



Mother Mary Francis Clarke, 1802-1887

Two Pioneer Mothers

Gertrude and Cecelia

Introduction

The story begins with the precipitating event—the death of the founder/mother superior.

On December 4, 1887, Mother Mary Francis¹ Clarke, founder of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, died of pneumonia at St. Joseph convent, Tablemound township, Dubuque county, (IA).² She had been leader of the congregation from its Irish beginnings in 1831 when she and four friends (Margaret Mann, Rose O'Toole, Catherine Byrne and Eliza Kelly) met for prayer in a cottage in a suburb of Dublin. The young women soon chose Mary Clarke as their leader and with the help of their families began a school in the center of Dublin town. Within the year, caught by the stories of their Philadelphia (PA) chaplain, they decided to come to

Philadelphia as missionaries. Here they met the Rev. Terence Donaghoe who assumed the role of director and proclaimed Mary Clarke the Mother.

And so, the Rev. Donaghoe³ acted as superior and director from the congregation's American beginning in Philadelphia on November 1, 1833 to his death on January 5, 1869 at the motherhouse on the prairie outside of Dubuque (IA) when Mary Clarke again became superior. At that time, she resumed keeping the congregation's account books and the Sisters formally elected her Mother over the next 19 years. During that time they experimented with a Rule and became a papal congregation. After her death, preparations for the election of a new Mother, specified by the Rule to be a member of the congregation (no more priest leaders!) began with a meeting of the General Council to nominate three Sisters for Mother (choose one) and six for the Council (choose four).

The Election of a Mother

Toward the end of January 1888, 500 BVM Sisters scattered throughout the Midwest filed into the community rooms of 53 houses to elect a new mother and her four consultors. All Sisters under vows for five or more years participated in this election, the first under the provisions of the approved 1885 Rule.⁴

In each convent the Sisters sat quietly at long library tables and fingered slips of paper. Two tellers passed out indelible lead pencils. The superior of each house began the familiar prayer for guidance (probably "Come Holy Ghost") and the room hummed with women's voices as the Sisters joined her. Thus was the Chapter of Elections of 1888 formally convened in the houses of the congregation. According to the Council's directions, the superior read aloud the names of the three nominees.

"Candidates for Mother Superior," she announced, "Sister Mary Agatha (Hurley), Sister Mary Gertrude (Regan), Sister Mary Maurice (Duffy)," in alphabetic order but without last names. "Write-ins are allowed," she added.

Immediately pencils moved, stopped, moved again with here and there an emphatic dot from an enthusiastic hand. A rustle of paper as each Sister folded her ballot. Two tellers collected the slips and unfolded the

votes. One called them out for all to hear; the other tallied them for all to see. The count began at once: “Sister Mary Gertrude”—“One.” . . . “Sister Mary Gertrude”—“Two.” (A crackle of paper) “Gertrude”—“Three.” . . . “Mary Gertrude”—“Four.”

And so on until all votes were read aloud and marched across the paper or chalkboard in tallies of five. In larger houses, ballots counted in front of the Sisters were added, burned and the total sent (the superior’s ballot in a sealed envelope for anonymity) to Bishop John Hennessy of Dubuque. In smaller houses, ballots were packaged uncounted (the superior’s in a sealed envelope) to go directly to the bishop.⁵

Sisters in larger houses already guessed the result. Only one name had been read by the tellers, that of Sister Mary Gertrude Regan. Of course, the election wasn’t official until the bishop of Dubuque tallied the ballots, but the Sisters did their own count. “Gertrude in every large place?” “None of us heard any other name!” “Has to be Gertrude!” reported a fast and accurate community grapevine.

