

Chapter 44

The 1914 Rule and Younger Sisters



Novices meet each other on a walk at Mount Carmel.
BVM Archives

The 1914 Rule changed more than the vows. It also limited the number of Sisters writing back about those requesting vows. Before that time, a novice on the missions received the written opinion of all the professed Sisters with whom she had been living and working, “no matter how short a time the Sisters were under vows.” If accepted, the novice could make vows for three years—as did everyone else from Mother on down before perpetual vows became the Rule in 1914.

The 1908 visit of Monsignor Falconio caused unexpected changes about decisions on individual novices. Solutions to novice illness in the past aimed at understanding the needs of each person. In the case of Noel Davis, a novice threatened with tuberculosis, the community felt she could go home to recover her health. Although she was not to wear the habit while she was there, she was still considered a BVM novice. If her case proved hopeless, she would be allowed to return to the motherhouse to die, as she had requested, and to make her vows on her deathbed.¹

That flexibility ended with Vatican regulation. The Pope through Falconio ordered that novices must have an uninterrupted time of at least a year at the motherhouse. No going home during that time for any reason.

The 1914 Rule added a second year of novitiate, removing novices from the missions entirely. From the beginning a young Novice learned BVM life from sharing the life, spirituality and charity within a local

mission. She experienced the regimen of a teacher by teaching, and the helpful mentoring of older Sisters during her novitiate on the mission. After 1914 there was no longer the gradual immersion into this new, complex life so strange from any other in the young woman's experience.

In 1914, 40 young and not-so-young women, a much larger number than usual, entered as postulants. There was not room in the Novitiate for them to join with 60 novices plus the 16 returning for a full year as ordered by Falconio. The Council separated the forty into their own group under Mother Cecilia as postulant mistress and sent them to a classroom at the west end of the first floor corridor. There they were to make their first retreat in the community—the very first retreat for many. It is this very retreat that Ambrosina McKinley, BVM, describes in her letter of January 3, 1988 to Doris Walsh. (See Appendix to chapter 44.)

Originally, being a novice out on the missions softened the mission experience, adding safeguards as needed and the encouragement of helpful older teachers who celebrated the young person's success like a prize in the family. The time periods in the Rule of 1914 added five years to the already lengthened novitiate with temporary vows of one year for a period of five years before perpetual vows. Eventually, as had been foreseen in the Sisters' round table discussions, perpetual vows assumed importance as a "higher state," calling for respect from the *temporary* professed. These latter made yearly vows — *temporary vows* — an intimidating term in itself.

Part of the formation on the missions once given to novices now shifted to the young professed, so that the temporary professed gathered for weekly instructions from superiors as had novices, by association reducing their status to that of novices before them. Though no one intended it, the practice resulted in an extension of the time of formation. To her two-year novitiate, the newly professed Sister had five years of temporary vows added as a time of trial before her perpetual vows, creating a time of indecision and uncertainty not felt before by young Sisters. At the end of each one-year period, she asked permission to renew her vows for another year and the community determined if she could continue. This trial period went on for seven instead of two years. Though they were as binding as perpetuals, temporary vows seemed to be of less value. Somehow *temporary* didn't sound solidly committed.

As a whole the congregation had aged. Once burned by the regulations of canon law suddenly descending on them through the apostolic delegate, the Sisters tended to look at regulations as protection—the way to stay out of trouble. Acquire the certificate, get the degree, keep a plan book and be safe. It was a logical result of the new Rule, of greater knowledge of canon law and new government regulations to certify teachers. Add on requirements of universities and colleges for entrance and for degrees. The community lost some of its original resilience and democracy, a little of its immigrant raffish toughness. It became more correct, polite and middle class under a veneer of respectability. Of course, some began to demand the respect due to age, education, kind of certificate, grade level taught or kind of school taught in.² As in Orwell's *ANIMAL FARM*, the equivalent of the side of the barn now read: "All are equal and some are more equal than others."

Even the Council waffled a little. For the first time, community letters instructed Sisters under temporary vows to "apologize humbly for even a slight want of deference to older Sisters." One letter exhorted the perpetually professed on their side to give good example, asking them not to criticize novitiate training or to threaten young Sisters regarding their future vows. A 1918 communiqué reserved correction solely to superiors; at the same time, the newly professed still found older religious more than willing to share teaching short-cuts, methods, time, and stories of the "early days" which carried humor and gave the sense of belonging to a group with a past — a richly mythical one.³ That spirit largely saved the day and kept the congregation turned toward charity, humility and mission.

However, the existence of two kinds of vows fulfilled the prophecy about perpetual vows devaluing other vows. Even more levels of separation were added by certificates and degrees to an already existing one of what level a Sister taught.⁴ To a natural desire to be valued was added the desire to be able to measure one's own worth. Of course there were those who acted as if they were blessed and sanctified by their certificates. Yet these were still women of high ideals and good intention. Generally Sisters on the missions continued to welcome the newly professed with generosity and helpfulness; glad for their enthusiasm, youth, and desire to serve; glad of their verve and noise and life.

