



Chapter 20

The Delicate Art of Juggling Funds

When Mother Gertrude returned to office in 1900, she and the Council approved and supported two building projects: St. Mary High School (Chicago) and St. Joseph Academy (13th Street. Dubuque). Both schools needed additional space.

St. Mary, the new central high school for girls, had opened the September before in the converted saloon, and already survived a shaky year of deficit spending under Hilary O'Regan.¹ Parish donations in uncertain amounts and music money helped support the school. Grocery money came from Mt. Carmel as did funds for heat. Urged on by the unwavering determination of Hilary Regan, principal of St. Mary, and the applause and approval of Cecilia Dougherty, BVM schools all over the country gave benefits, raffles, shows and entertainments. They sold candy to send money to St. Mary to support its continued existence to educate Chicago inner city girls from blue collar families.

Luckily, the BVM venture was such an educational success that construction of a new building for St. Mary, the first congregation owned and operated [O&O] central high school for girls in the nation became a high priority. Spring registrations indicated that the initial freshman class of 72 would be joined by an even larger group of new freshmen. The former saloon could not hold them all and was out of the question for a third year.

On April 2, Gertrude and Gonzaga (her vicar and VP) traveled to Chicago to see about bids for the new building. To meet the September deadline, the congregation must choose a contractor by April 19. With the figures in front of them and everyone present, the Council voted to “build and equip a high school on the corner of Ashland and Cypress (Hoyne), the building to face Cypress and the cost not to exceed \$20,000.”²

On the same day, the intrepid Gertrude proposed a second new building. SJA, (13th Street Dubuque) was overcrowded and had waited two years for additional space. The Council agreed to erect a “three storey brick building with the assembly hall on the top floor, the cost not to exceed \$24,000.

St. Joseph Academy Day School on 13th and Main in 1901.



BVM teachers used the Wellington Mansion (columns) as their convent. The new school building “with the assembly hall on the top floor,” sat next to a small mansion to its left which provided rooms for boarders until they could be moved to The Mount (Clarke) on Seminary,

Since Cecilia had been more interested in retiring old mortgages than in contracting new ones, Gertrude possessed a small bank account and a workable credit rating—a luxury she seldom had.

Ecclesiastical pressure to put most community energy (and funds) into the Dubuque diocese eased a bit with the death of Archbishop John Hennessy in March 1900. The new bishop, John J. Keane, former rector of Catholic U., himself an educator, understood the aims of the congregation and encouraged BVM Administrator Bertrand Foley to add college courses to Mt. St. Joseph. By 1903, The Mount had educated enough Sisters for its faculty to add a college curriculum to the regular academy courses.

Indicating a change in Council thinking in 1900, short supply and increased demand urged the Council to reexamine the use of teachers in small high schools. Faced with the demand for additional high school teachers for the second-year class at St. Mary and for the growth at St. Joseph (Dubuque), the consultors agreed that Gertrude try to close small parish high schools. The BVM congregation needed its teachers. Maturing plans for college classes at Mt. St. Joseph would skim off the top layer of high school Sisters studying for degrees.

When the pastor of Sacred Heart, Davenport protested the phase-out of grades 9-12 in his parish school, Gertrude wrote him that “pastors in large cities preferred to keep parochial grade schools distinct and prepare the pupils for some central academy or school.”⁴ Her statement caught him neatly on the prongs of pride in Davenport and the education program in his diocese. Convinced the central high school must replace small parish high schools which were limited by available courses and teachers, Gertrude used the same argument with variations in the Chicago area.

However, Gertrude did not yet see that boarding schools, though better able to maintain high educational standards, could be equally wasteful of teachers. Movement away from the boarding academy would come through Cecilia, as had the move toward the central high school. In fact, Mother Gertrude's next action indicates a difference in vision between Cecilia and herself. Gertrude renewed support of building programs for boarding schools in Wichita, Des Moines, Council Bluffs, and Boulder—schools Cecilia had refused permission to expand a year or two before—and asked for a Council vote on the boarding school additions when Cecilia and

Agatha [both central high rather than boarding school supporters] were absent from the Council meeting(CM).

