

## Chapter 19

### Gertrude's Brief Time in the Backwater



Not all Gertrude Regan's affectionate and peaceful novice watching prevented one hair-raising night. Her room was on the first floor in the south wing, convenient for her nightly visits to the sick in the infirmary on the first floor of the north wing.<sup>1</sup> The practice rooms for novice musicians ran from east to west along the south side. Her window faced north across from them.

When the BVM officers transferred to the new motherhouse on the bluff above the Mississippi, Gertrude had moved into "D," in the postulant corridor, (now called "letter wing.") "D" was a private room, one of 11 small finished rooms on the first floor under the chapel. It was the only one with a bolt on the inside of the door.

While Gertrude Regan was novice mistress, this room and its locked door saved her life. Crescentia Markey relates the story in her Diary with the finesse of a 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic novelist.

The Diary is handwritten and it will appear in cursive for effect to indicate style of original manuscript.

June 25, 1896.

Last night—at about one o'clock—we were roused from sleep by loud singing, accompanied by the music of a piano. The voice, weird and wild in the silence of the night, was that of a woman and the sound seemed to proceed from one of the music rooms on the first floor.

Immediately, Crescentia woke one of the novices and both descended to the first floor, another novice following. As they passed Gertrude's door, Crescentia tried the knob, found it locked, and called out,

“Mother, are you awake?”

(Recognizing the voice...) Gertrude turned the key and appeared all trembling... She exclaimed, "Oh, Sister, I am so glad you came. I was so frightened." All this time the playing and singing continued.

With a small [kerosene] hand lamp they went down the corridor to the first music room where they found one of the novices singing and playing. When she saw them, she warned, "Go away! Don't come in here! I have a knife and I am going to kill Mother Gertrude. She makes my head ache. My head won't ache after I kill her."

During this commotion, Gertrude had gone to wake Mother Cecilia and now both women, followed by the Council and most of the other Sisters and novices, appeared in the corridor. Two of the Sisters went into the music room and (continued Crescentia):

...their faces became deadly pale when they saw, glittering on the piano, the big, sharp bread knife, the largest and sharpest knife in the house.

Somehow they quieted the girl, removed the knife, and put her to bed. It is doubtful if many others went to bed that night. In a few days her father came for her, though the Sisters were sorry to see her go.

“She had been a good industrious little novice,” wrote Crescentia.<sup>2</sup>

After remarking that it was fortunate Gertrude's door was locked, the narrator ends without mentioning that it was fortunate as well that Gertrude, (who was blamed for the headache) had a door to bolt instead of merely a curtain to pull. The bread knife, the “largest and sharpest knife in the house,” was from that time on locked away securely every night, the Sister breadmaker having this duty as long as bread was made in the bread room and the knife kept handy to slice it.

It is an interesting comment on Gertrude's character that though she faced the assaults of chanceries and rectories, mortgages and debt with equanimity and strength, suddenly waking to wild and eerie singing in the night and finding herself sought by a demented novice with a bread knife, left her trembling. The threat of an unbalanced novice set off her own residue of Celtic imagination and shook her far more than the threat of a bishop. Luckily for her peace of mind, no other incidents comparable in emotion and setting occurred during the rest of her time as novice mistress. If they had, Crescentia Markey surely would have written about them.

On November 15, the Feast of St. Gertrude, the novices put on an entertainment of a different sort for Gertrude—a skit and songs, a traditional feast day celebration.

A few days later, on November 22, another original skit took the stage at one end of the novitiate for Mother Cecilia on her feast—nowhere near as original as the previous drama with the knife and piano.

During Cecilia Dougherty's first term, Gertrude was more involved than at first it seemed, continuing to handle much of the ordinary business of the motherhouse. In fact, she had only been off the Council for six months when she was elected to fill the vacancy left by the death of Rosalia Ryan. In the January 1897 general election, she was voted in as first consultor and reappointed novice mistress in spite of the eerie, midnight piano performance of the unbalanced novice.

Soon after her retirement as Mother, Gertrude had been asked to oversee construction at The Mount. In addition, she was still very involved with the business of the new motherhouse. She continued to handle the motherhouse funds as local treasurer noting monies sent in from community convents and schools. This included music money usually spent for ongoing expenses in motherhouse, novitiate and infirmary. One may wonder how she did it all.

By subtraction rather than addition. Almost all novices were out on the missions learning on the job how to teach and how to live as BVMs. There were few novices left at the motherhouse. Most of Gertrude's contact with these young teachers sent out to the schools came by correspondence. She sent simple letters asking how a novice was, thanking her for gift money, and teasing a little about the empty motherhouse left behind—affectionate, newsy notes.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, she was advising on the building program at Mt. St. Joseph and helping with the money problem at St. Mary High School in Chicago. Money was more than tight at St. Mary—it was non-existent. A story told by Agnese Gibbs, one of the first teachers there, shows that Gertrude Regan was a bit tight herself.

