The IHMs played such a significant role in the development of the movement which became the Sister Formation Conference that it was often described as “the Monroe plan.” Events occurring nationally were either preceded by similar action in Monroe or impacted by those working in the IHM program of the time. Two prime movers were Sisters Mary Patrick Riley and Mary Emil Penet. Both women were risk takers who changed forever sisters’ education in the Monroe congregation. Mary Patrick’s administrative expertise and IHM leadership position and Mary Emil’s vision and leadership skills were so essential that the foundation may well not have succeeded without them.

In 1948, when Mary Patrick was elected to IHM leadership, she assumed responsibility for the education of young IHMs, and by 1949 she had established a “juniorate” in Monroe. Sisters received into the novitiate that year were to stay at the Motherhouse to complete degrees at the Monroe campus of Marygrove College before going out to teach. Mary Emil joined the faculty there in 1950, and with Mary Patrick and campus staff, developed the program’s curriculum. Its objectives and emphases were reechoed by the Sister Formation Conference.

In 1952 Mary Patrick was scheduled to speak at the NCEA (National Catholic Education Association) Convention, but because of a death in her family Mary Emil replaced her. Sisters received into the novitiate that year were to stay at the Motherhouse to complete degrees at the Monroe campus of Marygrove College before going out to teach. Mary Emil joined the faculty there in 1950, and with Mary Patrick and campus staff, developed the program’s curriculum. Its objectives and emphases were reechoed by the Sister Formation Conference.

In March of 1953, Mary Emil submitted a proposal from her committee to the Teacher Education Section of NCEA asking the executive board to set up a separate commission on professional and educational standards for sisters. It would be an organization OF sisters FOR sisters. The resulting resolution passed in October 1953. In 1954, at the Chicago NCEA meeting, the Sister Formation Conference officially began.

In 1956 sisters of 10 congregations, including Mary Emil Penet and Xaveria Barton (circled), formed a planning committee for the Sister Formation Conference.
During the 1950s IHM extended the formation program in Monroe so that all of the young sisters could complete their baccalaureate degrees and teacher certification before being sent out to teach. This required resources IHM didn’t have owing to the minimal salaries the sisters ordinarily received. Mother Teresa McGivney invited Monsignor Carroll F. Deady, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Detroit, to the Motherhouse to appeal for assistance. After explaining the community’s intent to develop a new formation program, necessary if Catholic schools were to have a future, she left Sister Mary Patrick Riley in the parlor with Deady to explain the need and ask for assistance.

As one writer says, his reaction was predictable, but disappointing. Deady looked around the tastefully done parlor and said it seemed to him the sisters weren’t in need of help as they appeared to have “done pretty well for themselves.”

Mary Patrick replied, “You used the wrong preposition father….I think you would have to say BY ourselves.” She continued:

There isn’t an IHM Sister who has a pair of bedroom slippers, not one who has a bathrobe, not one who has a turkish [sic] towel…and for the most part, Father, we make our underclothing out of flour sacks…. There’s no Sister who has a vacation in Florida or anywhere else except a few days at the beginning of summer at our motherhouse and on the Marygrove campus….. I have been an IHM for thirty years and have not yet had a summer off for I was either in class or teaching classes…. Not that I regret any of this, Father, I just think it’s something that you should realize and maybe consider before you say again that we’ve done pretty well for ourselves.

After Deady left the meeting, he reportedly told his superior, Cardinal Edward Mooney, that the IHMs had “a hard one down there in Monroe.” With no assistance forthcoming from the archdiocese, the sisters formed a lay board of trustees to help in fundraising and negotiating with Marygrove College, which would be the accredited degree-granting institution. And, they successfully moved forward.

Assertiveness and Persistence Create a Future

Mary Patrick Riley, IHM 1895 - 1983

Helpful Hints from the Sewing Box Notebook

- Do not darn with the grain; darn with the weave.
- Keep rust off bonnet pins by using emery bags.
- Turn aprons before they get too thin.
- Never use HOT water or BROWN soap on blues. Use white soap suds when possible.
- Change bonnet line approximately every 3 months. (Take out stitching, press open, give to Sr. Norberta.)
- Change hems of sleeves when sharp, approximately every 3-4 months.
- Press out front of habit occasionally.
- Change the arrangement of pleats to prevent sharp creasing.
- Change position of crucifix cord to prevent wear.
- Be very careful in using DUCO CEMENT, as it removes the color from habit.
- To remove Candle Wax from habit:
  - Scrape off excess
  - Press with brown paper
  - Remove oily stain with naptha
- Press black veils with newspaper.
- When sewing hooks for pinning up, sew hook on piece of elastic, then sew on braid (not on serge.)

*When in doubt, consult Sister Norberta!*