

Chapter 11

The Call That Made All the Difference

Leave-taking is never an easy affair and it was hard for Cecilia to leave ICA Davenport. At Immaculate Conception Academy, she had been



There seems no reason why two novices stand in front of the Old Motherhouse infirmary like ushers or guards. The open window behind them is to Mother Clarke's room. Picture from *T. J. Donaghoe Co-founder of the Sisters of Charity* 151

happy and successful, loved by students and fellow teachers, familiar with the quirks, humors and traditions of the school—traditions partly of her own shaping. Her change from ICA to the 1877 motherhouse was a deep uprooting.

As Cecilia packed her trunk, she slowly disposed of the accumulation of 18 years and began the process of leaving close friends. Some Sisters had been with her at ICA since its first hard years. So keenly did she feel her transplanting from ICA to the farm 10 miles out of Dubuque that she sent a small girl with a message to a BVM

friend she heard singing, “How can you sing when I am going away?” “Tell Sister,” answered the friend to the tiny messenger, “I’m Saddest When I Sing,” the title of a popular song.¹

Cecilia Dougherty moved that summer to the motherhouse on the prairie as the new novice mistress. The separation from Davenport marked the first stage in her transition from teacher to administrator. After a short

year with the novices, she moved again, this time to Clinton, IA, to open Holy Family school as its new superior.² Here her experience, health, energy, and tolerant good humor faced a test composed of debt, petty harassment, and inconvenience.

Initially, Mary Michael Nihill had been chosen to open Clinton as superior, sent to organize supplies and curriculum at the school. Since their convent (the recently purchased Noyes house) was being repaired, the Sisters lived at the rectory and the pastor boarded out until the house was ready. By the end of September, Michael's failing health and negative opinion of the Clinton living conditions prompted Mother Clarke to exchange the two. In October, Cecilia went to Clinton to face the convent's problems and the debt. Michael journeyed back to Dubuque to preside over the novices—a three-year arrangement.



**Joseph
O'Reilly,
Iowa City
BVM Archives**

Mary Joseph O'Reilly (left) on her way to view an earlier Clinton school (the log cabin with holes in walls and roof) had called from the mud puddle where she had been deposited under the whirling carriage wheels, "Ah, well! Where there's muck, there's luck!" Muck in plenty and precious little luck met Cecilia at Holy Family (Clinton, IA). A strong anti-Catholic prejudice waited for the Sisters in a town still resenting the purchase of the Presbyterian Seminary for Our Lady of Angels Academy by the Sisters. It appears clearly in a letter written 27 years afterward by Valentine Zimmermann one of the first Sisters missioned at Clinton.

...We lived in Rev. W.P. McLaughlin's home until Christmas Eve when we slept for the first time in Holy Family Convent ... The property was purchased [by the BVMs] through Father McLaughlin's instrumentality and lawyer John F. Mullaney. The price was between five and six thousand dollars.

Colonel Noyes had lost the house by mortgage ... and was very angry when he discovered the property was bought for the Sisters, so to destroy things as much as possible, all bowls [sinks] and the bath tub were filled with water and their frozen pipes burst. The built-in library was taken apart, packed in boxes and shipped to different little [train] stations, but the energetic work of Father McLaughlin and the lawyer recovered it.³

This was the negative atmosphere Cecilia walked into. Besides the psychological shock of the Colonel's open animosity, she faced a debt plus

interest on a note taken out by the Community to finance the Clinton school. By December of 1880, a school fair grossing \$2600 canceled the last of the note. Coal bills ran as high as \$9.00 a ton, but school enrollment increased from 200 to 600 students, all from the public school. To all appearances the school was successfully begun. A second letter from Cecilia to Mother Clarke, however, hints at other problems than bursting water pipes.

Dec.7, 1880

Dearest Mother,

Please excuse the half sheet of paper—I have no more in the house this morning. The note came on the 6th. I settled it all up—paid \$1235.24. Inclosed (sic) you will find receipt for the same... Tomorrow will be the feast of our Immaculate Mother; I wish so much I could spend it at home, for I have so much to say to you that will not write, for when things are written, they are so easily misunderstood. What we speak we can repeat till we are sure of being perfectly understood.” (She closes the letter asking for prayers) “we need them so much.”⁴

Community legend casts a mysterious light on affairs in Clinton. The continued ill will of Colonel Noyes figures in most stories—one having it that he tried to blow the house up, another that he created disturbances and loud noises around the house at night. The most lurid of the tales contains an echo of gothic fiction (Poe and the Brontes) in its reference to a room in the attic where the Colonel reputedly kept his insane wife until she committed suicide, but unproved gossip said the colonel threw her down the stairs and killed her—part of the Clinton myth. Probably very little outside of Valentine Zimmermann’s letter is true, but that is strange enough.⁵

Given its beginnings, the convent had an air of the bizarre not lost, or likely to be, on women going upstairs by candlelight, treading creaking steps, and raised on 19th century fiction. The 20th century had its flying saucers; the Clinton house its ghostly footsteps.