The new Chicago high school had opened in the former tavern in September 1899 as planned, but when the first group of high school teachers moved in, they found no funds even for food. How glad they were to see Mother Cecilia a short time later when she came to look over the school. Gertrude, who had accompanied her, handed Hilary Regan, the superior, a check for \$25.00 for the month's groceries saying as she did so, “And, Thithy dear, you can give it back.”<sup>4</sup> She may not have been kidding.

By Thanksgiving, Cecilia had begun clearing away leftover projects on her desk. Already the instructions for the election of 1900 waited, stacked for mailing. Almost at the end of her second term, Mother Cecilia addressed a final letter to all her BVM Sisters in December 1899, responding to their notes of thanks and their affectionate letters of good-bye.

Dear Sisters,

...I would like to answer each one in particular. Instead of this a few words to all in general may be acceptable, especially as after the second of February, I shall cease to have any special claim on you all except for your affection and your prayers which I hope I may always have.

How much I have to thank you for—your good will, your loyalty, and your generous devotion to the interests of our beloved Congregation. I know all this will be just the same under another Superior, for it was given not to the individual, but to the office...<sup>5</sup>

So Cecilia wrote thanking her Sisters. She knew she had inspired affection and respect during her time as Mother. Her genuine interest in all of the Sisters engaged their loyalty without imprisoning them. That December she may not have known of the planned write-in movement to try to keep her in office for another term. Indeed, her letter to the congregation—especially the last line—shows her building a bridge between her term and that of whoever followed her—almost certainly Gertrude, already nominated and expected to win the election.

Nominations for Mother and the four Consultors had gone out to the schools. The congregation balloted early in January 1900 and Archbishop Hennessy oversaw the counting of the votes—his last time to do so. He since he died two months later, in March. As anticipated, Gertrude Regan returned to office as Mother, though not by a unanimous vote. Also as expected, Cecilia Dougherty moved back onto the Council.

But there is no count available for this election. Nothing appears in either CM or RE except that Gertrude won the election for Mother plus the names of those elected to the Council. The vote count always accompanied the results, but that for 1900 is nowhere to be found.

In March Hennessy died after ordering the burning of his papers, delaying the filing of any protest to Rome by planners of the write-in campaign and discouraging questioning by the planners of the write-in vote for Cecilia, which may have been huge. Others may have wanted to protest the election but were discouraged because of the following: 1) the burning of the bishop's papers including the vote count; and 2) the assignment of a new bishop to the Dubuque Archdiocese in Hennessy's place. But Antonia Durkin never forgot what she called the "stealing" of the election. Only the recollection of an old lady (Antonia) to the young Sister librarian at Clarke college who read to her (Robert Hugh Pendergast) remains of this piece of early BVM politics.<sup>6</sup> Luckily, Robert Hugh shared with Jane Coogan what Antonia told her and Jane included this in her BVM history.

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## Notes to Chapter 19

1. The infirmary was initially on the first floor of the north wing of the motherhouse. It was later transferred to the two top floors (3-4), since medical opinion at the time held that germs traveled upward. Around 1900, installing a dumb waiter allowed the kitchen staff to send trays up from the basement kitchen. The dumb waiter was walled in during the 1980s when the north wing became apartments. Information on the early infirmary came from Sister Mary Frances Rose Urbanowski, private nurse to Mothers Gertrude, Cecilia and Isabella during their time as Mother. Interview 1967 Doris Walsh.

2. Markey Diary BVM Archives.

3. The two letters below are examples of Gertrude's longer letters to novices.

To S.M.Celestina Leslie, 1890

My dear little Sister,

A few words dear is all you're going to get for the lovely letter you wrote me... Reports of yourselves and the schools state you are all doing first class, thank God—May your every effort and act be to promote his honor and glory. Be dear good children, love and serve him [God] generously and all will be well... Love to each dear Sister in the house. I want you all to pray us in good postulants—we have sixteen lovely postulants now—remember to pray for them too. Dear little one, time I should stop. is it not?

Lovingly,  
Your Sister,  
M. Gertrude

To S.M. Justinian McSwiggen,

Many thanks dear child for your kind little present. I think dear Mother Cecilia was pleased as myself with your thoughtful remembrance, as I handed it to her to get medicine for some of our young people, which this hot weather has not made feel the best in the world. I presume this great heat will soon moderate. I hope so as the children who are to begin school on Tuesday would not do much studying. I hope you write to your home thanking them for what you sent me. I will thank them by prayer.

I hope our dear Lord will aid and bless the efforts of you all in your school work. May your every act be for His honor and glory—how I would love to take a bird's eye view of you all in the school surrounded by the children in the various rooms. Tomorrow will be a busy day registering the names.

Don't forget you folks left us an empty house, so you must all help to fill it up again with good postulants—pray for this. God love and bless you all. With a Sister's love to each,

I am your  
S.M. Gertrude

Letters of Mother Gertrude Regan BVM Archives.

4. Story from BVM Agnese Gibbs Crescentia Markey Diary.

5. Letters of Mother Cecilia Dougherty BVM Archives.

6. See Chapter 20, note 5.

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**After the novice frightened Mother Gertrude, the bread knife was locked up securely every night by the Sister baker at Mount Carmel. In the 1940s, Sister Mary Almeda ran the bake house and carried out that duty.**