

Chapter 17



Introducing the Amazing Summer Institutes

The problem of summer school for Sisters presented more difficulty than merely securing tuition or finding a school and a program. Where would Sisters find the TIME? Summer was short. Vacation began in the last week of June! Parish schools started in August, a week ahead of public schools. BVM Sisters were due in their classrooms a week before that.

For summer study? Possible! There were plenty of empty boarding schools like Immaculate Conception (Davenport) or St. Francis (Council Bluffs), SJA (Dubuque). Sr. Joseph (Des Moines) or St. Gertrude (Boulder). Not a problem!

It was the bishops themselves who created the bottleneck—the same men who wanted top-notch teachers in all schools in their dioceses. Could Sisters go to state universities—the few who allowed women to enroll? Of course not!!! Most bishops objected to any such idea. Too dangerous for a woman’s weak intellect—or was it her morals? Of course, bishops opposed Sisters enrolling in any secular university as a threat to faith and a scandal. The real problem appeared to be social regulations, traditions, labels for women: smoke and mirrors.

What about a Catholic college during a few weeks in the summer? What an idea! Rome forbade priests to teach women. And for good reason! Teaching women put priests at risk—a threat to their morality. Remember Abelard and Heloise! Why? because Abelard (not a priest, but a teacher—the teacher of beautiful teen Heloise) fell in love with his pupil. She was beautiful and smart and finally more learned than he. No wonder no Catholic university allowed women in its classes! Sisters = women. Catch 22! No getting around it.

“The state!” replied a large balding pastor. “Sisters have to have college degrees!”

(Loose interpretation: “State Departments of Education will be demanding degrees for teachers of Catholic grade and high schools and we can’t afford to hire men with degrees! How can we educate Sisters fast?”)

“Let them go to Catholic Colleges in summer to get degrees quickly. Then they can teach each other,” said the bishop, summing it up. “Yes indeed!” a priest seriously proposed, “Sisters can use universities when the young men are on vacation and the grounds are empty.”

“Hear! Hear! “Good idea!” Male voices rose with excitement. “Now we’re getting somewhere!” “Yes! Yes!” Voices of agreement mingled and subsided.

Meanwhile, BVM weekend and four-day religion workshops in Chicago began quietly as Crescentia’s Summer Institutes! This self-educated (she read_widely!) secretary of Cecilia’s Council set up short



Science Laboratory, Immaculate Conception Academy, Davenport, 1890
BVM Archives

periods of input and discussion in religion to be planned, taught and run by BVM master teachers. The first Chicago Institute opened in 1897 and involved almost all Chicago convents. As a matter of fact, there is written proof for the religion workshops. For most BVMs the Institutes were stopgaps, not solutions. Seeking a do-able alternative to use for novice

education, Cecilia Dougherty (as mistress and later as Mother) kept the few postulants who entered with credits or college and/or Normal certificates whenever she could capture them for her novitiate Normal school. Learning in Council Bluffs from Antonia Durkin's method of accumulating credits, Cecilia encouraged other Sisters to enroll in correspondence courses at state universities under their family names *a la Antonia*.¹ Doing so avoided all objections of bishops about male teachers and skirted any discussion of classes with men.

Elected to a second three-year term as Mother in January 1897, Cecilia immediately introduced master teacher Hilary O'Regan's summer institute to Chicago BVMs. A general preparation preceded the institute. A committee of superiors including Crescentia and headed by Hilary, met at Holy Family to plan the five days of lectures and discussions: lectures in the morning and small group discussions (by subject/grade) in the afternoon.

Since Sisters moved for the week to a convent hosting their chosen topic, a problem arose. "Which superior do I obey during summer school—my own? or the superior of the house I stay in?" asked Sisters. They were given the easiest answer in a letter from the planners: "Sisters who study are subject to the superior of the house in which they stay." (See Chicago summer school regulations 1897).

The Chicago Institute proved a decided success. A letter setting up the second Chicago summer institute and introducing a similar program at The Mount (Clarke) in Dubuque mentioned the "good spirit of last year's meeting in Chicago." In April 1898, encouraged by the Institute's continued popularity, Mother Cecilia announced a Dubuque institute at The Mount from July 18-22. Lacking Chicago's many convents, The Mount was limited by space to Sisters in the area and those in the August retreat.

By 1899, teachers' institutes were "in." A May 1899 communiqué called for superiors to meet as usual at St. Aloysius convent (Holy Family) in Chicago to plan the regular institute under Hilary O'Regan, now superior at the new St. Mary High School. After St. Mary moved into its new building in 1900, the Chicago Institute assembled there in summer. (By 1918, Chicago BVMs had developed a series of quarterly meetings as well).