Then everyone waited for the mail to reach Dubuque, waited for the two priests to open envelopes, waited for Bishop John Hennessy (aided by the two) to add totals and count in single ballots—before celebrating. Anticlimactically, official word made its slow way from the Cathedral in Dubuque, out 10 miles of dirt roads to St. Joseph’s motherhouse on the prairie. A week after the voting the result was noted in the Record of Events (RE) by secretary *pro tem*, Cecilia Dougherty in her very readable hand, “Mother Mary Gertrude won the recent election unanimously.”⁶

Except for the election of Mother Clarke, the 1888 election of Gertrude Regan is the only one with the entire congregation voting that resulted in a unanimous choice. At last, on February 2nd, Mother Mary Gertrude Regan was installed and began a three-year term as the second leader of the congregation of 250 to 300 women.

Who was Gertrude Regan?

She was the perfect example of the obvious choice. Many factors made her sweep of the election not only possible, but predictable. The death of Mary Francis Clarke presented a decision to the congregation. Since 1869 Mother Clarke’s re-election had happened regularly as a matter of course. She was their beloved founder!

In 1887 Mother Clarke died. No longer able to choose her, the Sisters quite logically looked for someone who would carry on her policies. There at hand stood sister visitor,⁷ vice president and treasurer Gertrude Regan. A small, brisk figure in black, she had visited BVM convents and schools as Mary Clarke's representative for the last 15 years. The Sisters knew Gertrude Regan well.

There was plenty of precedent for selecting Gertrude. Mother Clarke chose her as secretary and then as her assistant after the death on Christmas 1873 of vice president and co-founder Margaret Mann. Gertrude's position as assistant to Mother was confirmed by Council vote in 1883.⁸ By choosing her, the Sisters had also followed the lead of Donaghoe. He often appointed Gertrude superior during the earliest years of the community in Iowa. After sending Margaret Mann to begin the academy in Davenport (IA), it was Gertrude he called to the motherhouse as novice mistress in 1862 in her place.⁹ From that time on, Gertrude served in the congregation's central government as member of the Council and as treasurer.

Gertrude Regan was much more than a safe choice. She possessed qualities appreciated by her Sisters. They admired her physical energy and toughness. Her alert and spry four-feet-eight-inches held a tremendous power to endure cold, hard work, fatigue and stress. In addition, her past frequently appeared as part of early BVM legend passed on by community storytellers. Her short size only enlarged her deeds. Older Sisters recalled that she rescued the boarders in the 1849 fire at the first motherhouse and school on the prairie not far from the Trappist farm,¹⁰ setting up an old church/barn nearby as dormitory/classroom and provisional shelter for the burned out Sisters and boarders.

Since she had helped make both community history and traditions, no one else remembered them better than Gertrude. Her experience in the congregation included time as a novice (1841-1843) with the original group of five young women from Dublin, the nucleus of the BVM community in Philadelphia. As #15, the tenth to join the group, teenage Gertrude journeyed to Dubuque in 1843 with 14 other Sisters in the community.

It had not been an easy ride through Pennsylvania by canal boat, nor a pleasant one over the Appalachians behind a coal burning locomotive. Near Pittsburgh, with more than 70% of the journey still left, the tired and sooty group of women boarded a riverboat with cabins (thank God!) for the trip

down the Ohio river, up the Mississippi to St. Louis, then north to Keokuk (IA). Here they transferred their baggage to a paddle wheeler going farther upriver ¹¹ and settled down for the slow ride to Dubuque. One wonders if they knew their Iowa destination was a wide open river port of 700, a mining town with sewers running down the middle of the street, no sidewalks, and a busy “red light” district with more saloons than corners on which to put them. ¹² More than one of the little group expressed anger that Donaghoe had brought them there from civilized Philadelphia. Because of the total destruction of their convent and school by fires set by nativist mobs, there was no going back. At first glance, Dubuque promised little more than bad sanitation—it was rough, barely under the control of frontier law, open to settlement only 10 years earlier.

