

Chapter 33

Fire and Earthquake

“We have not heard from San Francisco!” RE, April 19, 1906



1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire from Van Ness Street
San Francisco Public Library Photo Archives.

Financially, Mother Gertrude left community affairs in good order in 1906. Only a few building projects remained undecided. She sold the lots in Cascade to the pastor, got approval for new additions to academies in Des

Moines, Davenport, and Wichita, opened St. Jerome parish school on the north side of Chicago, and promised Sisters for Help of Christians, (Chicago) and St. Vincent (Kansas City).

Mother and the Council accepted Loyola Rutherford's proposal to buy the 24 lots adjoining Mt. St. Gertrude Academy, Boulder, a purchase providing a square block of campus around the school. Besides encouraging the newest addition to a growing St. Mary High School, Gertrude asked Bishop Muldoon to acquire two adjoining lots for future expansion. Construction had begun on the high school's second building and the down payment for the lots was already in the bank.

Mother Gertrude gave no indication she intended to retire from the central government. Since her name appeared among the candidates for the Council, her letter on the 1906 elections and the enclosed list of nominees hinted at just the opposite. Before the voting, superiors read the nominees aloud to the Sisters assembled in the community room, followed by the

instructions for the general election. Most Sisters thought the voting completely predictable, expecting Cecilia to return as Mother.

When John J. Keane, the new archbishop of Dubuque, counted votes in January 1906, he tallied a large majority for Mother Cecilia Dougherty, recalling her from her “exile among the Bluffers,” as her adherents called her three years in Council Bluffs. Gertrude was elected first consultor with 500 votes. Cecilia garnered all but 46 of the 604 votes cast for Mother General. By coincidence, there were just 46 votes from the Mt. Carmel motherhouse in the 1906 elections.

Cecilia's reaction to being Mother again surfaces in a brief letter to a BVM friend, ICA artist Blanche Fosselman, written from the Bluffs a week before Cecilia assumed office.

My very dear Child

I'm three days trying to get to you—and here I am yet. Getting ready to “change my quarters” again is not an enjoyable situation but—thy will, my God, not mine. I have longed to tell you, Child, how much I like the Benediction Vail (sic) you painted for us “Bluffers.”



1906 Van Ness Avenue and St. Brigid Church after the earthquake
San Francisco Public Library Photo Archives.

No one imagined the initial quiet of Cecilia Dougherty's first months in office was a relative calm—ending soon and violently! March passed without incident and Lent moved placidly toward Easter. Then, at 5:13 on the morning of April 18, 1906, the San Francisco earthquake hit—a type of quake called a “twister”—turning the cupola on the house across the street from St. Brigid’s convent from front to back.

While the BVMs in San Francisco helped with the injured in the Mechanic's Building until it caught fire, then walked to the chaplain's rock

house in the Praesidio, Lambertina Doran wrote four terse sentences in RE. “Earthquake in San Francisco. Great losses. We are anxious about our Sisters. No telegraphy communication!”¹

Much of San Francisco lay in ashes by the time the last sentence dried on the page. A series of lesser shocks (52 in two weeks) cracked chimneys, foundations, and water mains, causing a fire that only dynamiting finally stopped. The City was under martial law, most of its population in tents at the Praesidio—the army base on the Bay. Told to write messages on any scraps of paper and address them to relatives, people sent notes on the margins of ragged newspapers, on stained butcher paper and backs of envelopes.



Tent city, Praesidium, San Francisco Bay
Internet

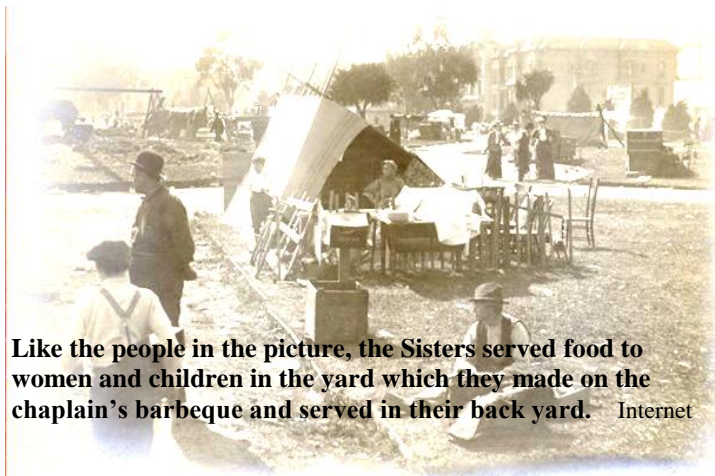
Out at “tent city” in the Praesidio, the Sisters went from tent to tent inviting those without stoves to come eat in the yard of the chaplain's rock house and gathering up all available children for tent school.

