparent that sister nurses and sister social workers had similar needs. And then there were the in-service sisters whose education had been garnered over 15 to 25 years of tidbit accumulation by way of summer school, weekend classes, classes after full days of teaching or other ministry. Their situation, too, called for attention.

By 1954, Penet had worked intensively with the survey committee. Now, elected as national chairman, she continued building awareness and support with various groups. Her skill as a communicator proved convincing. She knew how to establish swift rapport with her audiences. With humor and clarity, Penet illuminated the urgency, the profound reasonableness, the critical next steps, the need for support and action in this justice work.

Penet responded to invitations, not only to speak, but to write the message of Sister Formation. In October 1954, with Sister Ritamary Bradley, C.H.M., as editor, an influential organ began, namely, *The Sister Formation Bulletin*. Through this tool, both religious leadership and the sisters themselves caught the Sister Formation spirit. Each issue carried a lead article by some authority along with news of regional and national Sister Formation activity along with summaries and locations of other resources (“Why the S-F Bulletin?” 1954). *The Sister Formation Bulletin* became another piece in the grassroots enablement of the Conference and of the movement it generated. The first publication was sent to 400 religious superiors. By 1958, Bradley reported, “*The Bulletin* now circulates to about 4,500 addresses, including subscribers in 37 foreign countries” (1959, p. vii). By 1963, *the Bulletin* reported a publication of 9,200 copies (Bradley, 1964).

The second issue reiterated the character of Sister Formation:

It may be in place, then, to point out in this early issue of the *Bulletin* that there are only two hard and fast features for which this movement stands – namely, that it is an effort by the Sisters themselves, and that it is concerned only with the improvement of Sister-formation, and our mutual assistance and inspiration to that end. (“What is uniform,” 1954, p. 12)

With the knowledge, interest, and support of so many constituents growing, Penet and Bradley pursued and won a \$50,000 grant from the Ford Foundation for research into the educational needs of American sisters. This grant allowed them to (a) do preliminary research, (b) plan a curriculum enabling sisters to achieve a B.A. before ministry, (c) assess the curriculum through the regional meetings, and (d) test the curriculum with a religious community or two. As a result, Penet with another IHM sister, Xaveria Barton, visited over 125 U.S. Motherhouses gathering data, while Sister Emmanuel Collins, O.S.F., spent 1956 studying European sister education (Bradley, 1955).

No doubt, the highlight of the grant benefit was in the summer of 1956 at Everett, Washington, where 15 selected sister experts spent 3 months shaping the Everett Curriculum. An in-house daily news report chronicled the historic gathering, the daily happenings, and the excursions and recreations of the participants. Penet's leadership penetrated that singular summer as the daily circulars also testify. The outcome was a proposed liberal arts curriculum adaptable to sisters whatever their ministries.

The Everett Curriculum served as the foundation for two demonstration centers: the College of Saint Teresa in Winona, Minnesota, and the Providence Sisters' Institutional Branch of Seattle University. It became the paradigmatic structure for evaluation, exploration, and selective implementation in the upcoming regional meetings as well as in subsequent gatherings at Marquette University directed by Sister Elizabeth Ann, I.H.M.

Early on, Roman authorities recognized the expanding movement. The Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, Valerio Cardinal Valeri, acknowledged the work of Sister Formation on March 23, 1955, and again in 1957. Likewise, the message of Monsignor Larraona, secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Religious was read at the Sister Formation Conference meeting during Easter week in 1957:

We feel that they are making an invaluable contribution to the good of the Church, and we encourage them to continue their efforts in this important cause. A special word of thanks and praise must be added here for the selfless and untiring devotion with which Sister Mary Emil, Chairman of the National Committee, has been directing and coordinating the manifold activities of the Conferences since their beginning....The great good that has been accomplished is due, we know, in a considerable degree to her zeal. ("Vatican 'deeply impressed,'" 1957, p. 16)

Penet found another ally in Elio Gambari, S.M.M., of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. Engaging him to enable religious congregations to set up houses of study – juniorates – for sisters in temporary vows shaped the agenda for regional meetings and special gatherings. In the eyes of supe-

rriors and ecclesiastics, Gambari's input and his Roman connection buttressed the credibility of the SFC.

