

Chapter 34

North Wing Infirmary and The Round



1907 Infirmary, front view
BVM Archives

After the 1907 election, age and a change of duty curtailed Gertrude Regan's travels, but her ability to pop in on the infirmary or the novitiate for brief visits was not affected. During the last dozen years of her life she often looked in on the novices and postulants.¹ So delighted was she with the 30 postulants (the most ever) who entered in 1907, that she appeared one day in the postulate with 30 hot doughnuts fresh from the kitchen. She simply opened her apron and there they were.

As the postulants reached into the apron for their mid-afternoon treat, Gertrude went about the room smiling, her quick bright eyes amused, a little figure in black bobbing in and out among the young women. "And," laughed Eileen Curran, describing the scene 60+ years later, "I just wondered what Sister Mary Cordelia—she cleaned Mother's clothes, you know—what she thought when she got that serge apron to clean!"²

Apparently, after her active career as Mother, Gertrude needed more than the job of a First Consultor, or her new job as an adviser on the new construction at The Mount, or her role as grandmother to postulants. Sometimes Cecilia sent her into Chicago to see how St. Mary High School was doing.

Cecilia had delegated decisions about where to send stations and statues from closed missions to Gertrude. A 1907 letter to the whole congregation informed everyone that all money sent in should be directed to Mother Gertrude for her to process. In addition to recording these sums, she listed the contents of postulants' trunks and acted as treasurer or economer of the motherhouse.

However, center stage belonged to Cecilia, and it would test what she learned from her “exile” in both Davenport and Council Bluffs. How had those six years tempered and shaped her to be the woman a new age demanded? Besieged during her next two terms by Roman rulings, Apostolic Delegates, bishops, pastors and superiors, Cecilia's wit and calm purpose now operated from a steel strength. Before the ecclesiastical skirmishing began, however, she had time to build for the sick. Her third term as Mother began with 18 months of quiet.

“You know how I love the sick,” Cecilia had written during the 1903 scarlet fever epidemic at Council Bluffs. On the first floor in the south wing at Mt. Carmel she was surrounded by the young—more than 70 postulants and novices full of energy. Also on the first floor, the north wing housed the sick, the aged, and the feeble.



Originally the first infirmary rooms were located on the first floor, and then they were moved to the third and fourth floors. Notice fourth floor windows under roof.
BVM Archives

Just before the 1906 election, the Council approved the construction of an infirmary kitchen and other rooms on the ground floor of the north wing. Believing that germs travel upward, doctors advised Cecilia to move the infirmary from the first to the third and fourth floors of the north wing. A dumb waiter, a present from Fr. Cottle of San Francisco, carried the food up and down the distance from the basement kitchen. New arrangements were barely in place when the increase of sick and old at Mt. Carmel showed that these adaptations (even the motherhouse itself) inadequate for the seriously ill. The need for a separate building as infirmary became more obvious to Cecilia every day.

The new kitchen and dumb waiter alleviated a serving problem involving trays and stairs, but nothing provided isolation for those with TB or special facilities for examinations or surgery. In the early part of the twentieth century, surgery was done at Mt. Carmel as it was in homes, on a table in one of the smaller rooms. Knowledge of

anesthesia as well as antisepsis was primitive; nevertheless, Crescentia Markey could describe the research of Lister and the necessity of antiseptic conditions for surgery in her Diary.

In January 1907, a bequest to BVM Arthur Danahy encouraged thinking in terms of a new building and the Council voted to use the money for a new infirmary. In April, Cecilia's "long, crooked finger" [her words] traced on the architect's blueprints the lines of "The Round," a unique round chapel with 10 patient rooms facing the altar.



1907 infirmary with the "round" (left) and the bridge (right) were connected to the 2nd floor of the Motherhouse.

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Imagine The Round as a clock with the altar on "12." Rooms for bedridden patients faced in to the altar from the perimeter. The chapel made up the core or inner space. A corridor ran in front of patient rooms between them and the body of the chapel. Windows on the chapel side of the corridor were opened up or closed in the chapel as needed. French doors, the width of each patient room, followed the corridor's outer rim to give a Sister privacy or

to join her to the worshipping community. When chapel windows and French doors were open, patients could hear Mass without going through the agony of moving to a wheelchair or of getting dressed.

Having Sisters in the infirmary who were bed-bound caused Cecilia to think of a chapel for the sick available for those who needed it most. She modeled the design on a locomotive roundhouse built to switch engines onto a turntable and shunt them for repair onto shorter tracks radiating out from the center.

During the final phase of her aunt's illness when any other way of lifting her was impossible, Cecilia had operated the derrick attached to the chair of Aunt Agnes Burke. Cecilia's dream was to place the sick near their center, Christ, and to make it relatively easy for them to pray in the presence of the Eucharist. Using the Round plans for the chapel, the Council approved contracts on August 1, 1907. A year later, patients and staff moved into the unusual chapel and infirmary with Ascension Lilly in charge.