None of the above may have figured in what Cecilia wished to talk about to Mother Clarke. Perhaps she only hoped to share her own weariness from the day's work of classes and the responsibility of running the house and school. She wrote telling friends that some nights she woke herself by the scratch of her pen going off the paper at two in the morning, her bones cold from kneeling in front of the lesson plans on her chair.⁶ Barely three hours later the rising bell broke into her sleep.

In 1881, Cecilia Dougherty and Michael Nihill rotated smoothly again. Cecilia resumed her interrupted assignment as novice mistress and Michael caught the train for Des Moines to set up the curriculum at St. Joseph Academy as its new director. Meanwhile, Mary Clarke, with Gertrude as assistant, worked at last minute changes needed for Final Approbation by Rome of the BVM Rule.

The Clinton Sisters loved Cecilia. After her return to the motherhouse as novice mistress in 1881, they sent so many letters to her that Mother Clarke wrote the new superior, Olympia Sullivan, to restrict letters from the Sisters to Cecilia since she was no longer their superior. Within a few weeks Mother commented in a letter to Des Moines that she had not “heard a line from Clinton for a whole month,” causing her to write a second letter reminding Olympia that the Sisters were of course free to write the Mother General.⁷ Olympia may have overstressed the “no-letter” command. Cecilia was a hard act for anyone to follow.

Apparently, there were no more restrictions placed on Cecilia's correspondence after the Sisters stopped writing to Mother Clarke as well as to Cecilia. BVMs from all over the congregation kept up a lively correspondence with Cecilia. After she, Xavier O'Reilly and Crescentia Markey, compiled the 1882, '84, and '92 Customs Books, her attitude towards letters appeared clearly in the inclusion of St. Francis Xavier's famous letter to his fellow Jesuits on the importance of letters, “. . . letters can be the means of unifying a community and of extending affection, support and encouragement throughout an entire congregation,”⁸ he wrote.

As busy as she was, even as Mother, Cecilia never neglected this personal contact. Her letters and notes indicate interest and concern for her Sisters, many of whom became dear friends. Her correspondents also included dozens of priests who counted on her encouragement and support. These men wrote her with love and trust. In fact, Mother Cecilia's letters were kept and put away to be reread as perhaps no others except those of Mother Clarke.

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Notes to Chapter 11

1. Story told in 1967 by Evangela Henthorne. Interview Doris Walsh.
2. Beginning Holy Family, Clinton, 1873. Coogan 2 87.

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3. Letter in Holy Family, Clinton, file. Holy Family later became St. Mary grade and high school in Clinton. Sister Mary Valentine is the aunt of BVMs Margaret and Mary Ellen Zimmermann.

4. December 1880, Holy Family house annals; letters from Cecilia.

5. This collection of tales and community lore was gathered by the author from stories shared by Sisters at the motherhouse and infirmary in summer 1967.

6. Evangela Henthorne, a protégé of Cecilia, recalled many stories about her. Interview, summer 1967 by Doris Walsh

7. Mother Clarke's letters, February 21, 1882. Coogan 2 94.

8. Customs books, 1882-1892 quoted below. BVM Archives. The three editors wrote: "... in our written correspondence, especially with one another, we ought to bear in mind the advice of St. Francis Xavier to the Jesuits under his charge in India:

'The letters you write to one another should be exceedingly kind and affectionate. Be particularly careful not to let a word escape your pen that might grieve or discourage them.

'We should meet, as it were, in our correspondence, for the same reason that we hold converse, that is, as members of the same religious family, out of pure and affectionate regard for one another, to help or seek for help in the discharge of our duties, to console in trials, to gladden by the recital of some good that God has been pleased to perform through us, etc. Such letters will be the links of a golden chain of sweet charity binding together the members, and even the missions of the Congregation when distance shall have separated us, perhaps for life.'

St. Francis de Sales and St. Alphonsus Liguori were particularly desirous that their spiritual children should hold this happy intercourse among themselves."

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