Sister Formation Graduate Study and Research Foundation, Inc. (SFGSRF) emerged as a project of the Sister Formation Conference to secure corporate funding for the graduate education of sisters. As early as January 1959, Sister Mary Emil had written to the Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, Inc., seeking such funding. The SFC received \$5,000 dollars from Raskob for operational expenses for the drive. Cardinal Cushing, and the Maude and Louis Hill Foundation of St. Paul, Minnesota, also gave small grants. In 1960, directing this project along with providing consultation with small communities became Penet's responsibility. Penet reported her multiple contacts to Sister Annette Walters, C.S.J., her successor as executive secretary (1960-1964).

Although this pursuit of financial assistance did not have the desired success, it became part of a larger enterprise of generating a change of attitude toward intellectual advancement for religious. Religious communities began devising better ways to educate not only their own members but also to provide scholarships for sisters in small U.S. communities or from foreign countries.

As the first decade of the SFC drew to a close, so did Penet's terms of leadership, first as national chairman (1953-1957), then as executive secretary (1957-1960) of the Conference. She had traveled thousands of miles on its behalf, conducted hundreds of interviews of superiors and formation leaders, garnered broad support from clergy and laity, and enlisted the interest and collaboration of sisters across the country. She had delivered multiple addresses and speeches, and conducted workshops for the SFC. She had engaged the interest of public educators, joined their organizations, and invited their support.

Penet's deep passion for integrating the message of the social encyclicals penetrated all of her work.

There are passages in John Dewey which can make us blush, as Catholic teachers, because he points an accurate finger at what we have failed to do by way of education for citizenship and the education for social justice in which we should excel. (Penet, 1958b, p. 21)

Illustrative of the power of her message was her radio delivery of "Who Is My Neighbor?" on *The Catholic Hour*, August 30, 1964. "We've been inundated by letters praising this talk in language so extravagantly enthusiastic it will delight your heart," wrote Joan Paul, radio producer (J. Paul, personal communication, September 4, 1964). Martin Work, executive director,

echoed Paul's appreciation, "The mail response has been extraordinary" (M. Work, personal communication, September 4, 1964).

Equally strong was Penet's conviction that what sisters did in ministry was the fruit of contemplation. Her four probing presentations on the teaching apostolate provided deepened understanding of the spiritual foundations of teaching. These talks Penet delivered in multiple settings. Their publication reached an even wider audience (Penet, 1958a).

## LATER OUTCOMES

All these efforts effected change. With the election of John XXIII to the papacy, a new chapter in Church history brought change not only to the United States but around the world, especially through the convocation of Vatican Council II (1962-65) and John XXIII's call to *aggiornamento*, or renewal and reform.

American sisters, with a decade of the Sister Formation movement behind them, had already undergone an *aggiornamento* experience. They were ready to receive the fresh call to open the windows and let the Holy Spirit in.

They responded vigorously, making an educational contribution that reached far beyond parish classrooms and led them into new ministries in a changing church. "Few groups in the church responded to the decrees of the Second Vatican Council with the alacrity shown by American sisters" (Ewens, 1989, p. 41).

Leaders in the Sister Formation Conference hoped for sizable vocation growth to service the emerging needs. It did not happen that way. A newly educated population of sisters met the ferment of the 1960s with deep and enlightened desires for change and renewal. Some sisters did not find their congregations adapting quickly enough to the desired changes; others thought their congregations moved too fast. The message of Vatican II that holiness is for all toppled a theology of religious life that saw itself as a gathering of the elite. With the call for greater democratization in religious life and more openness to the human family, old structures began to change. Vowed women religious raised questions of themselves and their institutions. Sisters began to leave in unheard of numbers while those who remained began reshaping their institutions and lifestyles.

Other movements were afoot changing the situation of American religious and the shape of SFC. At the First International Congress of Religious in 1950, Rome called the major superiors of the world to greater collaboration with one another and to the development of national organizations. Not long after, in 1952, American religious met at the University of Notre Dame for the First National Congress of Religious.

Until 1956, Sister Formation had been the only national organization that gathered sisters nationwide from many communities to share goals and shape new structures. On November 24, 1956, the Congregation of Major

Superiors of Women (CMSW), was formalized in the United States under Roman authorization.

An uneasy tension arose between the SFC and the CMSW. Major Superiors understood the formation of young religious to be their provenance, but SFC had already been heavily involved as an organization in this very work while maintaining from the beginning close communication with superiors. The story of the struggle for clarity and authority in this matter is for another article. In the end SFC, renamed, became an arm of the CMSW with organizational changes that reduced the initiatives of the SFC leadership, shifting control to the major superiors.