On the riverboats, the Sisters had worn simple, long black or brown dresses, a ruffled white cap on their heads like other women in the 19th century. For outdoor activities, they donned an undecorated black bonnet. They had as yet adopted no habit even hinting that they were religious. In Dublin, the five young women had worked alongside third order Franciscans and Dominicans, ¹³ helping in hospitals during cholera and typhoid epidemics next to other volunteers, dressed like young women of their time.

During the dozen years in Philadelphia, the Rev. Terence Donaghoe heard the private vows of the Sisters in their little oratory. He seemed willing to let things develop as needed and nicknamed them “the Sisters of the Ten Commandments.” More seriously, because of his great devotion to Mary, Donaghoe began to call them “Sisters of the Blessed Virgin.”

Philadelphia Catholics spoke of the little group as “Father Donaghoe’s Sisters” or “them Dublin ladies.” When they reached Dubuque, they finally made public vows in a cathedral service including both Mathias Loras, first bishop of Dubuque, and their director, Father Donaghoe, ¹⁴ and received a longer title. Since Loras liked “Sisters of Charity,” he added those words to lengthen the title to “Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” Chicago priests and people would shorten it to “BVMs.”

In the spring of 1843, the first group of five from Philadelphia, with Margaret Mann as superior, had reached Dubuque and settled in at St. Mary school, a frame building put up by Loras on Cathedral Square. Originally all the Sisters planned to live together in the boarding school. But short of money for food, this first group rented rooms intended for the second group

of Sisters to boarding students. As a result, when the 14, including not only Gertrude but Mother Clarke, arrived from Philadelphia, there was no room at St. Mary school. The newest group moved into a large one-room log house built nearby by Loras and slept in its attic dormitory.¹⁵ With no return to Philadelphia possible—their school/convent there, set afire by a mob of Protestant Know Nothings,¹⁶ already lay in ashes—there was no going back. Destination had become destiny.

Though Gertrude's early days in the log cabin include legends beloved by community storytellers, her official history lists the following: 1869, Mary Eliza Regan (her legal name) signed the corporation charter of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the state of Iowa as treasurer; 1874, as corporation vice president, assistant to Mother Clarke and BVM sister visitor after the death of Margaret Mann, Gertrude takes her place at the center of the general government; 1877, Mother Clarke gives her the congregation accounts to keep; 1877-1887, as assistant to Mother, she copies the first BVM Rule. Mary Clarke wrote the Constitutions with the help of her friend Margaret Mann and completed it after Margaret's death. Because of her work as secretary and sister visitor during this period, Gertrude Regan knew bishops and pastors wherever the community ministered. And they knew her.

Gertrude also knew her congregation. When Mother Clarke died in December of 1887, Gertrude's nearly 50 years as a member provided an in-depth view of its finances and membership. Novice mistress for 19 years, by the time of her election in 1888, she not only knew each Sister, but each Sister's family.

That is not to say that the two women on the ballot with her were less able. Both Agatha Hurley¹⁷ and Maurice Duffy¹⁸ had served on the Council; both were superiors of convents, principals of schools and women of influence in community decisions. Agatha Hurley had really been the first to enter after the young community moved to Dubuque, but returned home for a short time to pacify her family. (Letty Burke entered and was registered as first before Agatha returned.) Nicknamed "Mother Agatha" by the Jesuits, she was handpicked by Donaghoe as superior and principal of the first BVM schools in Chicago. From that time until her death, she functioned as visitor in the Chicago and Milwaukee schools much like a provincial. Passing Agatha's scrutiny guaranteed the acceptance of any parish school by the Council.

Maurice Duffy, ten years younger than both Agatha and Gertrude, had been only a little less active in BVM affairs than Agatha. A few weeks before death, an aging Mother Clarke chose Maurice as superior and principal of St. Brigid, San Francisco, the first BVM school in California. Because it was 2,000 miles from Dubuque in a new section of the country for the congregation, Mother's choice of Maurice showed an awareness of her abilities and trust in her good sense. Yet, good as both Agatha and Maurice were, they received no votes! Incredible! Obviously the two also voted for Gertrude.