On November 12th, the Blessed Sacrament³ was placed in the tabernacle. On the 21st, while ambulatory patients occupied chapel pews, 10 Sisters in The Round facing in toward the altar from the circle of rooms saw and heard Mass from their beds—some for the first time in years. They wore their best nightcaps and gowns, bed jackets and large smiles. Some even donned a headdress and simple veil. On November 28th, doctors performed the first surgery in the new building. The infirmary was officially “in operation.”



The bridge connected the motherhouse and the infirmary through a covered corridor over the drive-through outside the north entrance. It fit the needs of every weather or time for visits.

BVM Archives

Located above the north entrance to the motherhouse, the bridge ran from that second floor to the infirmary second floor allowing people to cross in all kinds of weather. The covered and heated passage encouraged pots of African violets to bloom along the windows and permitted wheelchair patients as well as those who could walk to make occasional excursions to the main chapel for Mass. At other times it led the quick feet of novices to a task or to visit—and the slow feet of the old to “where the action was.”

Cecilia found the bridge convenient for her nightly walk to check on the sick. One evening her nocturnal stroll brought her face to face with the novice sacristan returning in slippared silence from setting up for Mass.

Cecilia's failing eyes saw only the white veil floating toward her. "In the name of Christ," she exhorted, "are you spirit or what? Speak!"

"I'm Sister Mary Corita, Mother," quavered the young Sister round-eyed. Then, caught by a sense of the ridiculous, both women shook with stifled laughter until Cecilia, wiping away her tears, walked on and the novice went smiling to bed.⁴

Sisters who died in the infirmary crossed the bridge for the last time to be waked at the southeast end of the chapel corridor in the motherhouse.⁵ In the classroom just south of the wake room, novices kept the traditional vigil through the night, reciting the rosary by turn, an hour at a time.

After the Requiem Mass in the main chapel, the Sisters processed down the front stairs, out the front door, south to the Pine Walk to the cemetery in all but the worst weather. The large scaffold bell from Old St. Joseph motherhouse pealed its harsh clang first, followed by all the other bells, a signal of joy for the newest BVM saint. In celebration, everyone could talk all day from the time the bells rang until evening prayers.

Being connected to one another has always been important to the congregation. A symbol of this desire, the infirmary bridge, connected more than the two buildings. It linked the motherhouse with the infirmary, the young with the old, the sick with the well, and the living with the dead until it was destroyed along with The Round in the 1955 infirmary fire.⁶

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Notes to Chapter 34

1. Until the new section for the postulate was built with the laundry underneath at the west end of the south wing, the postulants met in a room called Bethany. Right above the kitchen, it was convenient for Gertrude's doughnut foray. The stairs that led down to the southwest corner and the back door also led up from the kitchen corridor.

2. Eileen Curran, one of the 30 postulants, recounted the doughnut story in an August 1969 interview at the motherhouse with Doris Walsh.

3. The Blessed Sacrament is the name given to the large host consecrated at Mass and reserved in the tabernacle of Catholic churches and chapels. Since Catholics believe

it to be the body and blood of Jesus, it is also called the Real Presence. Its importance to the sick can be imagined.

4. Told by Corita Slattery (1969), the novice sacristan who met Cecilia.

5. The wake room on the second floor due east of the chapel entrance was also used as a confessional room. Later turned into a language lab, it became many other things in the next 25 years.

6. In the summer of 1955, the attic of the 1908 infirmary burst unto flames. It burned so completely that only the basement remained; yet not one life was lost. There were tertians at the motherhouse—young Sisters preparing for their final vows. These helped guide and carry the ill and old from the burning building to the waiting novices who took them to safety. The bridge was destroyed—chopped away by firemen to prevent spread of the blaze to the motherhouse. For a year or so the new brick (closing the place where the entrance to the bridge had been above the north entrance) stood out as a reminder of what had been a corridor; then time weathered the bricks.

In 2011, the motherhouse connects again directly to Caritas Center, the newest addition to the infirmary which sits on the footprint of the Old Infirmary Round. The circular dining room of Caritas Center is reminiscent of the shape of the original Round. At the south end of Philomena Hall, a steel fire door once led into the old infirmary and The Round. After the fire, the debris of the old infirmary was removed. A mound suggesting its round shape covered the foundation of that marvelous Round. Then it was landscaped. Novices coming to fold sheets in the infirmary laundry in the 1950s and 60s entered a door into a tunnel once the basement corridor of the old infirmary. This portion of the infirmary basement continued in use for half a century more for trunks and storage which filled the space.

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