“When a boy tired of the lesson, he ducked out under the flap with a cheerful, ‘Bye, Stir. See ya tamarra,’ ” recalled the voice of BVM Myra Liddle on one of the tapes in the Archives. “We didn't keep roll,” she chuckled. “How do you keep a boy in a tent?”²

Mother Cecilia wrote on April 22, four days after the quake, “We are in dreadful suspense here about our California Sisters. Not one word can we get to them or from them...S.M. Clement’s friends in The City (what the natives called San Francisco) phoned us. No word yet from our Sisters.” (RE, April 23).

No wonder there had been no word! “At the Praesidio, the Sisters were going from morning to night,” Robertine Welch’s voice lifted in joy at

the inner pictures of her memories.³ According to Robertine, between daytime tent school and night prayer meetings, the Sisters cut up chunks of beef and cooked stew on the outdoor pit in two large dishpans. All day long they served it up with bread and butter, milk or coffee to any mothers and children who came—after each shift rolling up newspapers spread on the tables as tablecloths.



Like the people in the picture, the Sisters served food to women and children in the yard which they made on the chaplain's barbeque and served in their back yard. Internet

Barges brought supplies daily into The City from towns along the coast until the twisted railway tracks could be laid again. On one of these barges crossing the Bay came Basil Healy, superior of Petaluma. Walking through the ruined streets to the Praesidio,

she feared all the way what condition she would find the Sisters in. Word had it that all in their district had died. Imagine her relief when she saw the group in rumped black habits, short veils and makeshift headdress teaching children in tents and ladling out stew next to the barbecue pit in the chaplain's yard!

The rock house inhabitants greeted Basil and her basket of food gratefully, then treated her to a dish of "Earthquake Stew." As a result of Basil's visit, Lambertina Doran wrote with relief on April 24th—"Message from Petaluma today. All ours in San Francisco and Petaluma safe. Sending circular letter for relief fund for all suffering in San Francisco." A May RE note added that the Sisters took refuge in the Praesidio and received rations like all the other victims. No mention of the stew kitchen, tent school, long wait in line for provisions, or even a hint of the evening prayer meetings.⁴

Reports in newspapers must have been especially lurid. By May 9th, stories of continued quakes caused Cecilia to think of San Francisco as irreparably damaged and she prepared to shift the St. Brigid Sisters to a new parochial school in St. Louis near the university. Accordingly, she wrote the Rev. W.B. Rogers, SJ, president of St. Louis University, that she would tell him in 10 days whether she could send Sisters to the pastor, Jesuit Father H.

Bronsgest, for the St. Francis Xavier parish school. If the San Francisco Sisters returned to Mt. Carmel, it was possible.

When five of the Sisters at St. Brigid admitted that the continual tremors made them too nervous to stay any longer, Cecilia accepted the St. Louis school and called the five home to Mt. Carmel. The remaining 10 at St. Brigid moved back into their convent on the top floor of the school to clean up the mess. As they gazed at a first floor jumble of books and desks,



Army lean-to as temporary housing
Internet article. 1906 San Francisco quake.

the voice of their Sister cook drifted down to them from the convent kitchen. Finding the mush, coffee, and water still on the stove, she remarked cheerfully, “Well, I don't have much to do. There's the breakfast!”⁵

Unlike the Sister cook, San Franciscans had plenty to do to rebuild. Nothing could be seen from Van Ness Avenue to the Bay but blackened chimneys left from the fire. After cleaning up the lower floors of their school and convent, the Sisters opened school with whatever children showed up, most of them from “the camps.” Many of these camp children were tough,

originally from the burned out Mission district, but they had enjoyed tent school so they came to “da Sistuhs” school. Then cholera broke out and school closed for good that year. When city inspectors condemned the top floor convent, the Sisters moved down to the schoolroom floors until the parish could build a convent for them.⁶

In Dubuque, Mother Cecilia waited for more to come back from San Francisco, but none did. The following September, St. Brigid's opened full

capacity and so did the new St. Louis school with Consultor Seraphina Short as superior. Cecilia Dougherty's letter to St. Francis Xavier convent, the St. Louis house, gives a good picture of her interest in this latest mission. Cecilia is #86. Seraphina, #83, is in her set. They entered together. The letter is a good example of Cecilia's habit of underlining throughout her correspondence.