The 1888 election must be viewed in context. Mary Francis Clarke, a much-loved woman, founder and Mother Superior for life by petition of the members in 1884, had died from pneumonia after a short illness. The spring before her death, she accepted a boarding academy in Wichita, Kansas.¹⁹ Just days before her final illness, she and Gertrude chose the faculty for the first California mission. Her letter to Bishop Hennessy, written a short time before her acceptance of St. Brigid parish school, shows her sounding him out on sending BVMs to San Francisco.

Feb. 18, 1887

Rt. Rev. Bishop,

The enclosed letter from the Archbishop of San Francisco is the second application which I have received from him in regard to sending Sisters. The first was an appeal for an academy which he wished our Sisters to open, but which I was obliged to refuse owing to our not having the members at the time. The second, as you see, is for Sisters to conduct a parish school which I do not like to refuse, and I think by the time he requires them, we would be able to supply them. Do you approve of my sending them to him if matters can be arranged satisfactorily? I will await your answer before giving him a definite reply...

M. F. Clarke²⁰

Hennessy's reply is immediate. When his answer included advice on qualities needed in Sisters sent to a school so distant from the motherhouse, Mary Clarke turned to Maurice Duffy as California superior. In the second paragraph of his letter answering hers of February 18, 1887, the bishop ends:

"...I do not wish to give any advice on this matter, but if you conclude to send your Sisters to San Francisco you may count on my approval of your action. In that event you should send Sisters in whom you have the fullest confidence that they would take care of themselves."

John Hennessy, Bishop of Dubuque²¹

Though it came as a shock, Mother Clarke's death in December was not a complete surprise. In fact, her age and declining health were the reasons the Sisters wrote Rome asking for her appointment as Mother for life.²² In ill health for years, she would soon be 85, a ripe old age for the 19th century. Most BVMs had probably forecast the election of Gertrude to succeed Mary Francis Clarke years before. As Mother Clarke's secretary and sister visitor, Gertrude seemed groomed for the position of Mother. Following her election, Mother Gertrude herself correctly interpreted her unanimous choice as a mandate to act on her own vision, to move the congregation into the future with a good push. While respecting Mother Clarke's spirit, Mother Gertrude Regan would be her own woman.

The Other Candidates for Mother



Agatha Hurley and Maurice Duffy were nominated for mother with Gertrude Regan

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Notes to Chapter 1

1. Mother Mary Francis Clarke usually signed documents and letters with her initials, "M.F. Clarke" or as "Mary F. Clarke." Sisters of her time and Father Donaghoe called her Mother Clarke. Some modern usage in the community has "Frances [es]", but BVM and Ecclesial documents prior to 1949 use "Francis [is]." Documents during the time covered by this book are prior to 1949 so her name will be spelled "Francis."

2. For death of Mother Clarke from pneumonia and her funeral: Doran In the Early Days 352ff Coogan 185-191 Harrington 99-101.

3. Terence James Donaghoe was a priest in the Philadelphia diocese in 1833 when Mary Clarke, Margaret Mann, Catherine Byrne, and Eliza Kelly (Rose OToole rejoined them a year later because of family business.) arrived in Philadelphia. Donaghoe saw in these young ladies from Dublin an answer to his own dream of educating the children of the Irish immigrants coming in great numbers to the U.S. at the time. He gave the five women a start as religious and provided a school in which they could earn their living as teachers. Doran Early Days 28–34

4. Election of the Mother General and the Council was dictated by the Rule of 1885. The Election of 1888 also followed the order in the BVM Articles of Incorporation. In the early congregation, the Council consisted of four Sisters elected by the members. The Council nominated three for Mother; six for consultors. All major decisions of the congregation required a majority vote from Mother and her Council. Coogan2 58-59 Harrington 128.

