

Chapter 35

The Trouble with Novices

Her first year back in office, Mother Cecilia turned to the now pressing problem of preparing teachers. She asked each mission to set up its own summer school using correspondence courses sent out by the high school or the college departments at Mt. St. Joseph. Exams and credits would be issued by the appropriate departments.

The next year, the 1907 summer school letter proposed that each superior see what courses the Sisters needed and make provision for supplying them—the time and place left up to the superior. Mother Cecilia



Msgr. Diomedede Falconio
Internet

suggested the 12 days at the close of retreat but remarked, “... if our own Sisters give the instruction, Sister students should not be forced. They've worked hard.” Somewhere in those 12 days everyone also had to ready classrooms for school, prepare lesson plans for the first few months, and see to books and supplies.

Both summer school letters were variations of “operation bootstrap,” and as usual Cecilia set the example. From June 24 to July 6, 1907, Lamberta Fitzgerald provided instruction at Mt. Carmel on the use of apparatus for physics. Before even the first demonstration could be set up,

fortune or fate disguised as a short Italian Franciscan walked into the Motherhouse parlor. Msgr. Diomedede Falconio, recently named Apostolic Delegate to Washington, had been sent by the Vatican.

Chronicles of convents in the Middle Ages mention occasions when nuns greeted unwanted emissaries from the local bishop with large pots of boiling oil or water poised above the gates. They never refused him

entrance, yet no messenger ventured inside once his attention fixed itself on the steaming pot above his head tended by a nun described as “rather careless.” If Cecilia Dougherty had dreamed of the tempest this small priest was about to loose that September day, perhaps she too might have chosen a 1907 version of the boiling pot.

But no warning preceded him and the polite, soft-spoken man in the Franciscan habit was received with Victorian courtesy. One of the Sisters ushered him (and the half dozen priests with him) into the parlor. In the course of his visit he was shown the novitiate (the clergy following) where all the professed and the few novices who were home came to meet them.¹ Eileen Curran, a postulant at the time, retold the story with relish, her brown eyes dancing at the memory of what came next.

As Gertrude Regan herded the 30 postulants in (proud there were so many), the little Delegate turned to look, then in English (and a trace Italian) observed, “What-a small-a no-vitiate for such-a large-a com-munity!”²

At this point, Father Clark, current chaplain, took up the role of devil's advocate, “Oh,” said he, “but there are novices on the missions.”

Falconio's black eyes deepened, “What-a color-veil do they wear?”

Father Clark, “Why, black, of course,” smiling at his villainy.

And Falconio in displeasure, “Black?” a look around for effect.

Consternation rippled along the line of professed Sisters flanking the little knot of clergy. A hiss of whispers brushed lightly around the room, hoods bobbed back and forth, nervous smiles appeared. Something was wrong? Oh, dear! And Mother Cecilia in Davenport!

Mother Gertrude found the suddenly laggard postulants much harder to hurry out than to conduct in. This life held more excitement than they dreamed. They had been here only a day, had met the Apostolic Delegate, and now



Postulants with sunbonnets
BVM Archives

whatever he said was causing considerable stir. Something was up! Reluctantly, ev-er—so—slow--ly, —they—filed—out.

The following day Cecilia returned from Davenport to meet Falconio and arrive at the same inescapable conclusion. If she herself had encouraged his visit, hoping for leverage to keep the novices home, the results were more than planned. The snowball quickly started an avalanche.³

Like the good Victorian products they were, the tall Mother Superior and the small Apostolic Delegate greeted each other politely, then sat down facing each other. “Mother, you must-a bring-a your novices back-a from the missions,” Falconio addressed her gravely: “Their vows-a will not-a be valid unless they have-a full-a year of no-vitiate-a here at-a Mounta Carmel.”

Silence followed his statement. **Vows not valid?** Questions cascaded through Cecilia's mind. Indeed in a few minutes the Delegate revealed that **perhaps no one's vows were valid, including most of those professed and currently holding office!** Cecilia gasped. What could they do? BVMs had been going out to the schools from the beginning! Why had no one told them before? Falconio continued quietly. Cecilia must write Rome stating what had led the congregation to send out its novices.