To S.M.Seraphina [Short], superior in St. Louis, MO.

My Dear Sister,

How welcome your letter was! And how eagerly looked for by us all! I was actually pestered with questions such as—Did you hear from St. Louis yet? Any word from Seraphina yet?" and the answer each time was, "Never a word, the mean things!" 8 pm—Back again, after entertaining Archbishop Kain (sic) and Bishop Garrigan. Mother [Gertrude] and Sister M. Loyola are in Chicago—You seemed disheartened in your letter, Sister dear. Never mind! Little beginnings make great endings. You were accustomed to such large schools that your present school seems small—but nevermind bide-a-wee. Great things are in store for the St. Louis school. We sent you a suit of vestments.

14th, 10:30 am—I hope I can finish this time. You won't know what to make of my silence. Good news today from Sr. Maurice— [surgery]

We will send other things when Mother ⁷ comes home. I presume your chapel is not large. We have the Streator statue of Blessed Mother and St. Joseph here and I think their Stations—small of course. I did not like to dispose of them until Mother is home.⁷

Does your school continue to increase? and your music class? Srs. Adele and Vincent have gone to Holden for a sick Sister. We are well-thinned out here. Only a handful left. 19 postulants came to our rescue on the 8th. Fond love to you all.

Your own old

Sr. M. Cecilia

A few months after their reception as novices, more than likely the 19 would also be out on the missions even though both Cecilia and Gertrude had tried on two separate occasions to keep them home for a full year.⁸ Schools grew, pastors like Fitzsimmons insisted on more Sisters, so the

novices went out to the schools—until the visit of Msgr. Falconio,⁹ a short Italian priest from Rome.

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Notes to Chapter 33

1. Newspapers carried stories and pictures or drawings of the disaster. Phone service failed all over The City. In fact San Francisco had been cut off by the quake and the fire following it. Natives of The City don't refer to the event as **The Earthquake** but as **The Fire** since fire is what caused the most destruction. Lambertina Doran, Secretary at the time, tried to keep RE up to date.

2. The first set of interviews in 1954 are on tapes made by BVM Angelita Kramer in the infirmary. Final vow tertian Doris Walsh (Thomas More) went with her to hold the mic. During the next summer, Doris returned to ask questions and take notes for a possible future article. Chapter 34 is based on both Angelita's tapes and Doris Walsh's notes. The tapes are in the Oral History collection in the BVM Archives. The notes have been used in this chapter.

3. Oral History tapes 1954.

4. Without all the delightful conversations on Angelita's taped interviews and collective notes, plus the equally anecdotal house Annals from the San Francisco files (Closed Mission Files, Archives), RE would have given the researcher/storyteller few bones to pick to reconstruct the quake and its experience by 15 San Francisco BVMs.

5. This information is from the St. Brigid (SF) house files and the 1954 interviews with BVM Robertine Welch. BVM Archives.

6. A more complete account of the BVMs during the 1906 SF quake is an article by Doris Walsh in the Spring 1985 issue of SALT magazine. Back issues of SALT are archived at Mt. Carmel.

7. Cecilia's use of *Mother* when referring to Gertrude and her deference to Gertrude in sending things to the new St. Louis missions points to a slow transition in 1906 from one Mother to the next. Apparently, Cecilia encouraged Gertrude to take her time tidying up loose ends in the Chicago area. It's almost like "How do you keep a Gertrude off a train?" As Mother, Gertrude handled and, under Cecilia, continued to handle furniture, money, and property. It's possible Cecilia wanted to send a message to anyone still inclined to "take sides" that there were no sides to take.

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8. In 1898, Cecilia proposed that no novices be sent out until they had completed one year of novitiate. The Council adopted the resolution unanimously, but need and illness on the missions found her unable to hold the novices back.

In 1903, after the election of Pius X, Gertrude also tried to keep novices back for a year and failed. Archbishop John J. Keane approved of her decision to keep the novices home for their full term in 1903. (CM)

9. For more on Msgr. Falconio, see Ch. 35.

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