5. The Bishop of Dubuque represented the Roman Catholic church. He opened and counted all sealed votes and totaled the count sent in by each convent. This official count insured the validity of the election. Though sent separately to insure privacy, apparently no more weight was given to a superior's sealed ballot than to any other. A majority vote elected a candidate. See Doran Early Days 332,335-336 Coogan2 58-59 Harrington 128.

6. Record of Events (RE) is an oversized (8x14) bound book similar to old account books and the source of much information in this book on the two Mothers. Usually the writer was the secretary of the Council: during Gertrude's time, Pulcheria McGuire; during Cecilia's, Crescentia Markey and after her, Lambertina Doran, author of In the Early Days. Each Council elected its own secretary.

In RE, Pulcheria jotted down the present events. Her 1904 Annals covered the past, from the beginnings in Dublin until the acceptance of the Rule by Rome in 1885. Pulcheria also gave background on the 1885 proclamation by Rome of Mary Francis Clarke as Mother for Life. RE carried also election results. Harrington 95-96.

7. The sister visitor traveled to community schools in parishes or to BVM academies and boarding schools to check on conditions and see what was needed. She conferred with superiors and met with any sister who requested time. Gertrude, as Mother, usually did her own visiting, but Mother Clarke seldom traveled outside of Dubuque and relied for information on others. The visitor supplied an important link between Mother Clarke and BVM missions.

8. Gertrude, as secretary, not only wrote out many of the first longhand versions of the Rule, but tested the reaction of the Sisters to its content. She and Agatha Hurley

corresponded with Rev. Philip Laurent of Muscatine and his friend, Rev. Andrew Trevis, priests ushering the BVM Rule through Curia committees to final Roman approbation. In her desire to leave the congregation strong at her death, Mother Clarke worked untiringly for the approval of the Rule from her initial writing and submission of it to the Jesuits at Holy Family in 1871 to its Roman approbation in 1885.

The congregation had to distribute as many as 14 handwritten copies of the Rule for every change and version. Mary Clarke searched out Sisters with a good clear “hand” who could do other things at the motherhouse. After transferring Gertrude from novice mistress to assistant to work on the Rule, Mother picked up a recovering BVM, Michael Nihill, to teach the novices and fill in as mistress for Gertrude during the early 1880s. Later, Mother pulled in Cecilia Dougherty from Clinton to act as mistress, partly because of her “clear hand,” freeing Michael to begin St. Joseph, boarding academy in Des Moines. Agatha Hurley wrote the Chicago Jesuit copy for examination and comment.

9. The early group of five women who crossed the Atlantic from Dublin to America considered Margaret Mann co-founder with Mary Francis Clarke. After they met Father Donaghoe in the fall of 1833 in Philadelphia, he and the group of women chose Mary Francis Clarke as Mother. Donaghoe then proclaimed Margaret Mann novice mistress and himself director. On November 1, 1833, Father gave them a daily schedule, a sketch of a Rule, heard their private vows and declared himself their superior.

Although, as director, Donaghoe represented the congregation to the bishops of the Church, he and Mother Clarke made most decisions together. Donaghoe acted as director and superior until January 5, 1869, when (a month before his 74th birthday) he died at St. Joseph prairie motherhouse. Without ceremony, Mary Clarke became sole leader as Mother Superior. Margaret Mann resumed her original position as associate to Mother and dear friend until Margaret died on Christmas Day 1873. Mourning her deeply, Mary Clarke chose Gertrude Regan in 1874 as assistant and sister visitor.

10. The 1849 fire at the first motherhouse: Doran Days 132-135. Lambertina Doran’s commentary and addition to Pulcheria’s Annals is available on the Internet under Doran In the Early Days full text.

