ALVERNIA MOURNS THE LOSS OF AN
INSTITUTIONAL TREASURE, SISTER PACELLI

The Alvernia community suffered a heart-felt loss last week with the passing of one of its greatest leaders, Sister M. Pacelli Staskiel, OSF. During Sr. Pacelli’s more than five decades of service at Alvernia, she touched the lives of generations of students and inspired community members throughout the region. She died Tuesday evening, Feb. 16, at the Reading Hospital and Medical Center.

Hundreds of Alvernia community members filled Sacred Heart Chapel to mourn her death and pay respects during a funeral service last Friday, Feb. 19. It was a moving tribute to an iconic figure whose contributions to Alvernia were countless.

At the service, Alvernia President Thomas Flynn delivered the following memorable eulogy that reflected on a life well lived. We share it here with you as a celebration of her life and a remembrance of her enduring spirit.

Eulogy by Thomas F. Flynn, Ph.D.—February 19, 2010:

She was a towering presence, a giant of a woman. It was a description she appreciated, knowing it was meant seriously and yet with full humorous intent. She so enjoyed hearing another local legend, Al Boscov, say that he admired her not simply for her generous service to others but also because she was the one prominent person who did not look down on him. With current faculty president, Karen Cameron, she loved joking that they always saw eye to eye with one another.

Sister Pacelli was also known to be a bit coy about her age, so perhaps the only drawback to the celebration of her contributions during last year’s 50th anniversary festivities was that the media inevitably reported her accurate age!

Most of us here today have bid farewell to a loved one who has had a good long life or, as the bible puts it gently, fullness of years. There is sadness over our loss, but it is not especially difficult to move rather smoothly to joy over a life lived well, appreciation for the person’s presence in our lives, and depending on our faith perspective, an expression of gratitude, indeed confidence, that our loved one is at peace and with God.

As we gather at the end of this long week, we feel this same joy, this appreciation, this gratitude, this confidence about our loved one. We are mindful of her legacy. And we will gather sometime next fall as a university community—students, colleagues, trustees, and her beloved alumni—to celebrate her five decades of service. But today, as I pay tribute to our dear Sister Pacelli, I am aware of how very much we are grieving, just how painful is this loss. This is, no doubt, the ultimate tribute to this rarest of rare individuals: we believed she would always be with us, in part . . . because we could not imagine it otherwise, and in part because we thought that Pacelli might well not be subject to the ordinary laws of mortality.
On behalf of all in the University Community, I extend our consolation and prayers to Sister’s family. Both to her Aunt Evelyn, nephew Jim, and other relatives and to her larger family for the last 60 years, the entire community of Bernardine Franciscan Sisters. In a special way, to Sister Madonna and her leadership council; to Sister Rosemary, like so many a former student; and to all other Sisters who serve or have served at Alvernia, particularly Sisters Florence and Jacinta, Sister Pacelli’s treasured companions on campus. As president, I also extend my sympathy to those in our university community who feel Sister’s loss so keenly, some with relationships stretching back for decades, even as Helen and I are mindful of how much this dear woman has meant to us and how warmly she embraced and supported us over the last five years.

Sister Pacelli was an exemplary servant-leader and teacher-scholar and a witty, fun-filled colleague. She was, foremost, a woman of faith, charity, and courage—a “take no prisoners” saint as one trustee recalls admiringly.

Let me share some of the many dimensions of this extraordinary woman and a few of the countless stories.

**Pacelli the Pioneer.** She arrived five decades ago, following ten years as a high school English and social studies teacher. She is one of our foundresses, those Sisters with “audacious daring” who like all pioneers shared a dream as well as the determination to make that dream real. Like Sister Zygmunta, our founding president, Pacelli was a pioneer intellectually and practically. While serving as dean of students, she was asked to pursue her doctorate so that the fledgling college would have sufficient top faculty to earn Middle States accreditation. Her greatest challenges as a pioneer, she later reflected, occurred during her early years as academic dean, when Alvernia decided to enroll men, reach out to adult students, and launch innovative programs. Genuine pioneers must have boldness of spirit and a will to succeed.

