



BVM Archives

“Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me.”
Emily Dickinson

Mother Gertrude Regan, BVM

Chapter 49

The carriage held but just ourselves And Immortality. *Emily Dickinson*

Gertrude Regan 1827 - 1919

In 1916, BVMs all over the country joyfully prepared for the 75th anniversary of Mother Gertrude Regan. So busy were the Sisters in the sewing room that the postulants wore their clothes to rags before anyone had time to sew “poplins”¹ (a work habit made of poplin material—fatigues). Everything was perfect for Gertrude’s September jubilee—a celebration entirely religious, according to her own instructions.

Formal greetings came from all over. Pope Benedict XV wired his blessing, the usual ceremonial acknowledgment for such an occasion. All the prelates in the U.S. sent messages of congratulations following notice of the event from the congregation. The chapel at Mt. Carmel filled early with those close to Mother, many of them BVMs: the four provincials and the superiors of the academies, 105 novices and 32 postulants, together with as many other Sisters as the chapel would hold. All had come for the morning's Solemn High Mass.² Everyone joined in the singing except at the Offertory hymn, a solo by novice Marie Donaghoe.³ Afterward Mother Gertrude rode to Mt. St. Joseph for an afternoon ceremony in her honor. Though she was 82, she showed no sign of fatigue.

Nor did she seem tired during the Solemn Benediction that night at Mt. Carmel. The indomitable Gertrude had outlived all 19 who journeyed to Dubuque in 1843. Of the close to 1,000 BVMs, who had entered, many lay in the cemetery at the end of the Pine Walk where she went each day to say her rosary.⁴ Sometimes (much to the amazement of whatever novice happened along the walk) she cried a little, fingering the long strand of large beads looped at her belt. At one time those buried next to their iron crosses shared the same bright vision, faced an uncertain future, called to a work with meaning and excited by the challenge and beauty of their community effort. She missed these companions.

Mother Gertrude recalled what no one else could about those early days in Dubuque when the first 19 BVMs struggled to live off the income from one school. Slowly, things had improved. How many stories she

knew! She had helped establish most of the 80 missions represented by the Sisters at her Jubilee Mass—borrowed and mortgaged and planned for them. The evening of her Jubilee found her starting to tire, but she thanked everyone and then went down to the recreation room to sit in a big chair for some time and retell memories. Sisters even called out for favorites to be told again. “Mother, what about the time –etc.”

All over the community, stories about Mother Gertrude circulated on her Jubilee Day shared by those who had been her friends. Some Sisters recalled her telling novices that the dress worn by the BVMs in Philadelphia was brown. Others recalled the calico napkins used by Gertrude and Cecilia at the Old Home and the single sheet of paper Mother Gertrude handed each novice once a month to write home.⁵

And there were the penances! BVM Celerina King wryly recounted her penance for watching a calf play instead of doing her own work. “The Theven Penitential Thalms, Thithy dear.” Far worse was the result for Landaline Harrigan. Large, deep-voiced and a little careless as a novice, she was nearly sent home because a cow chewed up her shawl. Those at the novitiate who left their red woolens airing on a snow bank overnight went to Mother Gertrude for a penance, even though Cecilia was their novice mistress.

A bit of awe attached itself to the respect felt by the novices for the older Sister whose room they cleaned.⁶ Cleaned in silence—supposedly. According to Verena Griffin's story, there was precious little silence on one particular day. The novice cleaners and dusters were all chatting gaily in the small building where Gertrude used Mother Clarke's room as an office. Then, pitter-patter, pitter-pat and the quick footsteps sounded in the hall. Verena (later postulant mistress) on impulse hid in the bed—bonnet, habit, shoes and all—and pulled the blankets over her head. She was there a long while, getting warmer and warmer—Gertrude seemingly busy with work at her desk. After some time, Mother pattered over to the bed, lifted the covers and looked under. “Why, Thithy dear,” she lisped in a tone of mild reproach. Verena made an embarrassed exit, and never heard another word about it.

Sisters who knew Gertrude agreed that she never said a cross word, but “when she disapproved of what you were doing, she was like a rock.” Was she stern? “Not exactly stern, but quiet,” recalled Eileen Curran,

thinking of a smiling Gertrude bobbing gaily among the postulants while passing out hot doughnuts from her apron to Eileen's entire *set*.⁷

Gertrude's correspondence continued to be large during the last three years of her life, and many kept her simple letters. To the Sisters at DeKalb she wrote:

It looks as though your old Sister had forgotten there is such a place as De Kalb—but it is not so, tho' her letters are few. She ever remembers her loved mission Sisters and their noble work and daily prays for them.

