



Painting of the prairie motherhouse, 1880s. (BVM Archives)

Chapter 13

The Educator and the Novices

During her years with the novices, Cecilia prepared young Sisters for the missions, and gave retreats to postulants, novices and vow Sisters. She kept novice hearts turned towards the real world of poverty, inconvenience and hard work synonymous with a turn-of-the-century parish, convent and school. Gently, she directed all novice eyes toward a generous gift of themselves to Christ and his Church, with the Virgin Mary as model.

Each time Cecilia put on her pink bonnet and pink apron (her fatigues) to walk out with the novices over the hills near the old motherhouse, she taught geology or biology—naming birds, trees, rock specimens, weeds and wild flowers. On their way home she reminded her charges of the diminished woodpile and their opportunity to fill it. The young women planned other ways to please the Sisters, returning with laughter and stories, armloads of wood, baskets of plums, bags of apples and nuts, and bunches of wild flowers.

Cecilia did what she could to provide a stable program of instruction. Novices met with her daily for a half hour of Christian Doctrine. She asked Gertrude if she could keep those with high school diplomas or Normal certificates to teach in the novitiate for a year or two. She herself saw to the training and practice time of musicians.

More often than she liked, Cecilia Dougherty reluctantly helped to pack suitcases and fit black veils instead of white for those “going out on the missions” after only a few months in the novitiate. Mother Clarke herself wrote Bishop Hennessy that her novices were better off learning to teach with a master teacher than working in the barns and fields. She suggested sending them to the schools to learn how to teach rather than keeping them on the motherhouse farm to milk cows.

In state capitals, required courses for teachers increased each year. A better way to educate the postulants and novices must be found soon. When she reached the motherhouse as novice mistress in 1881, Cecilia lobbied Mother and the Council for a Normal school, asking for the only teachers she could expect. Those recovering from illness, those elected to the Council, or those too old for a full day of teaching, would make up her Normal staff.¹

Postulants who entered the community in the 1880s were women of varied experience ranging in age from 15 to 28 or older. Many came with a sixth or eighth grade education, perhaps with an additional few years work experience. At the time, this was considered sufficient schooling for women. Cooking and canning they learned in the kitchens of their family.

Boarding school graduates possessed a solid background in the academics, including some courses of the caliber of a 20th century junior college. Some had simply read widely and studied on their own like Crescentia Markey.² Or like Loyola Rutherford, taught in public schools, run their own or the family business like Mary Clarke and Margaret Mann, or taken correspondence courses like Antonia Durkin. To supply what the novitiate lacked, novices in the early community continued learning under Sisters on the missions. During the last decade of the 19th century the congregation also set up short workshops taught by master teachers on weekends and in the summer to add to the skill and knowledge of Sisters sent to enroll in them.

It was not always hit or miss. BVMs on staff in boarding schools could finish the grades or the academics by attending class with the students under the best teachers in the congregation. As more women entered the novitiate from boarding academies, Cecilia tapped graduates to teach other novices. She kept back as many as she could to give courses at the

motherhouse with varied results. Some novices finished the grades, and worked toward a Normal certificate while at Mt. Carmel.

Much of the impetus for preparing young Sisters came from within the congregation. In 1882, a Course of Study (structured according to the newest division into grades rather than the older division into primary, elementary, upper, high and academics) standardized instruction in all schools taught by the community. The resulting Course of Studies made teacher preparation for any BVM grade anywhere an achievable goal.

The congregation's method of educating novices was not new, rather it closely followed an age-old tradition in the craft guilds. Until 1908, most Sisters went out as novices to an educational apprenticeship under a master teacher. They learned how to teach by observing how the master teacher taught and by teaching under her. After supper, young Sisters studied content and method with a mentor during study hour. A directress of schools, a master teacher responsible for visiting and improving methods and discipline in schools in a geographic area, checked on the results. The BVM Course of Studies provided a list of what to teach, when and how in each grade.³ It made changing Sisters from one grade or school to a different grade or school much easier.

Public school teachers of the time also varied in education and training. Most completed sixth grade; some finished the eighth. A few had added two years of Normal school and/or earned a Normal certificate. Perhaps three in ten, mainly men, graduated from high school. The 19th century in America had as its goal teaching everyone the three Rs, "Readin, Ritin 'N Rithmatic." Many times this took place in a one-room schoolhouse where one teacher covered all subjects for all grades. However, some of these country teachers had gone only as far as eighth grade. Eventually individual states suggested that all grade school teachers have a grade school diploma, then legislated a state certificate. Legislated, yes. Not every teacher or every school board complied. By the 1880s, states desired, but could not yet demand a Normal school certificate from elementary teachers.

What did teachers teach? Whatever the local school board wanted them to. Generally this was satisfied by the three R's. Those who really wanted professional recognition as teachers added the two-year Normal course to a grade school education or worked for a Normal certificate and a

high school diploma. Men usually went on to college and an education in the professions. Women at college were rare to non-existent.

