Eulogy

SISTER MARY PETER TRAVIS, O.P.
OF THE HOLY CROSS

August 31, 1928 – May 22, 2020

“God created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. . . He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be . . . a preacher of truth in my own place. . . I will trust Him. . . He knows what He is about.”

These words were written in 1848 by one of Sister Mary Peter’s best friends, St. John Henry Newman. It is remarkable how this meditation frames the life of Sister Mary Peter.

“God created me. . .

On August 31, 1928, Janet was born to Clarence Traviss and Maria Louisa Hagata in Bell, California. Janet had two younger sisters, Patricia and Beverly, and one brother, Robert. As a child, Janet attended Escondido Elementary School in Escondido, California. In the fall of 1942, she enrolled at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy which she described as “a white jewel mounted on a hill.” She was a resident student, member of the varsity basketball team, student body president, and a member of the drama club. She was editor of the school’s first yearbook which described her as “a little dynamo of energy who possesses all the qualities of a potential attorney-at-law. . . well read. . . persuasive. . . lovable.” In her senior year, Janet attended a retreat that changed her career goal to be an attorney. On that retreat the students were challenged to serve others. This call captured Janet’s heart. Janet decided to make service of others her life work as a Dominican Sister.

On September 8, 1946, after her graduation from high school and despite the objections of her family, Janet entered the Dominican Sisters at the Motherhouse, Mission San Jose. On June 12, 1947, she began her novitiate and received the name Sister Mary Peter. Two years later, June 24, 1948, she made first profession of vows.

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The “definite service” that Sister Mary Peter would pursue for the next 66 years was, as she would express it, “the apostolate of Catholic education.” In 1953, in preparation for the teaching ministry, Sister Mary Peter earned a BA degree at Queen of the Holy Rosary College, Mission San Jose. Always motivated by Mother Pia’s insistence that her sisters be well-prepared, Sister Mary Peter pursued study and research all her life. In 1962, she earned an MA in History at Catholic University of America; in 1965, she received a second MA in Education at Immaculate Heart College, and in 1973 she earned a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at
Stanford University, focusing on moral growth and development in children. She did postgraduate studies at Harvard University under Lawrence Kohlberg; and after her retirement in 2006, she delighted in postgraduate work at Oxford University.

During the first twelve years of her ministry in education, Sister Mary Peter taught elementary grades. She taught a double fifth and sixth grade class during her first year teaching at St. Boniface School, San Francisco. Later she taught at St. Anthony School, San Francisco, and then became eighth grade teacher and principal of St. Boniface School, Anaheim. Sister Mary Peter’s emphasis on research was evident even then. One of her students, Sister Gloria Marie Jones, recalls that Sister Mary Peter taught her eighth graders to be her research assistants, teaching them how to locate information about the founding families of the City of Anaheim in cemeteries and the library in order to help her complete *The History of a Parish*, a book she co-authored with Bishop Donald Montrose. Recalling these early years, Sister Mary Peter said, “God was good. I grew to love teaching.”

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Given her evident gifts as teacher and principal, Sister Mary Peter was appointed Assistant Director of Education for the Congregation in 1962. For the next twenty-three years, she supervised the schools staffed by the Dominican Sisters. In 1973, Sister Mary Peter was elected to the General Council of the Congregation and appointed Director of Education. These were phenomenal years of professional development for the schools she supervised. Recently, sisters who were principals or teachers during this period reminisced on her influence. Her sisters agree that Sister Mary Peter was “a giant” among them. What did her school supervision look like? Her sisters remember vividly how Sister Mary Peter would arrive at a school, often after driving from the Motherhouse or elsewhere in her compact little car, Blue Bell. Usually, her school visit lasted three days. She interviewed the principal and teachers, observed classes, conferenced with the pastor, and, often gave a professional development presentation to the faculty. One sister remembers a time that Sister Mary Peter returned to the Motherhouse from a school visit, immediately walked to her office carrying two heavy briefcases, and, without removing her heavy coat, sat down to begin working at her Selectric typewriter. She never stopped. During these years, the Congregation’s educational ministry included 33 elementary schools, 2 music schools, and 8 high schools. Year after year, she visited all the schools in California, Oregon, and Mexico.

To support and guide her efforts, Sister Mary Peter established the Community Education Board. She planned an annual Administrators’ Conference at Villa Maria del Mar, Santa Cruz; designed a Master Teacher-Student Teacher program; published a monthly Education Bulletin; organized the Congregation’s Education Department; invited sisters to serve as educational consultants in subjects across the curriculum, and created a curriculum and multi-media library.

Remarkably, there was more. As a member of the General Council, she worked very closely with Sister Mary Thomas Lillis, Prioress General, in the placement of sisters in the school ministry. She became increasingly involved in Catholic education across the country, serving as chair of the Board of Trustees of the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), a member of the
Education Committee of the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) and a member of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE).