Mother Gertrude had felt the difference between commanding as a superior and slipping into the common life again afterward, writing in 1917:

... Are your six years of office up this coming August? ... You will now have the experience of the patience and control of self that is required of Superiors and how easily they can be misjudged by appearances and what need they have of patience and prayer and self-control. Know that it will be a great help in you for the sake of others to help them view things in the right light.

As Gertrude aged, she also simplified until her entire spirituality could be summed up as union with the Will of God. In December 1916, a letter to BVM Xaveria Griffin shows a constant desire for oneness with God's will, a desire written over and over in her letters and notes.

Dearest Child,

This will be only a few lines—being Advent I am anxious to secure your prayers during this Holy Season in a special manner for the Community—unite your intention with mine for that purpose—united prayer is powerful with God whose holy will I only seek in all I ask of Him.

United prayer was Mother Gertrude's response to World War I as well. To BVM Salvator Carey she wrote, “We are all praying for peace—may it be God's will that it may soon be restored to the whole world.” Her letters in 1918 showed an added concern for Sisters living in the cities during the virulent flu epidemic following the war. She mentioned that all schools were closed and many of the Sisters ill. The flu struck the entire novitiate that winter. Although one novice died, the death toll on the missions was worse.

Early in April 1918, Mother Gertrude's occasional abdominal discomfort grew worse and was finally diagnosed as colon cancer. Quietly she accepted the humiliation and pain it caused. Her handwriting in all her

1917 letters had been clear, well formed for a woman in her 90s. There was very little noticeable change during the next year until the late November “thank you” notes for the usual St. Gertrude's feast day presents. Then the slant of the loops made the writing seem hurried rather than weak. Perhaps the hurry was real. One November 1918 note explained:

. . . It is getting dark fast and I feel you will be satisfied with a line of grateful thanks for your kind remembrance of Nov. 15th. I thank you all most sincerely for even a Hail Mary.⁸

Gertrude herself was conscious of writing less evenly. “You will overlook this scratch,” she joked in one November note. And about a mistake in a January 1919 letter, “See dear, the blunders of your old Sister.”

In early 1919, though she suffered intensely from the obstructions forming in her colon, her letters have no word of her illness or her pain. Instead she wrote about the Sisters in the infirmary, sent news of reception ceremonies, or made general comments about the success of the schools, particularly mentioning whatever praise she had heard for a Sister's work. Of the three letters from 1919 now on file in the BVM Archives, one to a local superior indicates her reason for including such praise and her own appreciation of the kindness of those around her at Mt. Carmel. She had just celebrated her 92nd birthday.

A few words of thanks for the prompt reply. You will have your hands full but our dear Lord for whom you all work will aid and sustain your efforts.

You work kindly with your Sisters. Keep to that as we all need Kindness from those in charge over us—it relieves us after constant work and we really do more when our efforts are noticed and appreciated—don't you too think so dear Sister. Even when we are tired we are ready to do more because there is sympathy for us ... God love and bless you all,

Most gratefully your old

Sister M. Gertrude

By April, the cancer had almost completely blocked the colon, causing extreme discomfort and periods of delirium. She became so much worse that her doctor decided on surgery. But according to Francis Rose (her novice nurse) the love and respect which the community felt for Mother Gertrude prevented their taking her to a hospital. Instead, she was placed on

a table in “E” (a music room) and an ether mask fitted over her mouth and nose.

Against all the rules of modern hygiene, Cecilia and the rest of the Council gathered in the room along with the doctor, the anesthetist and two nurses—Francis Rose and Mattie Heffernan, sister of BVM Columban Heffernan. Not much could be done under any circumstances since the condition was terminal. All that the doctor hoped for was an easing of discomfort and pain. An hour later after surgery, Mother Gertrude was carried back to her bed. Word went out to the missions immediately that she was critically ill and could not recover.

Before the surgery, she had been able to sit in her small, old-fashioned rocker, talking to her visitors. After it, she spent all her time in bed. Occasionally Mother Cecilia appeared, preceded by Crescentia Markey's facetious announcement, “The Queen is coming to see you.” And queenly Mother Cecilia sat on the side of the bed holding the wrinkled old hand in hers while they talked: two women so different in size and manner and so alike in their love for their community and its work.

