



Students with flags: St. Mary High, Chicago, WWI
St. Mary High School Archives

Chapter 15

The Wild Idea: St. Mary High, Chicago!

With the help of Mother Cecilia, the educational orbit also shifted in 1897 to a new type of central high school for girls. Opening St. Mary High School in Chicago meant a decided turn away from the boarding school and the select day school. The first of its kind, St. Mary not only changed the way BVM schools operated, it started a national trend toward the large city central high school serving many Catholic grammar schools. For BVMs and most congregations, it meant closing out parish high school extensions.

For years Chicago grade schools staffed by religious congregations prepared girls for Chicago Normal, the public school center for teacher training, by adding an academic course to parish grammar schools. Except for a deficiency in language and science, this worked well enough as a stopgap, but not as a continued plan. When Chicago Normal changed its entrance requirements to include science and foreign language, the BVM congregation had too few language or science teachers to supply every parish.



Freshmen, St. Mary, 1899, with Hilary O'Regan at door.
St. Mary High School Archives

However, one central high school, using personnel at a central location could offer classes for girls from many parishes. In 1896, this revolutionary concept from Hilary O'Regan, superior at Holy Family, appealed to Mother Cecilia. Schools like boarding schools were not the solution for big city students from low-income families. And without required courses, parish schools offered no competition to the public school system. They could not hope to hold girls who aimed at certificates from Chicago Normal to qualify for a public school positions.

Mother Cecilia embraced the central high; so did her Council.¹ As for money, there was none. The entire congregation must help finance starting this school, with the help of feeder parishes and the cooperation of pastors asked to close academic sections presently tacked on to parish schools. Half a century later, Mary Agnese Gibbs, one of the early St. Mary teachers cheerfully admitted, "The idea sounded wild to the Council!"² However, since Curran of Holy Family and Muldoon of St. Charles, two south side pastors with clout, supported the school, the Council approved it on a trial basis. With Muldoon's help, the new central high school rented temporary

quarters a block north of St. Charles church, his parish, an area central to the south loop and to nearby south and west side parishes.³

How could the BVM congregation afford to set up such a school? With careful planning. First, Cecilia approached the pastors of parishes affected. Calling a meeting with a dozen of them, she explained the advantages of a central high school for girls. When she pointed out that each year they could drop the expense of one grade of the parish academic section and its teachers, pastors turned enthusiastic. “Go ahead,” they urged. Counting on their support, mainly verbal at first, in 1899 the BVM community rented a two-storey building on Taylor, a block north of St. Charles grade school. It was big and dirty and had been a saloon. When the new St. Mary faculty saw it, they immediately named it “the Flats.”⁴

Somehow school had to open that September with the freshman homeroom in the ex-saloon. Nearby parishes had already phased out freshman classes. For a week in August, two dozen younger Sisters recruited by Hilary from Holy Family, walked two miles from Roosevelt and May to Taylor and Cypress (Hoyne) to scrub decades of dirt and grime out of the saloon. By the end of the week, the space looked clean and tidy—walls washed and repainted, floor scrubbed almost white, then varnished and waxed, blackboards painted on the side of the room, new erasers, new chalk. Not a whiff of stale beer!

Filled with over 70 desks containing as many girls, St. Mary began as scheduled in September 1899. Acknowledging its tag as an experiment and restricting enrollment to freshmen, it had four years to prove itself. The handpicked faculty under Hilary believed it easier to establish high standards if students represented a planned four-year program. Each year for the next four years, parishes would drop the first year at participating parish highs and add it to St. Mary as the new freshman class.

Rent for the building came to \$100 a month. With tuition at \$1.00/girl/month, even the unexpectedly high enrollment of 72 fell short of meeting the rent total. Music money from private lessons barely covered food and supplies. Money for fuel came from Mt. Carmel and the generous purses of Muldoon and Curran. Others had not as yet contributed to the pot, but planned to. In the meantime, pastors liked having the yearly salary for one Sister from the closed academic section resting in their bank accounts.

In October, after a meeting with pastors suggesting they allow parish fundraisers for St. Mary, Mother Cecilia wrote all BVM schools in the country asking for a benefit or other entertainment for the new high school. In addition, her letter requested each superior for three or four scholarships of \$100. The 72 enrolled in the first year clearly indicated that the school was needed and would succeed, but it must build and soon.⁵

Financing a new building required more than temporary plans. Cecilia asked each BVM mission to raise at least \$200 a year until the proposed building was paid for. She asked for prayers, novenas, and cooperation. St. Mary was low budget, a shoestring operation. Outside of the congregation, so far only Curran of Holy Family and Muldoon of St. Charles had helped tie the laces.⁶

In December, one more time before the end of her term, Cecilia turned again to the pastors whose parishes benefited from St. Mary. Would they think of some way to aid the school with more than good wishes? The BVM community was already heavily in debt and could not shoulder the added expense of constructing the building needed for the next year. It was impossible to raise tuition above a dollar a month. They had chosen blue-collar families for the experiment to improve job potential in the parishes, but alone the Sisters could not maintain such a school.

Some pastors responded with benefits and outright gifts, but most of the burden of constructing and



**St. Mary High, Chicago;
auditorium doors, about 1900**
St. Mary High School Archives

maintaining the new St. Mary High School was carried by the BVMs. The most constant friend of the project in those first slim days was the new bishop of Rockford, Peter J. Muldoon, pastor of St. Charles church. When checks from Mt. Carmel were late and laborers threatened to quit, Muldoon paid them. Finally, in 1900, Mother Gertrude asked him to oversee the construction entirely, promising to pay him back for whatever he spent.⁷

As expected, the school succeeded academically. It offered a two-year preparatory course for Normal, the Chicago training school for public school teachers. Later this program changed to a two-year commercial course and a four-year academic course. Year after year, St. Mary graduates topped the list at Normal school exams.⁸ St. Mary, the first central Catholic high school financed entirely by the religious who ran it, continued solvent, and other religious congregations followed suit.

