

Chapter 12

The Potter's Wheel and the Clay



New novices wear traditional wreaths for Reception Day at the Old Motherhouse.

BVM Archives

The novitiate that Cecilia moved back to was not quite a boarding school, not quite a parish convent, not quite a hothouse, not quite anything as much as a place to equip young and not so young women for the practical tasks of being a religious and an educator. Those who asked to join the BVMs were attracted by an ideal—usually a desire to make the world a better place or an urge to give themselves and their talents to a larger vision, a wider goal dreamed by the congregation and pursued for the love of God.

The novitiate tested this desire and a novice's ability to accommodate herself to a life among other women, following the Rule of the congregation. Cecilia provided a joyous model for such women. Theoretically, a novice mistress encouraged novices to grow in learning and in grace. She planned

their class schedules and taught them the Rule they would live by. Practically, Cecilia knew that what she did and valued made more impact than any instructions she gave.

The young women watched how she folded her napkin, said her Stations,¹ spoke to others, treated the old chaplain, bore his harangues on “training novices to obedience.” They saw her kneel in front of Mother Clarke or Sister Mary Gertrude to request permission to receive Communion on one of three weekly Communion days—sometimes heard it refused.^{1b}

Cecilia’s common sense was as deep as her love of God. As expected she taught obedience to the Rule, but she also stressed thoughtfulness to others, directing these amateurs in the religious life to notice others, think of others, make others welcome. “Show visitors where to pick up a plate for supper,” Cecilia suggested, hoping gradually to alert her charges to ways of seeing and responding in practical charity to those around them.

As novice mistress, she did not believe rigid fasts necessary for novices or teachers. At the beginning of Lent, she went herself to weigh a thick slice of bread for the cook to see, so that her novices received full measure. She and other Sisters frequently passed their meat or pie to the novice tables. Later as Mother, Cecilia wrote reminding superiors to see that the Sisters had enough to eat, not to count one piece for everyone and no more, to “provide more for supper than bread, butter, and dessert.”²

During her time either as novice mistress or Mother, Cecilia never allowed the fault to obscure the person, or human frailty to hide the beloved novice. She accepted the fact that humans were weak. Let God be the judge! Her action was to look beyond the circumstances to the individual who needed love and understanding after a failure to be her best self. In 1895, she wrote to one of her former novices teaching on the missions.

My very dear Child,

Don't be disedified, Child, at what you see being done wrong. If you do—you don't know yourself at all. We can—each one of us—do much greater wrong if God's grace does not sustain us. We are all weak—without God we are capable of naught but evil. The trouble is want of fidelity with grace and—of course human frailty and infirmity. If we do not learn to control and mortify ourselves while young—God pity us and those who have to live with us as we grow older. Please pray for me. I have a hard road to travel too.

S.M. Cecilia

The letter above shows deep respect for others. “You could tell Mother Cecilia anything,” retired BVM Eileen Curran recalled, “and she would listen and look at you with the same love and acceptance, interested only in you and how she could help. She could be trusted never to speak about it or act as if she knew anything except the very best about you.”

Eileen shared these words in one of the 1967 motherhouse groups of 6 to 10 older Sisters gathered to talk about Cecilia. Hearing her, Celerina King added with warmth, “If you didn't know Mother Cecilia, you missed half your life.”³ All in the group of Sisters nodded affirmatively.

No wonder her novices rushed to greet her on her return from trips to town! “When Mother Gertrude came home, we all went out and stood stiff and straight as statues,” said one Sister, “but when Mother Cecilia came back from town, we all ran right out to give her a quick hug and crowded around to hear about her trip.”³ This comment from one of Cecilia's former novices indicates the general reaction to the two women more effectively than paragraphs of explanation.

Nor was the difference lost on Gertrude, who commented after one little novice braved her austerity to give her a hug and kiss, “Ah, Thithy dear, if I had been Thither Mary Thethelia, you all would have been out to hug me.”³ It was true. Somehow one woman reaped respect and the other harvested love.

At the end of a trip to town, Cecilia drew her listeners to her with stories, news, her view of the world, a humorous recounting of the hack driver's philosophy, a wide interest in all. Watching this tall, slender woman open her life, novices learned to give in turn something of what she gave to them. How easy and graceful she was about it, writing, “Please pray for me. I have a hard road to travel too,” and thus inviting her correspondent into a relationship of mutual need and support.