And so she wrote, citing the needs of the schools in America and the repeated requests of bishops, as well as the community custom from the beginning of sending many of the young Sisters to the missions for their trial period. All novices came back each summer for the two months of vacation, and instruction on the religious life (she assured Rome). The needs of the schools had been so great that the community felt compelled to respond. One wonders whether Cecilia was not secretly glad about the turn of events. At last she could keep the novices home without incurring the bad will of superiors, pastors, and bishops. She could blame it on Rome!



**Novice at the old
Motherhouse 1880s**
BVM Archives

During September and October, letters came from the Delegate, went to the Sisters from Mother Cecilia asking how long each had spent in the

novitiate, and finally traveled back with the information relayed to Rome. Cecilia listed 431 Sisters lacking an uninterrupted year of novitiate.

This certainly was not the simple, authoritative NO she might have hoped for to keep the novices home. In the middle of the anxiety and uncertainty about the standing of the congregation or the answer from Rome, Cecilia found time to write a Sister who was ill.

Nov. 20, 1907

My very dear Child,

You are quite sick again—and how sorry your poor old "Mother" is! I have been thinking so much of you lately—and praying for you—but could not get a line out to you—so crowded have I been since coming home from Chicago—with Superiors etc. from the missions—all with troubles of every variety. Some physically, some mentally, some morally ailing. God help us all. We are well kept only in His holy keeping... I fear I seem indifferent, but it is all owing to the pressure that is being brought to bear on me—and being absent from home so much...

Not until December did a *sanation* (a decree declaring everything in order) arrive from Pius X validating all vows and all acts made by BVM officers. Lambertina Doran, secretary at the time, notes in RE that a letter has come from Rome. "... a peaceful conclusion of what looked like serious trouble," she comments, adding, "The *sanation* arrived on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception." A major feast for BVMs!

But the respite proved temporary. Falconio had not quite finished with the matter of the novices. On December 28th, Cecilia visited him in Washington, D.C. A month later he mailed a package of books on Canon Law to her. In a few more weeks he sent definite instructions to recall all novices from the missions for their complete year of novitiate at Mt. Carmel.

Between this letter and her solution to the dilemma posed by recalling 32 Sisters while maintaining teaching contracts, Cecilia wrote Sister Mary Louise Clarke telling her humorously not to die.

Cecilia to Louise Clarke

Feb. 25, 1908

My own dear Sister

How sorry I am to hear of your serious illness. You must brace up, dearie—don't you dare go and die now even if you were sure of stepping into Heaven,

for I can't replace one of you and I'm nearly wild with all the anxieties that are cropping up—first one thing then another.

Now be brave, my Sister. I know our Lord will spare you to us. We are praying for you and all our poor sick. Now don't go to Heaven.

(Obediently, Louise Clarke recovered.)

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Notes to Chapter 35

1. Entries in RE for the period of August 15 to September 10, 1907 innocently recount the sequence of events toward a conclusion totally unexpected by Lambertina Doran. There is an element of irony in the joy at the large number of postulants, in the satisfaction at the novices being sent out in time to make room for them, and in the comment, "A memorable day!"

Aug. 15 16 novices professed.

Aug. 25 Seven postulants receive the black habit.

Aug. 27 12 novices professed.

[Fate in the guise of Falconio had already boarded the train for Dubuque. Oblivious, Lambertina continues to note facts / numbers.]

Sept. 8, 1906 29 entered today—largest number to date at one time! [And then surely a dramatic entrance].

Sept. 9, 1906 A memorable day! His Excellency, Msgr. Falconio, visited us accompanied by Bishop Janssens, Msgr. Ryan, and Father Heer. Met the professed Sisters and the novices in the novitiate, spoke to them about 15 minutes.

Seemed surprised to learn that some novices were on missions teaching. Asked to see Mother Cecilia, she is in Davenport. He wishes to see her before he leaves the city. All [the priests] took wine in the parlor.

Sept. 11 [Today] ... the Apostolic Delegate ... forbade the sending out of novices and directs us to write to the Holy Father

stating what has been done. The practice has invalidated the vows, we must ask for *sanation*.

Dec.18 30 postulants received the habit, the largest number ever.

2. The story behind the entries in RE (above) related to the author by Eileen Curran (after she retired) in a 1967 interview at Mt. Carmel.

3. It might be conjectured that Father Clark was partly responsible for the outcome of the Delegate's visit. He ushered him in and let drop that the novices were out on the missions. But there is a question to be asked. If Cecilia knew the Apostolic Delegate was coming to visit, why was she in Davenport and not home in Dubuque? And where was Archbishop John Keane?

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