At first, Penet resisted this move strongly. She realized the consequences of such a re-ordering. As the unfolding outcomes became clearer to her, she chose to support the move. In March 1964, Penet wrote: "The Mothers and Sisters now attempting to stabilize and clarify relationships between the two organizations are acting in loyalty and good faith and deserve our gratitude and cooperation" (M. E. Penet, personal communication, March 6, 1964). By August 1964, the change was complete. The Sister Formation Conference was no longer an independent movement but a committee under CMSW.

## **FURTHER EDUCATIONAL WORK**

By 1964, however, while remaining on the national SFC committee (until 1969), Penet was fully invested as president of Marygrove College, her alma mater, a role she assumed in 1961. There she retained her focus as educator, increasing philosophy and theology requirements for a solid liberal arts background for all majors, including the professional majors; orienting the students as Derry once did to the ideals of the college and to the agenda of the social encyclicals; reshaping the calendar of the college into trimesters; and collaborating with college and university leaders and organizations statewide and nationally to foster higher education.

By 1968, her educational thrust changed once again in the role of education consultant for the IHM Congregation. As Mother Benedicta Brennan wrote,

I find it fitting, as General Superior, to ask you to dedicate your powers and capabilities in a yet new way to the service of God's poor – to bring fuller knowledge and to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the role of the Catholic school and the Christian educator in the Church of the modern world....Without any hesitation I entrust this charge to you. (B. Brennan, personal communication, July 18, 1967)

This work Penet integrated with related commitments. She was a member of the Board of Directors of the Religious Education Association (1957-1969),

of the Commission on College and Society of the Association of American Colleges (1965-1969), of the Executive Committee on Professional Accreditation of the Association of American Colleges (1965-1968), of the Problems and Plans Committee, NCEA (1966-1969) and its chair (1968-1969), of the Advisory Board of the *Journal of Teacher Education* (1966-1969), of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (1966-1980), of the Editorial Board of the *Catholic School Journal*, of the AACTE Committee on Evaluative Standards for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (1966-1969), and in 1968-1970 of the Higher Education Advisory Committee of the Education Commission of the States (Penet, 1980). Scanning her itineraries, it appeared that there was little time for anything but travel to and from meetings and presentations. There was need for a different pace.

Possibly, a more satisfying time came in 1969 when Penet entered a 5-year period of post-doctoral study, first at Saint Louis University, and then in Rome where she was personal assistant to Joseph Fuchs, S.J. Remembering Fuchs, James F. Keenan, S.J. (2005) concluded, "Along with Bernard Haring of the Alfonsianum University...and Louis Janssens of Louvain University...the Gregorian University's Fuchs provided the foundations for the moral theology of the Second Vatican Council" (p. 6).

After such concentrated and valuable preparation, Penet began a new venture. As professor of moral theology, she taught at four major seminaries: St. John's Provincial Seminary (1974-1975) in Plymouth, MI; Weston School of Theology (1975-1981) in Cambridge, MA; and, finally, a dual teaching role at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary, Boynton Beach, FL, and St. John Vianney College Seminary, Miami, FL. Penet described her Florida ministries from 1981-1984:

Teaching in two seminaries, with special responsibility for the social justice program in both would seem obviously to be continuing the mission of Jesus, promoting justice and peace, empowerment of leaders in the church, and the promoting of the equality of all persons particularly minorities and the poor. I have a special relationship to the few women students at St. Vincent's and am working assiduously to bring about an increase in their numbers. I think ministerial training should be available to women at diocesan expense. This is demanded, it seems to me, by stewardship of church resources in seminary buildings, faculty, library, and equipment. It is not yet well understood, but when it is there can be a burgeoning of much needed new ministries. (1983, p. 1)

She combined this ministry with educational outreach to the surrounding areas, providing moral education and insight to laity, sisters, and organizations through lectures, study groups, seminars, and workshops.

## LAST YEARS

In 1985, after traversing weekly the 70-mile distance between the two Florida seminaries, at age 69, a stroke eclipsed her intensive years of ministry. From 1985-2001, illness and paralysis confined Penet to the IHM Health Care Center in Monroe. Speech proved difficult for her; her mind was sometimes clear and sometimes confused. Visitors and contacts lessened. As the years passed, the memory of Sister Formation faded in religious communities. The SFC had become known as the Religious Formation Conference, once again an independent organization, with goals adapted to a new era in religious life. In her now clouded judgment, Penet herself questioned the efficacy of her labors.