Like a potter, Cecilia, gently molded her novices on the wheel of the novitiate. The women she influenced in the 1880's came to the novitiate filled with idealism and joy. One rode over on horseback to apply after an evening at a high-kicking barn dance—all the more enjoyable and high-kicked because during it she decided on the next day's ride to the novitiate. In a 1954 oral history tape, Robertine Welch remarked, her old voice almost young again, “We were all crazy about what we were doing!”

Other young women came at the turn of the century, like Colombiere Hagarty, simply looking for a religious community to belong to. “The community took me in without knowing anything about me,” she told Cecilia, who said, “They took us all in without knowing anything about us.”³

Following their generous hearts meant that these young women had to adapt to different customs—to silence at meals for one thing, to the quiet of a house of prayer, and to a regulated life with prayer at set times, recreation at set times, rising and going to bed at set times. Since silence and obedience were the most easily observable tests for novices, the life of a novice mistress in charge of effervescent youth was not the easiest—especially when quiet meant so much to others, and others were everywhere. All eyes focused on Cecilia's charges; every tongue waited ready with advice. No wonder she walked outside so often with her novices!

Worse still was the penchant of the old chaplain (Fr. Hattenberger) to interfere, a practice in keeping with the 19th century attitude toward women as merely larger and not very bright children. Some even held that women should not go to college because study “taxed their weaker brains.” Many men (as well as women) repeated this fallacy as common knowledge. But not Cecilia! One of her letters says what is lacking for her Sisters is “not talent, but opportunity.”

Few jobs outside the home offered young women even a small opportunity for independence. Nineteenth century women could neither vote nor hold office. As for possessing an independent fortune, in most states, trustees were appointed for women by law as for children. It's remarkable under the circumstances that so many BVM academies succeeded, education for girls being generally thought of as the patina of culture, worth using only to adorn a man's world. Yet these same women somehow civilized the West, bringing music and art from a convent boarding school education to their homes. During the 1880's, BVMs administered and taught in almost a dozen such cultural enclaves.⁴

Religious Sisters were similarly treated in the Church—children to be looked after by the “wiser and more intelligent clergy.”⁴ Any priest (being a man) felt up to it. However, BVMs had begun in pioneer times and carried deep in the spirit of the congregation, an independence and strength earned by having to create miracles out of nothing. Male claims seldom controlled or awed these women religious who called each other “Sister.”

It is easier with this general cultural background to understand why the Roman Curia applied the same rules (canons) to communities of men and women as if they were a different species rather than different expressions of humanity. It also explains why old Father Hattenberger, the chaplain at St. Joseph's motherhouse, felt able to criticize Cecilia's novices for lack of obedience, this being his Jove's bolt for any and all feminine disregard for his commands—no matter how irrational.

A few days after complaining to Cecilia about “disobedient novices”, he met with the novices for his class in scripture. Suddenly he pointed to a little novice in the front row. “You,” he growled, “get up there and crow like a rooster—flap your wings and crow.” What could that possibly have to do with scripture, you may wonder and so did the novice. “But I crowed, like a simpleton,” she commented at 80 to Angelita Kramer during a 1954 oral history session in the infirmary.

On the way out of the novitiate after class, the line filed past Cecilia, who chuckled, called her “my little rooster” and planted a kiss. The nickname she understood, but “why the kiss?” “For doing what you were told,” sighed her mistress. And she might have added—and for rescuing me from another rambling and irrational lecture on novice disobedience.⁵

Contrary to Hattenberger's opinion that Cecilia didn't make her novices obey, “She was a strict mistress, but kind about it” was the opinion of Celerina King.⁶ Enjoyable as well, evidently. Cecilia often imitated an ungainly walk or an affected gesture, hoping to eliminate traces of farm girl gait or city mannerisms in her novices.

And since appearances meant so much in the Victorian society that her novices would re-enter as teachers--poise, grooming and the social graces warranted novice attention. They watched Cecilia walk, listened to her hints on keeping neat, being thoughtful of others and aware of the needs of those around them. “Make Sisters welcome, show them where things are,” urged Cecilia. “Leave everything you use clean and ready for the next person . . . keep a black rag at school to take spots off your clothes . . .” Many Sisters recalled Cecilia’s practical hints about small things. She taught them to love God by doing signs of courtesy for others.