The desire for excellence pushed Cecilia to educate her novices as well as possible before they entered a classroom as teachers. She worked to provide them with the tools to teach well. Often their pupils were children of poor Catholic immigrants. To accomplish student transformation, Cecilia thought a Sister needed to educate herself in college. The way would not be easy but since her life was concentrated on her religious commitment and dedicated to the work of the congregation and the Church her heart could be aimed at such goals.

Time and again Cecilia filled novices with zeal, using her dream of college classrooms filled with women eager to learn and willing to share with other women what they had learned. Because BVMs were teachers, she scanned the horizon for solutions to teacher education. In the early 1890s, she pushed for more courses in the novitiate, but though she had plans to educate her novices, she lacked the power to implement those plans.

When Gertrude Regan's two terms came to a close, the Council drew up a slate of names for Mother and for the Council. A way to keep Mother Gertrude in office was proposed, but squashed. Too many leaders in the community wanted to give the Rule a longer trial. When the houses met and voted this time, the bishop's tally revealed a significant change—the congregation had elected a builder who used not bricks and mortar but information and Sisters with a hunger to learn.⁴

On February 2, 1894, her 56th birthday, Mother Cecilia called her first Council meeting and began a three-year term in office. Around the table sat Loyola Rutherford, Basil Healy, Maurice Duffy, Sebastian Courtney, and Rosalia Ryan. These five master teachers elected Crescentia Markey, secretary; Loyola Rutherford, vice-president, treasurer and motherhouse superior; and Gertrude Regan, novice mistress.

And how did they view the new Mother? According to Lambertina Doran, "There was nothing brilliant or startling in Cecilia's speech, no waste of words, but there was the unmistakable accent of sincerity. The sweet reasonableness of her appeals, the gentleness and charity in her tone, together with her genuine respect for the Sisters, made her become to each a warm, personal friend."⁵

Cecilia brought her “sweet reasonableness and genuine respect for the Sisters” to problems resulting from an addition in membership, an increase in schools staffed by her congregation, and a growing complexity in society itself. A heavy debt lay on the new motherhouse. Though requests for Sisters increased, salaries remained as low as ever because of the 1893 depression. The combination created an economic crisis which Gertrude handled by borrowing and mortgaging.

People, not money, were Cecilia's preferred interest, but she found herself forced to deal with money and debts. But her vision of a Normal school in the novitiate seemed closer. In Basil Healy, Crescentia Markey and Maurice Duffy she recognized a nucleus of educators at the motherhouse who could teach regular classes to novices unless interrupted by a Council meeting or a funeral. With her eyes on a novitiate school, she encouraged Bertrand Foley, president of Mt. St. Joseph, to add college departments to the academy. By 1900, the end of Cecilia's two three-year terms as Mother, The Mount had altered its curriculum to become the first college for women west of the Mississippi.

At last Cecilia had the sought-after Normal school certificate in hand. Novitiate courses could be accredited by Mt. St. Joseph College. The registrar at The Mount would list credits earned by novices in classes at the novitiate, the Mt. Carmel extension. Teachers from The Mount would commute from the College at the north end of Grandview to the motherhouse and Normal school at the south end.

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Notes to Chapter 13

1. Council members like Michael Nihill and Maurice Duffy often taught during their time on the Council. The health of Alexis Butterworth (“from the University in Iowa City” wrote Lambertina Doran in her Notebook) was fragile, but she taught Latin at least two years and perhaps three to the novices.

2. For the majority of women, society held that “higher” education was both unnecessary and beyond their ability. Apparently, Trappist Prior Clement Smyth didn't subscribe to this opinion. After 1846, he taught the Sisters at the boarding school on the prairie, among them Agatha Hurley, Agnes Burke and Michael Nihill. Before novice

Sebastian Courtney went to open the school at Holy Family parish (Chicago) in 1867, a well-taught Mary Michael Nihill tutored her in math during the summer.

3. Older Sisters at the infirmary on the 1954 and 1967 oral history tapes and in unrecorded group sharing said that master teachers also helped novices become part of a convent or mission since they provided individual attention and welcomed the young Sisters into the house. As Sisters received more formal education, this system continued informally. Older, more experienced Sisters and those teaching the same grade, sometimes combined classes and team-taught, helping less experienced Sisters and shared lesson plans. Actually, preparing plans became less of a chore for both. This method continued into the 1960s with the modern Scholastics.

4. Mother Cecilia had been talking about educating novices and new teachers for more than a dozen years. While novice mistress, she worked on the committee that set up the BVM Course of Studies in 1882.

5. Opinion of Lambertina Doran on Mother Cecilia in her Journal. According to Ann Harrington (Creating Community 160,161), Lambertina served as secretary on the Council from 1906-1915 and 1925-1943. As her master's essay, she wrote In the Early Days, the second community history and the first published (1911), republished in 1925. Instead of BVM, the front cover uses the Latin abbreviation BMV, "Beata Maria Virgine"—Latin for "Blessed Virgin Mary."

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