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After twenty-three years, forming, inspiring, motivating, and challenging her sisters and their colleagues as Director of Schools, Sister Mary Peter’s educational influence expanded significantly. In 1985, she became an Associate Professor of Education at the University of San Francisco, and in 1989 she was named Director of the Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership (ICEL) at the University of San Francisco, a position she held until 2006. Students from Catholic schools around the world enrolled in ICEL. As Director, Sister Mary Peter stressed the singular place of the Catholic school in the life of the Church. She emphasized the importance of community in Catholic schools, reflecting the way that community support was key to teacher formation in religious communities. ICEL students prayed together, studied together, and recreated together. Sister Mary Peter focused phenomenal energy on the research of her doctoral students believing that teachers must translate research findings into classroom strategies.

Sister Mary Peter’s students and colleagues invited her to give workshops across the United States and around the world: Oxford, England, China, Canada, American Samoa, Mexico, France, Russia, Australia, Guam, Puerto Rico, Italy, Ireland, and South Africa. During these years she wrote numerous articles for Catholic educational journals, authored a book, Student Moral Development in the Catholic School, and co-authored Pioneer Mentoring in Teacher Preparation, an account of how religious congregations of women supported and trained their members to be teachers in Catholic schools.

In 2006, after her retirement from ICEL, she accepted an appointment as President of Queen of the Holy Rosary College, the Dominican Sisters college at Mission San Jose. In addition, Sister Mary Peter served on the boards of the Dominican Sisters Center for Education and Spirituality as well as Vision of Hope, a scholarship assistance program for students attending eight of the Congregation’s affiliate schools in the inner city. She rejoiced in the opportunity for a sabbatical in Oxford where she studied more deeply the life of St. John Henry Newman whom she highly revered.

Sister Mary Peter’s educational expertise and passionate commitment to Catholic schools won the widespread admiration and respect of Catholic universities and educational organizations across the country. In 1973, Today’s Catholic Teacher named her The First Lady of Catholic Education in the United States. Altogether, she received 27 public honors. These included three honorary doctorates and the prestigious St. Elizabeth Ann Seton President’s Award for lifetime achievement in Catholic education from the National Catholic Education Association.

“I shall be . . .a preacher of truth in my own place.”

Sister Mary Peter, a Dominican, was a preacher of truth, giving witness by her life to the charism of St. Dominic. She diligently pursued study, a pillar of Dominican life, underscoring how preparation must precede preaching. In the same way that Dominic stood at the heart of the Church, Sister Mary Peter taught her students how the Catholic school stands at the center of the
Church’s mission of evangelization. Like Dominic, joy radiated from her, so evident in her wonderful smile. And, as was said of St. Dominic, because she loved others, they loved her. Her religious community knew how dearly she loved her family. Children loved her, and many sisters observed how easily she engaged children of all ages in classrooms and playgrounds. Her wide circle of friends loved her, and she maintained an amazing level of correspondence sending family and friends handwritten greeting cards and an annual Christmas letter.

Sister Mary Peter enjoyed life—being with people, sharing a good meal, engaging in stimulating conversation about politics, debating current events, discussing books, discovering more about her family’s genealogy, and watching sports—especially tennis. To promote conversation and good relationships, she began a custom of scheduling High Tea in her office at ICEL.

“I will trust Him...He knows what He is about.”

Sister Mary Peter bore the burden of arthritic pain for many years. To all appearances, she ignored the complaints of her body, willing herself to maintain a pace that would exhaust persons much younger than she. In January 2016, she moved from Immaculate Conception Priory, San Francisco, which had been her convent home for 31 years, to the Motherhouse at Mission San Jose. The adjustment was challenging. In September 2019, it was evident that Sister Mary Peter required more assistance and she was assigned to St. Martin Residence, the care center community at the Motherhouse.

On Sunday, May 17, she was taken to Washington Hospital, Fremont, for tests. To the surprise of her sisters, her condition worsened. On Friday afternoon, May 22, when it became apparent that God was preparing to take Sister Mary Peter home, her Dominican community gathered in the Motherhouse Chapel to sing the Salve Regina, the song traditionally sung by Dominicans when a sister is dying. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, her sisters could not be with her. Several hours later with the consoling presence of Father Jeff Finley at her bedside, Sister Mary Peter went home to God.

We rejoice that our Sister Mary Peter is now in the presence of our God whom she loved and served so incredibly and tirelessly! Thank you, Sister Mary Peter, always an educator, for teaching us by your life the lesson you learned so well from your good friend, St. John Henry Newman:

“...trust Him...He knows what He is about.”

--S. Mary Catherine Antczak, OP