Then the depleted Council voted in replacements for the missing Cecilia and Agatha. Did Gertrude even suspect this vote had widened a crack that might split the congregation? It seems not. Immediately after the February installation of new officers, she had sent Cecilia to teach music at ICA. Cecilia supporters were outraged. Only the good will and commitment of Cecilia herself prevented the threat of withdrawal from over a third of the congregation.⁵ Why should such a small act cause such an inflated reaction? From this distance in time it's hard to see.

An analysis of Gertrude's action indicates that she was not a long-range planner, but rather geared her decisions to the demands of the moment. When she needed teachers for an expanding Chicago central high, she moved to close small parish high schools. When new schools in Chicago required teachers, she sent letters warning pastors who had not kept up their schools or had provided no salary to the Sisters that she intended to withdraw. Priests who had neglected school buildings began to paint and plaster. Pastors who had "forgotten" to pay the Sisters made hasty trips to Mt. Carmel to "make arrangements."

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Notes to Chapter 20

1. Sister Mary Hilary O'Regan, BVM, was superior and principal at Holy Family school in Chicago for three years before she became principal at the new St. Mary High School. Holy Family school happened to be one of those BVM parish schools with high school courses added on. Father Curran, SJ, the pastor, encouraged Hilary to propose the central school; Father Muldoon, whose school it would be nearby, gave support St. Mary.

Considering that St. Mary eliminated the salaries of teachers for the added high school departments in all parishes it drew from, the BVMs might have expected steady support in the form of donations equivalent to the salaries from these parishes. Unfortunately, Chicago pastors generally did not follow this line of reasoning. They banked the money saved for their parishes.² St. Mary operated as a central high school supported by the efforts of BVMs nationwide. Pastors of feeder schools gave permission for their BVM staff to put on benefits for St. Mary. Scholarships from the congregation's

grade schools all over the U.S. and money from benefactors kept St. Mary alive and tuition stayed within reach of south and west side Chicago working class families.

In fact, St. Mary enjoyed an enviable record. So well trained were its graduates from the two-year commercial section that businessmen phoned the head of that department directly for secretaries to interview when they needed a replacement. The high school department was equally successful. Half the principals in the Chicago Public Schools during the 1930s were St. Mary graduates who had finished at Chicago Normal during the early 20th century.

3. In 1895, the Congregation advertised St. Joseph Academy on 13th and Main for sale. It was housed in a corner mansion at the time. No acceptable offer appeared so the school remained open, then the enrollment rapidly increased until the need for classrooms became acute. Since many BVM high schools began in old mansions, the assembly hall mimicked the placement of the ballroom on the top floor. Sports for girls were not a big consideration, but drama and music were. The top floor assembly hall located the noise at the top where it bothered fewer classes and was easier to supervise.

4. Mother Gertrude's letters 1900-01. BVM Archives.

5. The tradition on the near split and the existence of factions supporting one or the other of the two Mothers has been persistent. The vote count for the 1900 election is missing. Hennessy died in March and ordered his papers burned. The election vote too?

Did enough write-ins elect Cecilia, and did Hennessy declare them invalid since she lacked the interim demanded by the Rule? When Cecilia had the necessary interim years in 1903, the number of "write-in" votes counted for Cecilia in that election, indicates a strong move to return her as Mother. Of 590 votes cast, though her name had not been placed in nomination, Cecilia received 224 write-in votes, 40% of the count. Antonia Durkin often said when that the election of 1900 was won by "skullduggery."

Cecilia's Davenport experience and what she learned in Council Bluffs led to the opening of Universities to all Sisters and to all women for real degrees when Catholic U. opened its classrooms to Sisters in 1910. The walls around the citadels of education had been breached. There were women in the club at last--reading, studying, writing, correcting the mistakes of the writers of history—men who had left women out of the equations and taken them out of their place in history. Because of a missing interim, Cecilia lost an election but learned to broker higher education for Sisters. At last "The world, it was a-changin'."

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