On Friday, June 15, 2001, Penet was in a reduced state of consciousness. Two weeks earlier she had taken a sudden turn for the worse. In a three-bed room, she was alone, the other beds unexpectedly vacant at the time. In this temporary setup at St. Mary Center, the IHM sisters' former St. Mary's Academy, the sisters were crowded together in what had been dormitories while the Motherhouse next door underwent much-needed renovation. Oxygen tanks whirred in the hallway. Fans stirred the warm summer air. Nurses' voices echoed from their stations at either end of the corridor. The elevator groaned along its shaft as sisters and staff returned from lunch. It was then, after 16 years of infirmity, that Penet's spirit let go of a body impaired by multiple strokes, paralysis, and emotional trauma.

The sisters and family were informed. Friends were informed. An admiring bishop friend who had offered to celebrate her funeral liturgy when the time came regretted his absence; other duties called. Marygrove former coworkers, too, were scattered. Close companions in the SFC were already gone: Sister Annette Walters C.S.J., Sister Ritamary Bradley, S.F.C.C., Sister Philothea, F.C.S.P., Sister Elizabeth Ann of the California I.H.M.s and so many others all preceded her in death. A few faithful sister friends had kept vigil while she lingered.

Sister Barbara Johns, I.H.M., Marygrove professor and former student at the college during part of Penet's tenure, wrote:

I have had this strange feeling that Mary Emil orchestrated the entire scene the weekend of her death to keep it in the Gillet [Redemptorist co-founder of the IHM Congregation] heritage of "poverty and obscurity"...dying on a Friday in the summer, with so many people out of town or unreachable or gone for the day when the word got out; in a year when there could be no grand funeral in the Motherhouse chapel; a Monday funeral with no obituary in the Free Press...no real way to reach the alumni on such short notice....But obscure it all was, and I can't quite fathom how little apparent attention it drew. In fact, when the word came to Marygrove in the early afternoon the day of her death,

I searched in vain for anyone to tell who either knew or had any idea of who she was. I stood in front of her picture for a minute, helped the President's secretary compose the brief E-and voice-mail announcements...and that was it. I heard that Mary Daniel Turner [SNDdeN, an early president of the LCWR] said that every religious congregation in the country should have sent a representative. (B. Johns, personal correspondence, September 11, 2001)

The funeral was a quiet community gathering with the Motherhouse chaplain presiding in the temporary worship space. The Catholic literary critic, Charles DuBos, on his deathbed observed, "The mark of every great life is failure" (Maritain, 1974, p. 276).

Indeed, shadows marked Penet's passing.

The former glory days, the widespread and continuing impact of her contributions to Catholic education, particularly to religious sisters in the United States and elsewhere seemed a fading memory. The American sister population was diminished. Numerous Catholic schools and colleges had been closed. Newer members of religious orders arriving in smaller numbers usually had degree work completed.

It was not simply her innovative presidency of Marygrove College that qualitatively advanced education, both Catholic and public. Nor was it just her years of seminary teaching or all her related educational outreach. All that self-gifting was additional to the major contribution Penet made in the shaping and solidifying of the Sister Formation Conference and movement from 1952 and into the 1960s.

Many titles described her in life: philosopher, moralist, teacher, college president, lecturer, scholar, author, and editor. Above all, she was an educator. As such, she made her mark on the religious congregations of the United States and beyond. She initiated, shaped, led them to fresh, collaborative initiatives in their own formation. With or without awareness, countless women and the religious communities with which they are or were affiliated, internalized the necessity of their intellectual and professional development, their spiritual and psychological maturity, as messengers of the Gospel call to compassion and justice.

To Mary Emil Penet, laden with honors and recognition in her years of high achievements, the encomiums were of little consequence. The task mattered. Perhaps one of her own observations serves as a prophetic reflection on the life of this remarkable woman:

Somewhere, in all of this mighty effort which Sisters will make in the Church of our day, there is a task for me, large or small, but mine...I give myself to this task. But I know that whatever I do for God I do in the mysterious framework of our Christian destiny. If I recapitulate the life of Christ, then I will indeed



accomplish little or much for a while. God will cooperate and the Palm Sundays you and I have will be various. But the pattern of Christ's life will have to be repeated. God will seem not to cooperate all the way. Evil will seem to triumph. We will seem to be abandoned, and our work will go into eclipse. How this will come, when it will come, we do not know. But we do know that we must be ready, for the disciple is not above his Master. As a matter of fact, we have never deserved to accomplish at all, and it is abundantly clear what a limitation upon our usefulness as instruments is set by our imperfections, This Christian pattern is a hard one to accept – the symbol of it is on our persons and on our walls, and we make the sign upon us a hundred times a day. But we still hope that it will not have to be – or at least there is a tension in waiting. This revulsion from the cross all the time that we know we are walking toward it, all the time that, please God, we try to will to walk toward it, this is the supreme tension. Our Lord bought for us the strength to endure it with a sweat of blood. (1958b, p. 20)

For American religious, for millions of students, for companions and collaborators, Penet's leadership as educator toward the full development of all persons, marked as it was by struggle and achievement, is not only a memorable legacy but also a resource for the inspiration to set to work meeting emerging needs in a new era.