11. Margaret Mann, Mary Joseph and Mary Frances O’Reilly, Eliza Kenny, and Patrice Caniff set out May 5, 1843 with Bishops Peter Kenrick of St. Louis and Mathias Loras of Dubuque. Journey described in Pulcheria Annals VIII 111-112. Second Group of 14 came with Father Donaghoe from Philadelphia on September 18, 1843. Pulcheria Annals 113 Doran Early Days 74 -79

12. Conzett, Josiah Recollections of People and Events of Dubuque, Iowa 1846 – 1890. From the foreword by his grandson, Donald C. Conzett, M.D. “In the preparation

of this book, I am indebted to Dr. Clifford Fox, now deceased; the late President of Findley College, Findley, Ohio but formerly Professor of History at the University of Dubuque. Dr. Fox used the original copy as source material for his doctorate thesis. To this end he deciphered and typed the manuscript, a painstaking task. Further thanks is given to my friend, Allan E. Sigman, President of the Union - Hoermann Press, who has made the publication possible.” 2 74 University of Dubuque Library

13. Mother Clarke’s register of members does not show that she made vows with the others in 1845. She alone has no date for public vows. Lambertina Doran wrote that both Mother Clarke and Rose O’Toole belonged to the Third Order Dominicans in Dublin. BVM tradition always suggested that Mary Clarke might have made vows in the Third Order Franciscans. Doran’s Notebook mentions that before coming to the U.S., Mary Francis Clarke became so ill that all thought her dying. At this time she was urged to make “vows on her deathbed” and did so as a Dominican tertiary. Since she had already taken vows, Mary may have decided not to do so again.

14. First BVMs in Dubuque made public vows in the cathedral, August 15, 1845. Pulcheria Annals 137-140

15. Log house on Cathedral Square, Pulcheria Annals 133,134.

16. The Know Nothings were a nativist American political group of the 1840s and ‘50s empowered by popular fears that the country was being overwhelmed by Irish Catholic immigrants. Irish Catholics were often regarded as hostile to U.S. values and as controlled by the Pope in Rome. Mainly active from 1854 to 1856, the Nativists tried to curb immigration and naturalization, though its efforts were met with little success. The largely middle-class and entirely Protestant membership fragmented over the issue of slavery. Most had joined the Republican Party by the 1860 election. When a member was asked about its activities, he was supposed to reply, "I know nothing." Wikipedia.

17. Agatha Hurley was sent by Donaghoe in 1867 to head the first BVM school in Chicago. Father Arnold Damen, SJ, pastor of Holy Family parish, had invited the BVM congregation to the Jesuit parish. After considering it, Donaghoe agreed to staff Holy Family school. Agatha Hurley was directly involved in the BVM Rule, copying Mother Clark's draft by hand for the Jesuits to study. They in turn gave her suggestions on parts to be included and on the correct organization of a Rule. In 1888 Agatha was already functioning as an unofficial provincial in and around Chicago as well as in Milwaukee. She served frequently on the Council. Coogan2 265 Harrington 158.

18. Maurice Duffy, after 1876, was elected more than once to the Council as consultor or as secretary. As teachers at St. Joseph Academy and boarding school on 13th St. in Dubuque, Maurice Duffy and Rosalia Ryan helped plan the transfer of the boarding

academy to Seminary Hill. The two chose the site of Margaret Mann hall, the academy's first building. Renamed Mt. St. Joseph Academy, this school later added college courses and became Iowa's first four-year college for women in 1912. It was renamed Clarke College in honor of Mother Clarke in 1928. Coogan² 117-19, 288-89, 405
Harrington 157-59

19. All Hallows, Wichita. Coogan¹ 180-183 and Lawlor Your Affectionate 14.

20. St. Brigid, San Francisco: Smith-Noggle Letter #236 MF Clarke to Hennessy.

21. Hennessy's reply to Mother Clarke re/San Francisco. Coogan² 178-179

22. The petition of the Sisters to Rome asked that Mother Clarke be confirmed in office for life. It was their wish that she continue as Mother for the few years left to her.
Doran Early Days 333 - 336 Coogan² 149-154 Harrington 95-96

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