“She's a sick little Mother, isn't she, Agnes?” said Cecilia to the novice nurse waiting outside in the hall. Agnes (Francis Rose) agreed, as she watched the graceful, tall Cecilia glide down the hall, recalling the glimpse of her leaning to kiss Gertrude's forehead before leaving.

Sometime in May, Gertrude Regan was moved to the infirmary she had helped plan and visited so often in the past. Here she died on June 2, 1919, at three in the morning. Her still body, so long driven by great zeal for the will of God, was washed, dressed, coffined, and waked in the infirmary. The next day her coffin was rolled across the bridge⁹ from the infirmary between two lines of solemn novices and through the second floor hall in the motherhouse to the small room directly opposite the chapel entrance. On this second night, Eliza Regan—Mother Gertrude—was waked in the house she had planned and prayed, mortgaged and borrowed into being.

Archbishop James Keane preached at the funeral Mass; a choir of novices sang; a procession of hundreds formed from the chapel to the gravesite. After more prayers and a final hymn, the 15th member of the community lay at last among her old friends at the end of the Pine Walk in the space reserved for her next to the mausoleum.¹¹

Newspaper clippings preserved in the Archives quoted verbatim the prepared release on her life and death. “She filled responsible positions requiring prudence, a broad and kindly power of direction...” In the large ledger-like book in the Archives called the Record of Events (RE), a concise entry on p.91 reads:

1919, June 2. Mother Mary Gertrude, Elizabeth Regan, died at about three o'clock this morning after an illness of fourteen weeks accompanied by intense suffering from intestinal cancer.

Elizabeth Regan was born in Cork, Ireland, Jan. 20, 1827; entered the Novitiate Sept. 24, 1841. At the time of her death Mother Gertrude was in her ninety-third year...a member of the Community nearly seventy-eight years.

It does not seem quite the right final comment on such a rare courage, toughness and deep faith as that making up Mother Gertrude Regan. In 1917, she herself summed up her life in one sentence devoid of statistics. “United prayer is powerful with God whose holy will I only seek in all I ask of Him.”

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Notes to Chapter 49

1. Poplins were the long, black poplin dresses worn by postulants. Usually, the postulants were measured by the Sisters in the sewing room and, after a few weeks, changed from their street clothes into the poplin dress and a short black cape.

2. A Solemn High Mass used three priests instead of one. In a High Mass, parts usually said aloud were sung as were all the responses from the congregation. Add six large candles on the altar and incense.

3. At the Offertory in the Mass, the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar. Marie Donaghoe identified the hymn she sang as Schubert's “Ave Maria.” Mt. Carmel, summer 1970.

4. The Rosary is a chaplet of beads in five groups of 10 separated by a larger bead. The larger beads are “Our Fathers” and the 10 smaller beads are “Hail Marys.” Going around the rosary, one says the appropriate prayer on each bead, using them much as one might use a mantra. Gertrude said several of these daily, meditating on one of the major happenings [mysteries] from the life of Christ on each decade (10 beads).

5. Details from BVM Lewine Enderle's Notes.

6. Celerina and Verena recorded these anecdotes in 1954 for Angelita Kramer in the Infirmary. They are on tape in the Archives as Oral History.

7. Every group of postulants entering together was called a “set.” The word is derived from the Celtic *sept* meaning *clan* or *family*.

8. The “Hail Mary” was a familiar and beloved prayer for Catholics, especially prior to Vatican II. It is a prayer using the angel's words to Mary in Luke, Elizabeth's praise of the “womb that bore” Jesus and a prayer for intercession at the hour of death.

9. The “bridge” connected the second floor of the motherhouse with the second floor of the infirmary and was about 20 feet long. Like the second floor corridor, its width was that of a main corridor in a school—about 12 to 15 feet. There was plenty of room for novices to line both the bridge and the second floor corridor while the coffin, Mother Cecilia, the Council and others passed through to the room near the chapel where the wake would be kept.

10. All details of Mother Gertrude's illness were shared with the author by Francis Rose Urbanowski, Gertrude's nurse during Mother's last illness.

11. A more complete description of Gertrude's funeral, together with the funeral sermon, can be found in OUR HERALD. June 1916 BVM Archives

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