## REFERENCES

- Beane, M. N. (1993). *From framework to freedom*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Bradley, R. (1955, December). SFC research project in curriculum. *Sister Formation Bulletin*, 2, 16.
- Bradley, R. (1959). Foreword. *Sister Formation Bulletin*. Reprint edition of Vol. 1, No. 1- Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct 1954-Summer, 1958). Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Bradley, R. (1964, Summer). Statement of ownership management and circulation. *Sister Formation Bulletin*, 10, 14.
- Chronicles, St. Charles Mission*. (1932, June 19). Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Clanon, E. (1997). The sacrament of a life. In Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Building sisterhood: A feminist history of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary* (pp. 299-318). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Derry, G. H. (1932, September 26). *Class outlines*. Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Dolan, J. (2002). *In search of an American Catholicism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ewens, M. (1989). Women in the convent. In K. Kennelly (Ed.), *American Catholic women* (pp. 17-47). New York: Macmillan.
- Keenan, J. F. (2005, April 4). Champion of conscience. *America*, 192, 6.
- Kelly, M. R. (1948). *No greater service*. Detroit, MI: Evans-Winter-Hebb.
- Maritain, R. (1974). *Raissa's journal* (J. Maritain, Ed. & Trans.) Albany, NY: Magi Books. (Original work published 1963)
- Meyers, B. (1941). *The education of sisters*. New York: Sheed and Ward.
- Penet, M. E. (1951). *Property and right in representative Catholic moralists of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO.
- Penet, M. E. (1953a, October). Cooperation in sister-training. *College Newsletter, Official Organ of the College Department of the National Catholic Education Association*, 17(1), 2-4.

- Penet, M. E. (1953b, April). *The survey report on teacher preparation. The sisters' view*. Paper presented at NCEA Convention, Atlantic City, NJ.
- Penet, M. E. (1958a). The apostolate of teaching. In J. E. Haley (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 1957 Sisters' Institute of Spirituality* (pp. 229-278). Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press.
- Penet, M. E. (1958b). The challenge of our apostolate. In S. Ritamary (Ed.), *Planning for the formation of sisters* (pp. 5-23). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Penet, M. E. (1964, August 19). *Development of religious teachers, sister formation – a current statement*. Paper presented at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN.
- Penet, M. E. (1975, January). *Personal resume*. Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Penet, M. E. (1980). *Personal resume*. Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Penet, M. E. (1983). *Ministry commitment form, Part 1, 1983-84*. Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Penet, M. E. (1985, September 17). *Life sketch*. Unpublished manuscript, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Archives, Monroe, MI.
- Pius XII. (1957). Counsel to teaching sisters. In V. A. Yzermans (Ed.), *Pope Pius XII and Catholic education* (pp. 45-52). St. Meinrad, IN: Grail Publication.
- Riley, M. P. (1952). Share the sisters. In National Congress of Religious of the United States, *Religious community life in the United States* (Vol. 2, pp. 134-147). New York: Paulist Press.
- Stewart, G., Jr. (1994). *Marvels of charity*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor.
- Unger, H. (2001). Normal school. In *Encyclopedia of American education* (Vol. 2, p. 755). New York: Facts on File.
- Vatican “deeply impressed” with Sister Formation Conferences. (1957, Summer). *Sister Formation Bulletin*, 3, 15-17.
- What is uniform about SFC? (1954, December). *Sister-Formation Bulletin*, 1, 7
- Why the S-F Bulletin? (1954, October). *Sister-Formation Bulletin*, 1, 6.
- Wolff, M. (1949). The education of Sister Lucy. In *National Catholic Educational Association Bulletin, Proceedings and Addresses, Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting* (pp. 253-256). Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.

*Joan Glisky, I.H.M., is an oral historian and researcher in the Archives of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Joan Glisky, I.H.M., SSIHM Archives, 610 West Elm Avenue, Monroe, MI 48162-7909.*