In 1919, Mother Cecilia sent out directives for a devotional renewal⁵ of vows to meet a general desire of Sisters to pronounce their vows aloud

again. She printed instructions for a three-day time of prayer before temporary vows on August 15th and a retreat before perpetual vows. Finally she suggested that those preparing for perpetual vows make the eight-day retreat at Mt. Carmel.⁶ Setting aside an entire summer as was done later was out of the question in summers filled with courses toward gaining certificates and degrees to satisfy state regulations for teacher education.

At the time, a great congregational push for teacher certification aimed to qualify as many Sisters as possible before new legislation added more courses to the certification process. The summer simply couldn't be spared for anything but necessary courses—at least not during the first quarter of the 20th century.

/ / /

Notes to Chapter 44

1. This often happened. During Gertrude's time two novices pronounced vows on their deathbeds. One had gone home to Sioux City to recover but had not succeeded.

2. Such elitism was directly opposed to Mother Clarke's spirit. In the late 19th century there had been a move toward making two classes of BVMs after the European model: the school Sisters and the lay Sisters (those who did manual labor). Hearing of it, Mother Mary Clarke announced that if the proposal went through, hers would be the first name on the list of lay Sisters. The idea was dropped and never showed up again until a “higher state” for perpetually professed Sisters was begun. See Coogan2 5, 27.

3. An April 26, 1917 letter to superiors shows the new attitude. It is strange coming from Cecilia and may have been a product of the Council. It has her signature, however. Temporary professed also could not vote for delegates to the chapter.

The Temporary Professed are not your equals. You will more easily keep them in their place if you prove you are their superior in every sense of the word. If they see in you what they are one day to be, you will be a strong influence in their spiritual life, and the bond of charity, which is "love for one another," will unite young and old to the Heart of God. Coogan2 397.

4. There was an incipient elitism in the selection of Sisters for grade school and high school as well as for college teaching. For some reason, as they thought of progress through the educational steps as making one higher, so some considered grade school teachers less educated than high school Sisters, etc. This even caused grade school

Sisters to think something was wrong with them if they remained teaching in the grades, no matter how marvelous they were as teachers. It would take Vatican II and a re-reading of the life of Mother Clarke to rid the congregation of some faulty evaluating.

5. The devotional renewal of vows was a repetition of the vow formula initiated so Sisters would have the sense of a fresh promise. Usually this happened at Mass on December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception; March 19th, the Feast of St. Joseph; and August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. The last two feasts were days on which first vows and perpetual vows were made in that order. A triduum of prayer, silence, and abstinence from meat occurred on the three days just before making temporary vows every year for five years until a Sister made perpetuals. It constituted a hardship in that the days preceded March 19 and cut across the St. Patrick's Day celebration—a feast with steak and recreation except for Sisters under temporary vows. These ate fish in silence and felt left out of the community celebration.

From the late 1930s, Sisters preparing for perpetual vows spent a summer called the tertianship, the third and final period before final vows, at Mt. Carmel taking courses on the vows and scripture. It was changed to a shorter period of six weeks. Sisters who were never final vow tertians chose a spiritual renewal summer studying Scripture and the vows at Mt. St. Gertrude, signing up for it in fall.

/ / /

Appendix to Chapter 44

Letter from Sister Mary Ambrosina McKinley, BVM, on Jan. 3, 1988

“Cecilia had given the postulant retreat to 40 young women in 1914.” [This statement is a quote from an early draft of this book used by Kathryn Lawlor, BVM, in a course offered to BVMs and novices at the motherhouse in the 1980s.]

This statement is [partially] incorrect. I was one of those 40 “young women.” (There were several that could not be called “young” and few that could be so designated!)

Sister Mary Bertrand Foley, BVM, gave that retreat—a very intellectual series of talks that we had difficulty following. It was the first retreat for many of us and eight days of silence besides talks over our heads was a most exhausting experience.

Dear Mother Cecilia who was our postulant mistress came to us one afternoon when Sister M. Bertrand was not around and sent us all out to the cemetery to “let off

Chapter 44

steam.” I presume it was Sister Mary Michtilde Riley who came with us to talk it out. We were not to pretend we had been out! Bless her!

...Up to that time postulants were in the novitiate with the novices under Sister Mary Angela Fitzgerald.

On September 8, 1914 the 40...were taken to the other end of the hall to their own postulate and Mother Cecilia became our postulant mistress.

In her instructions she taught us just how to live in community down to the minutest detail. Because we were 40, Mother called us “The Forty Martyrs” and managed to have us received on March 10th the feast of the Forty Martyrs. How we loved her!

On the day of our Profession Mother took us into St. Mary’s and we sat in desks and on the floor about her as she talked to us from 1 o’clock to 4 trying to prepare us for every problem we might meet!

One instance I would like to mention—One day Mother Cecilia asked us to each say rosaries for the Sisters who had died. She said she was often so busy that she did not get the 9 rosaries said and she wanted us to help her make up to those she had slighted.

Sister Mary Ambrosina McKinley, BVM

January 3, 1988

/ / /