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Notes to Chapter 12

1. a) The Stations of the Cross are pictures or representations in sculpture, mosaic and/or paint of 14 scenes of Christ's journey from Pilate's court to his burial in the tomb. They present the suffering and death of Jesus and are usually placed on the inner walls of a Catholic Church at regular intervals around the sides and back from the left side to the right front. Someone making the Stations walks counter clockwise from station to station thinking on the suffering and death of Christ. Originally, the Stations were performed by medieval guilds during Lent on guild house porches around the town square. The townsfolk walked from one stage (station) to another. Medieval guilds also presented plays or scenes from Old and/or New Testament and the lives of saints on wagons which moved from one station or place (usually a crossroad) to another (viz. the shipbuilders did Noah and the Ark; butcher's guild put on Abraham and Isaac). More may be found in internet articles about mystery or miracle plays. The Stations of the Cross are still done in Catholic Churches on Fridays during Lent by a leader walking from one station to another reading short meditations and brief prayers while the people pray along from the pews.

b) Refusing permission to receive Communion was not unusual in the 19th century Catholic Church with its Jansenistic idea of frequent Communion being for the very holy. Denial of the Sacrament was thought to increase respect for its awesomeness as gift to "unworthy humankind." Companion to this idea was a preoccupation with self-denial, sacrifice and hardships as good for the soul. Sanctity was judged by external compliance to law, Rule, schedule, command, or custom.

2. On a visit to the academy in Holden (MO), Cecilia once told the superior to make sure there was plenty on the table for dinner. Since Lent began soon, she asked for a scale to weigh a slice of bread for the cook and the superior to see. One fasting novice who was "seeing visions" was told to eat more or give up becoming a BVM.

3. A group of Sisters at the motherhouse in 1967 who entered between 1900 and 1915 provided a variety of stories about their novitiate. They often interrupted each other and added details, corrected some stories with more informed knowledge etc., until most of them agreed. The spontaneity of such a process resulted in chuckles and laughter followed by more stories—some never told before—making it nearly impossible to identify tellers. Some requested anonymity consequently few are named. How they laughed when everyone knew a story considered a secret kept by a select few!

4. The 9-11 boarding schools: seven in Iowa: 1). St. Frances (Council Bluffs), 2). St. Joseph (Des Moines), 3). St. Agatha (Iowa City), 4).Immaculate Conception Academy (Davenport), 5). Our Lady of the Angels (Clinton), 6). The Mount --Clarke (Dubuque). Two in other mid-west states: 7). St. Cecilia (Holden, MO), 8). Mt. Carmel, first named All Hallows (Wichita, KS) and one west: 9). Mt. St. Gertrude (Boulder,(CO). SJA (13th Street, Dubuque) was a combination boarding & day school for a while {10?) as was St. Joseph's at the prairie motherhouse. (11).

5. Coogan² writes at length about Fr. Hattenberger. The Rev. Philip Laurent, a firm friend of the congregation and of Mother Clarke, and Agatha Hurley, believed Hattenberger thought when he became chaplain he was to take Father Donaghoe's place as Father Superior. Little wonder he gave the Sisters such strange orders to test them. Mother Clarke simply paid no attention to him, but Hattenberger kept thinking he'd become Father Superior one day, and continued to look up what Father Superiors in charge of congregations of women did. Fortunately for the Sisters, the Rule made no provision for Father Superiors. By Rule the Mother Superior must be a BVM Sister.

6. The quote is (#694) Celerina King's opinion of Cecilia as novice mistress. She delivered it from her infirmary bed in 1954 to Doris Walsh, who was a Final Vow Tertian that summer and asked Celerina to talk about her novitiate under Cecilia.

Celerina had been trusted with big jobs. Under Mother Gertrude she oversaw the construction of Philomena Hall, the 1936 addition to the infirmary. This connection to the Round is located between Caritas Center (the newest section) and Marian Hall. Philomena Hall was saved from the 1955 fire which destroyed the Round. Caritas construction covered much of the Round's footprint.

Celerina died April 24, 1959 and experienced the 1955 infirmary fire. Steel fire doors kept it from spreading to Philomena Hall, the addition she built. Imagine her emotions as she watched from a safe distance on the lawn while the flames destroyed the infirmary next door to her room.

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