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Notes to Chapter 15

1. Cecilia's 1894 Council:

Basil Healy: superior at St. Bridget, Chicago, in 1880; and superior of a new grade school in Rock Island in 1881. No high school experience.

Sebastian Courtney: superior, St. Bridget, Chicago, 1876-80; opened St. Mary, Sioux City, in 1881; became ill and was brought back to the prairie motherhouse in 1885; member of Council, 1891- 93. No high school experience.

Maurice Duffy: Mt. St. Joseph teacher; helped pick the site for that school in 1879 and moved with the boarders from 13th St. to Mt. St. Joseph (Clarke College) in 1881; first superior in San Francisco, 1888; nominated for Mother, 1888.

Loyola Rutherford: before entering the community, taught high school in Muscatine (IA) public schools; superior at Annunciation and St. Pius (Chicago) and at SJA (13th St., Dubuque); assistant to Cecilia and general treasurer; favorable to St. Mary proposal. Coogan² 270.

Rosalia Ryan, Councilor 1894; died 1895. August 1895, the Council elected Gertrude Regan to fill out Rosalia's term.

2. SM Agnese Gibbs may be mistaken about the Council's reaction. As far back as 1890, Mother Gertrude purchased six lots in Chicago for a "future high school." The Council had been thinking of it as well for a few years before that. Cecilia was a member

of that Council as was Agatha Hurley. Mother Cecilia's November 21, 1897 letter to the Chicago pastors indicates the Council had discussed the idea before 1899.

Letter from Mother Cecilia to the Pastors of St. Mary feeder schools:

For some years we have been considering the project of a Catholic high school for girls in the City of Chicago. We are inclined to think the time is now ripe for such a work, but before entering on this important business, we feel that we ought to consult with those interested in our schools and competent to afford us wise counsel.

May we infringe upon your charity and good will by requesting you to meet us on Monday, 28th inst. at 3 pm, at St. Charles school, 12th (Roosevelt) and Cypress (Hoyne) streets, to discuss the advisability of such a step and the proper location for such a school? Please favor us by considering this subject and by being present at the meeting. The above project has the approval of the most Reverend Archbishop (Quigley).

Letter in the BVM Archives, also quoted in Coogan² 269.

3. Feeder parishes: Holy Family, St. Charles, Blessed Sacrament, Sacred Heart, St. Pius, St. Agatha, St. Bridget, Annunciation and St. Jarlath. Enrollment at St. Mary was open to girls from all feeder parishes; some from other parishes also registered.

Jane Coogan writes "... the plan of a central high school for girls supported by a religious congregation was without precedent in the entire country." According to Coogan, St. Mary's nearest rival for the title of first—a Philadelphia central high for girls, opened in 1912. Coogan² 270, 279 n22 .

4. Letter: Oct. 17, 1935. From Hilary O'Regan to Realmo Sullivan, treasurer:

In September 1899, our Sainted Mother Cecilia had the courage and generosity to take up a burden that a score or more of Rev. Pastors feared to undertake and St. Mary had its beginning in a rented building at Taylor and Cypress [Hoyne]. Registration of 72—faculty of three: SM Columba, St. James, Hilary; Aquilina, cook.

With all its difficulties, financial and otherwise, this was a happy year. The Dominican Sisters and other communities were as well pleased as our own to have somewhere to send their girls—so the success was not entirely due to our efforts. On Aug. 28th we moved into the "flats", and imagine the succession of rapid movements that enabled us to open school the first week in September.

5. Sept. 29th, Rev P.J. Muldoon offered the first Mass in St. Mary's on the little wooden altar still used (1935) in the auditorium. Oct. 1, Mother Cecilia and S.M. Loyola visited us and were so well pleased with our girls that they said "the good work must go on." Hilary O'Regan St. Mary Annals in St. Mary file BVM Archives.

6. Finding money for St. Mary High School proved good practice for two more of the same: The Immaculata High School during the 1920s and Mundelein college built during the Depression of 1929.

7. Hilary O'Regan St. Mary High School folder BVM Archives.

"When Mother Gertrude succeeded Mother Cecilia in 1900, she at once proceeded to carry out the work. Rev. Father Muldoon, at Mother Gertrude's request, took up the business management, purchased the property, supervised the building, and to accomplish this, even postponed his visit to Rome for six months. He certainly deserves honorable mention for this and for many other benefits conferred on St. Mary's. My! How much he respected Mother Gertrude. The first building, basement and two-storeys cost \$22,000. Ground was first broken July 2, 1900, and the school was ready for occupancy Nov. 21st... Put on fourth storey in 1903. Second building—ground purchased in S.M. Crescentia's time (as principal), and the lots to the north in S.M. Clemenza's. Crescentia Markey left St. Mary to become Cecilia's Council Secretary. She also taught Christian Doctrine ...to the novices as part of the Normal curriculum in the novitiate."

8. So many St. Mary students applied for registration that Chicago Normal ruled they had to take entrance exams. Bishop Muldoon, hearing of the ruling, objected to the exams being given only to St. Mary students. Muldoon is reported as saying the St. Mary girls would take the entrance tests **IF** every one applying for entrance also had to take them. As a result, the exams, designed to limit the number of girls from St. Mary attending Normal, resulted instead in their being valued as the best prepared students in the city. See Coogan2 269-274.

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