**Pacelli the Visionary Academic.** Where do we begin? With her vision that students, especially the underserved, included young mothers and working women not just eighteen year old high school graduates? Talk to Judge Linda Ludgate, a trustee emerita, and other grateful alumnae from the 1970s and early 80s, long before adult education became fashionable, and hear them recall Sister’s unwavering support for their hopes and dreams. Or talk to a few of “Pacelli’s Boys,” those earliest criminal justice students who received both a liberal arts education and practical preparation for their chosen profession. For a time during the 1970s, she was the only woman in the country heading a CJ program. Or we might look to Alvernia’s innovative Addiction Studies program, launched by her in the late 70s to respond to an important community need. She felt an almost maternal care for these students, many of them in recovery, notes current director George Vogel, provided they were willing to do the work and meet high standards.

**Finding more on the web...**

Sister Pacelli receives Honorary Degree during spring 2009 commencement, as part of Alvernia’s 50th anniversary celebration. [Click here for the full citation](#).

Sr. Pacelli has been an integral part of Alvernia for five decades. [Click here for Sister Pacelli’s biography](#).

Alvernia Alumni have been leaving comments and remembrances to celebrate Sr. Pacelli’s life. [Click here to read their remembrances](#).

[Click here to leave your own comments, which will be posted on the webpage above.](#)

Several members of the Alvernia community have expressed interest in Sr. Pacelli’s last book *Designed to Serve: The Places and People of Francis Hall.* [Click here for a link to the book in Alvernia University’s bookstore](#).

The *Reading Eagle* featured Sr. Pacelli in an article entitled, “Alvernia mourns passing of longtime professor, official.” [Click here for the full story](#).

The *Reading Eagle* also featured Sr. Pacelli several times over the last few years. [Click here to read a “Kitchen Table” interview from May 2009.](#)

[Click here to read an article about Sister Pacelli’s research into Alvernia’s past](#).
At the core of the Pacelli vision, and the Pacelli legacy, are key elements that today define Alvernia: the integration of liberal arts and professional education, the marriage of theory and practice, an emphasis on ethics and values, and a caring concern for each student matched with high standards of expectation. To this last point, I recall a faculty discussion during my first months on campus. When a colleague suggested that our Franciscan values might dictate special accommodations for high-risk students, Sister Pacelli unequivocally made clear that the Franciscan way combined academic rigor with support, consistent with St. Bonaventure’s ideal of “knowledge joined with love.”

**Pacelli the Renaissance Woman.** The range of her intellectual interests was dizzying. From Medieval Literature and King Arthur to Gothic Literature and Count Dracula to Classic Films like Gone with the Wind and Mutiny on the Bounty to the Beatles (as I learned last night from nephew, Jim), especially George. The linkages between the often disparate fields of English and Communications were fundamental to her as a learned woman, her passion for film paralleling her love of literature. She was a serious scholar also well versed on the academy award winners.

As some know, she almost pursued a career on the stage. She admired the dashing Clark Gable, and her own acting ability was in turn much admired by the legendary Claude Reins whose daughter was a fellow student. Sister delighted talking theater with Nathan Thomas and other faculty, confiding once with much merriment that after a collegiate performance of Blythe Spirit, in which she had played the leading role, some parents complained that the production should not have imported a professional actor.

More than a few of her faculty colleagues have expressed satisfaction this week that our very own Renaissance Woman was still teaching and learning in what became her final year at Alvernia.

* Writes Alfred Lord Tennyson in “Ulysses:"

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I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move. . .