Plans for the various institutes allowed for considerable variety depending on the location and number of Sisters involved. Western Iowa and Nebraska assembled at St. Francis Academy (Council Bluffs) for the

meeting and the retreat following it. Antonia Durkin invited willing Creighton Jesuits from across the Missouri river in Omaha for institute classes and the retreat—scheduling both for late July. A win/win situation! Jesuits soon became supporters of higher education for Sisters as they began to see the problem. Their lectures allowed Sisters to widen course content and gain confidence in themselves as thinkers.

In most of their boarding schools, “Operation Shoestring” invited Sisters to become Sister-scholars during late June into July and early August. Sites for summer study continued to develop. Southern Iowa



Art department, The Mount
Clarke Lives p. 37

gathered at OLA (Clinton), ICA (Davenport), or SJA (Des Moines)²—three large BVM boarding schools. Sometimes classes spilled over into the school and convent in Muscatine (IA).

Artists, musicians and Sisters still finishing high school or the grades filled the dorms and corridors of Mt. Carmel,

Wichita (KS). Musicians, speech and drama teachers also gravitated toward ICA or OLA where there were pianos, harps, violins, flutes, and accomplished BVM musicians and dramatists on the staff. Some artists and musicians headed for Des Moines or The Mount (Dubuque)—and found a new group gathered there: Sisters taking college courses for a bachelor’s degree. Meanwhile, two dozen Northern Californians treated study time more creatively, exchanging ideas while vacationing together in the mountains or spending a week in the wine country north of San Francisco.

These measures, obviously temporary, were not a solution. Educating women for the schools of the future meant that their teachers must have real degrees—diplomas, pieces of paper in addition to the knowledge and how to pass it on. That meant a BS, BA, MA or a PhD.³ They needed permits, a license to drive the educational freeways and to take other women along. As matters developed, during her 3rd and 4th terms as Mother (1906-12), Cecilia not only made her point to the men at Catholic U., but sent BVMs for

degrees in the face of opposition within her own congregation and despite the shortage of money.⁴

It was 1911 before Mother Cecilia managed to break the barrier at Catholic U. (Washington, DC), and send six Sisters there for advanced study. Jesuit colleges opened in the summer for Sisters around 1911 and eventually the Jesuits and other orders of men allowed Sisters and then lay women to work for degrees during the academic year as well.

, , ,

Notes to Chapter 17

1. Antonia Durkin, using her family name, took correspondence courses from the University of Nebraska while she was principal at St. Francis Boarding and Day School, Council Bluffs. In 1910, when Antonia went to Catholic U., these courses were transferred to Catholic U. so that she received her BA after only two summers and two semesters. Adding a second year of classes earned her an MA.

2. These abbreviations were common at the turn of the 19th century. Everyone called Immaculate Conception Academy, Davenport, ICA; Our Lady of Angels, Clinton, OLA; St. Joseph Academy, Des Moines, SJA. To avoid confusion, St. Joseph Academy Dubuque became “13th Street,” and Mount St. Joseph, “The Mount.” The latter renamed Clarke College grew into Clarke University by 2010.

3. BVM Joseph Therese Geiger would be the first woman admitted to doctoral studies at Catholic U. (Coogan2 428, 429, 463) These few pages in Jane Coogan tell the story of Joseph Therese and her quest for a science degree—no easy thing. Joseph Therese had to follow special rules for Sisters and women—doing all her lab work at night or on holidays when the lab was empty. She had a Sister companion, generous BVM friends who took turns going with her, meanwhile taking a few classes as well.

4. Not only was money an objection, but some Sisters complained that the schools could not do without Sisters who were sent to study during the school year. Every new direction attracts a crowd of resisters to change. According to the group of older Sisters at the motherhouse and infirmary in 1967, sending Sisters on to study met with vocal opposition. Gradually it became evident that the congregation had led once more in the field of education. Mother Cecilia and her corps of educators had broken through a barrier to the education of Sisters and of women. They did it using the help of

educators at Catholic U., the Jesuits at Loyola, Creighton, Marquette, and St. Louis universities, the Vincentians at DePaul and finally with the cooperation of universities and colleges across the U.S. and Canada. Catholic universities opened their classrooms during summer and on weekends during the year. More and more schools of higher education allowed women to attend classes during the entire year. Yet the truth is, as BVM President Joan Doyle put it so succinctly, “We did it ourselves!”

Comment: We are again reminded of the hurdles Sisters jumped to educate themselves! Their track records are remarkable especially since many began with a grade school diploma, finished high school while teaching in the grades, and earned a bachelor’s degree in summer school and/or by correspondence. When Catholic colleges and universities opened up for women, many Sisters added one or more master’s degrees! Some who went on for doctoral work later used their PhDs in BVM colleges helping educate other women.

, , ,



Study Hall, The Mount, Dubuque

Clarke Lives p. 37