

REMEMBERING SISTER MARGARET "PEGGY" McELWEE, IHM
June 30, 1926 – April 9, 2010



Peggy's autobiography makes it clear that God's loving providence was the great influence in her life.

Peggy was born on June 30, 1926, in Philadelphia, Penn., to Anthony Joseph McElwee and Margaret Josephine Ryan. She was the oldest of three children. Patricia and Anthony were her younger siblings. Sister Marie Clark recalls, "It was always necessary to update each other on the latest news of our families. The loss of her brother Anthony and the latest news about her sister Patricia and her sister-in-law Catherine were big topics of conversation. She would glow when she mentioned the latest stories about her nephew Anthony. I knew she had a special place in her heart for him."

The McElwee family was deeply rooted in the Catholic faith. Peggy says in her autobiography, "When the Depression struck, our lives were turned upside down! My father lost his jewelry store. We also lost our new home. I only realized and appreciated much later what my parents had endured together during those difficult years. What struck me most was the mutual love and support my parents gave to each other as well as their deep faith in prayer and God's providence. In fact", she continues, "our family life revolved around the Church's liturgical year with its various parish functions and ceremonies that identified one as a 'good Catholic' in those pre-Vatican days."

Peggy also describes her beloved grandmother as a "saintly and prayerful woman, praying on her knees with arms outstretched every morning despite her painful rheumatism." She attributes her religious vocation to her grandmother's "good" prayers.

Peggy was no stranger to different communities of sisters. In grade school she had the Sisters of St. Joseph who, she says, "made a profound impression on my naturally idealistic and impressionable nature." By the time she reached eighth grade, however, she had decided to become a Carmelite nun. "Occasionally", she writes, "I would accompany my father to the Monastery of the Discalced Carmelites to hear Mass, and this was a moving experience which stirred my vocation. Their cloistered life intrigued and mystified me."

Peggy's plans changed, however, when she entered Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls and met the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary from Westchester, Penn. Sister Marie Françoise, one of Peggy's favorite teachers, listened to her questions and gave her a copy of the Little Flower's famous autobiography to read. Peggy recalls "that book and a subsequent visit to the IHM's Westchester Motherhouse for Forty Hours devotions convinced me that I did have a vocation. I decided to enter Villa Maria novitiate as soon as I could after my high school graduation in June 1944. My formal entrance was Monday, Oct. 2, 1944, the Feast of the Guardian Angels."

During the novitiate years, according to Sister Marie Clark, "Peggy was very well known for her musical talents. Her piano solo of *Malaguena* and her vocal solos of *Bless This House* were two of the most popular requests at the sisters' gatherings. In one of her classes, the teacher, in fact, frequently would stop in the middle of the class and invite Peggy to come to the front of the class to do a solo. This was certainly not one of Peggy's favorite things, but there was no choice for her but to obey."

From 1946-1969 Peggy taught music, English and/or religion both on a grade school and a high school level. Her experience in San Isidoro, Peru, at Escuela Immaculado Corazon from 1951-1957 was a major turning point in her religious life. She poses these questions: "...What can I really say about all that happened to me in Peru? How can I explain the changes that took place within me as I absorbed the daily impact of a pseudo-Catholic culture where such extremes of poverty and wealth existed side by side? How can I put into words the shock, the disillusionment with the Catholic Church and my own Community's priorities? It is sufficient to say that I 'grew up' in South America, and the seeds were sown for future decisions that I would one day make."

Increasingly discouraged and disillusioned by "the predominantly conservative religious and liturgical environment and thought" in the Philadelphia diocese as well as what was not happening in her community, Peggy decided to take a year's leave of absence. On Aug. 10, 1969, she left the IHMs and her new life began.

Peggy's life was very fulfilling at first. For almost 11 years she worked as a training assistant and eventually as a supervisor at ICI Americas Inc. She also "learned to drive, be self-supporting, and make independent decisions about her life." She "even learned how to make her checkbook balance!" Her "self-confidence grew as her perspectives and experiences broadened." Peggy eventually decided not to return to the IHMs but to get a dispensation from her vows.

Even with this new-found personal and professional success, however, Peggy was discontent. She believed she still had a vocation. She contacted Sister Mary Kinney and spent Thanksgiving 1980 at the Monroe Motherhouse. Of the visit she says, "One of the highlights of my Thanksgiving stay was a visit to Fr. Gillet's tomb where I prayed for his special guidance since he understood the pain and turmoil involved in changing from one community to another." She adds, "Nothing was left for me at this point but to make the leap of faith into uncertainty and darkness. I believed that God, my loving Father, was waiting in the darkness for me just as surely as he had walked beside me during those desert years of exile." Peggy resigned her position at ICI Americas Inc. and came back to Monroe on the new feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the old feast of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, June 27, 1981.

From 1981-1994 Peggy's life as a Monroe IHM included ministry in the Motherhouse Health Care Center as a secretary, working as an administrator in the Toledo Diocesan Health Services office to develop a 10-year plan for inner-city parishes, teaching religion at Cabrini High School and serving as the coordinator of Programs and Development for St. Mary Conference Center. In 1994 she retired to the Motherhouse and lived there until she moved to the Health Care Center in 2002.

Peggy, you ended your biography with this prayer, "May my Father in heaven continue His providential care of me until we meet one day face to face. Mary, my mother, shelter me close to your Immaculate Heart. Be at peace woman of strength wrapped around order and chaos, holding firm tension's pieces, forging new dreams and promised tomorrows, the day has come." Your prayer has been answered.

Mary Ellen Loren, IHM
April 15, 2010