And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
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**Pacelli the Seamstress.** No, to the best of my knowledge, she was not devoted to knitting. But she was a great weaver. As a storyteller, always ready with a tale or anecdote. As Alvernia’s historian, attuned to the different dimensions of the subject, in her most recent book, to the artistic traditions and even more, “the voices” that helped trace the development of Francis Hall. And, of course, as the author of *Threads*, her account of the “tapestry” of her beloved Alvernia.

Listening to her department chair, Beth DeMeo, to Spence Stober, and to other senior faculty share memories this week, it struck me forcefully that Sister Pacelli is for generations of Alvernians our master weaver—the person to link past and present and to link both to a bright future; to exemplify the close partnership of campus and congregation; to see clearly and to speak sympathetically; to be a steady and supportive colleague during past times of turbulence and discord; to be a strong, compassionate servant-leader through multiple administrations, a faculty member appreciative of administration, an administrator who never left the faculty; to articulate and embody the mission and vision of this special place, once orphanage and school, then college, now university. . . . Our, and always her, Alvernia.

And finally, of course . . .

**Pacelli the Bernardine Franciscan Sister.** Several of our community, not previously knowledgeable about Catholic Sisters, spoke admiringly this week about her impact on them. Long-time colleague Carol Schwanger praised her friend as embodying the “wonderful, inspirational ideal of what a Sister should be.” Never parochial, so much a part of the larger world, a “woman of this planet,” in the words of friend and shopping buddy, Polly Mathys, she was also a deeply spiritual woman of example-giving faith.

Back in my first year on campus, when this magnificent chapel was being renovated and the Sisters’ daily mass was held at 7:00 AM in the small chapel in Francis Hall, I used to tease Sister Pacelli that the reason I showed up unannounced on some mornings was to see if she actually did attend church. Her eyes would twinkle with delight.
Like her fellow Sisters, she reached effortlessly to those with beliefs and traditions different from her own. Muslim leader and new trustee, Steve Elmarzouky, recalls the warmth of her welcome to him as a newcomer to the area and her compassionate respect for other people’s faith. Rabbi Alan Weitzman, besides praising her as a “principled person,” recalls her asking him to find a replacement for her Mezuzah, important to her because Jewishness was part of her Christian tradition.

I recall another meeting during my first year as president when, during a lively faculty discussion on Alvernia’s mission, a colleague emphasized the primary importance of educating Catholics. Sister bristled a bit and then quipped, “If all we Sisters wanted to do was educate Catholics, we certainly wouldn’t have settled a century ago in Berks County.” It was, for those of us old enough to recall the television ad, one of Sister Pacelli’s many “E.F. Hutton moments.” For her, ecumenism and interfaith work were integral to, not separate from, Alvernia’s Catholic identity as a Franciscan institution.

As she recalled last year, Sister Pacelli had never had a grand plan to become a religious, nor had she experienced any epiphany (“But then,’ she said mischievously, who really does unless you’re St. Paul?”) Yet when Geraldine Staskiel first learned about St. Francis, she had been inspired by his willingness to give himself over completely to a higher cause, to serve God. “Religious life is a rewarding life; there’s no doubt about it,” she remarked. “I couldn’t imagine myself doing anything else.”

Pacelli the Pioneer, the Visionary Academic, the Renaissance Woman, the Master Weaver, the Bernardine Franciscan Sister.

She is an Alvernia treasure, representing the best in ourselves and our highest aspirations as an academic community. She was, in Provost Shirley Williams’ words, the “ultimate university citizen—ever present, ever engaged, ever affirming.” She has modeled our motto—“To Learn, To Love, To Serve”—and has shown us the way forward toward being a “Distinctive Franciscan University.”

I noted at the outset that it is hard for us to imagine Alvernia without Sister Pacelli. But I suggest we need not imagine that. Last night a colleague warmly described her as having “spread her wings over all of us for so many years.” If we genuinely reflect on her legacy, both personally and professionally, and if we recall her wonderful smile, she will continue to watch over and guide and inspire us, now and for generations yet to come.