



## Chapter 3

### New Mother—New Time

After the January 1888 elections, any lingering desire within the congregation for continuity was surely satisfied. The familiar face of Mother Gertrude, Mary Clarke's trusted assistant, greeted Sisters at the door of St. Joseph motherhouse.

No unfamiliar faces appeared on the Council either. The four Consultors had already surfaced time and time again as superiors. Even the newest of them, Cecilia Dougherty, had served as superior for three years in Clinton before her seven-year term as novice mistress. The election of Gonzaga McLoskey, Loyola Rutherford and Agatha Hurley to the Council surprised no one. Agatha was queen of Chicago, Gonzaga, duchess in Davenport and Loyola, inspector general in Dubuque.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, Gertrude Regan did not think of herself as “continuity.” She might have agreed that she was a bridge connecting the present to the past. At no time would she have named that past “legendary” as opposed to “real”. It was simply what had happened until now. Believe it or not!

Yet Gertrude was one of the few links left to the original five from Dublin. On August 15, 1845, she had (with difficulty) hurried up the aisle as one of 20 Sisters in the Dubuque cathedral making public vows. Legend reports that at 17, Gertrude was so small that a parishioner—thinking her a child trying to see—picked her up to set her out of the aisle. Off the ground but struggling, she objected, “I'm a Thither! Let me go!” And when he did, fled up the aisle after the others.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, there was about Gertrude the aura of the unusual. Her gaze was sober, her mouth large and slightly crooked, her headdress usually a bit awry, its starch slightly crushed by the tilt of her hood.<sup>3</sup> She spoke with a decided lisp, addressing other Sisters as “Thithy dear.” Because she pronounced her own name “Jer-trude” (the Irish way), everyone else said it that way too. Too short (4'5”) and too quick to move majestically, her slightly hoarse voice<sup>4</sup> much too soft to deliver an inspired speech, Gertrude had nevertheless been voted in by 500 Sisters because of what else she was.

The qualities of spirit that insured Mother Gertrude's unanimous election included a certain pioneer toughness. Small and wiry, she seemed always to have extra energy. Her eyes were bright, even when she was 80. Stories say that superiors hid their young Sisters from those eyes fearing Gertrude's reputation for changing the young from one school to another in the space of a 10-minute cup of tea. "Out of sight, out of mind," became the practical motto for a superior in Milwaukee who (admitted 80 year old Salome Phillips) sent the young Salome to the attic with orders not to come down until Mother departed.<sup>5</sup>

Though she could be compassionate, especially with the mentally ill, and sympathetic and patient with the young, Mother Gertrude was most often called "just." Her penances while she was novice mistress were sure and immediate. "Kneel right down, Thithy dear, and say a De Profundis" (Ps. 130).<sup>6</sup>

Yet a letter to young Xaveria Griffin at St. Joseph Academy, Des Moines—a difficult mission because the superior, was ill<sup>7</sup>—shows a quality of feeling with and for others:

Mar. 19, 1892

My very dear Sister

Are you thinking that all at home have forgotten you? Not so dearest child—very, very many times are you and all on Grand Avenue thought of and remembered in our prayers. Dear S.M. Lewis [Kennedy] and Sr. M. Michael's [Nihill] health shattered makes the school duty heavier on you and dear S.M. Wendaline [Fitzgerald] —but this, dear child, will cause you both to work on more diligently in doing all to make the children happy and contented. Never be discouraged or despond. All will be well in time but resignation now will strengthen your virtue and give you experience for future years.

I feel sure you will ever be respectful to S.M. Michael and make allowance in every way for the long years that she has suffered from ill health and you know that sickness and anxiety changes the best. There will be much in your power now to lighten by your earnest care of the children and solicitude concerning the things of the house and I know from experience how nicely you can do this.

Had the BVM Community elected a peacemaker as its second Mother General? The official results of the election mailed from the motherhouse went to all BVM houses. A congregation, neither as small nor as Dubuque-centered as it had been at Father Donaghoe's death 19 years before, read them and celebrated.<sup>8</sup> But was she a peacemaker as her letter hinted?

What Mother Gertrude was not was a pocket edition of Mary Clarke. Gertrude borrowed much from her past experience with Mary Clarke, but the style of her leadership differed in several ways. Where Mother Clarke seemed content to inspire and left many decisions to local superiors, Gertrude Regan preferred to initiate policy from the top—whether this meant by herself or with the vote of the Council.

Believing she needed knowledge at first hand to govern justly, the second mother traveled almost constantly, riding to Dubuque in sleet storms, rubbing her arthritic hands and stamping her frostbitten feet while waiting at the Sabula or Savanna railroad junctions; jolting in carriages over Chicago's cobblestone streets or walking in its big city muck of half frozen mud. Her care for others caused her to hold Council meetings in Dubuque at St. Joseph Academy on 13th and Main so the Council coming in on the train would not have the added 10-mile buggy ride out to the motherhouse.

In contrast, Mother Clarke did little traveling once she reached Dubuque and even less after the motherhouse was built farther out. After 1875, Mary Clarke seldom went farther than to Dubuque to do business or to talk to the bishop. She preferred to call Sisters to her little room at the motherhouse to discuss changes or air complaints.

There too, the style of Gertrude's administration differed. Rarely did a sister know her destination when she was whisked away by a brisk "Pack your bag, Thithy dear... Come with me, Thithy dear... Get your cloak, Thithy." Young Celestine Leslie, worried because she thought her change from one school to another meant she had not taught well, wrote Gertrude to ask about it. In reply she received a letter of explanation.

... Do not let anything discourage you and never for a moment think you were changed from St. Charles [Chicago] because you were not competent. It was really in Kindness (sic) you were sent to San Francisco on account of the climate and to be with your old school mate and friend, Sister M. Redempta [Coleman]. I hope you are getting a little bit of flesh on your bones.<sup>9</sup>

Without such an explanation, other Sisters puzzled over the strange turn of their fates in Gertrude Regan's quick hands. Perhaps with a deeper wisdom, Mother Clarke would have told Celestine what Gertrude finally wrote—discussing the change in her little room, explaining why she thought a move was needed and encouraging her face to face.

Of course the congregation had been smaller then. In the 1890s, Gertrude's time, distances were greater, schools and Sisters more numerous, illnesses more catastrophic,<sup>10</sup> and decisions more immediate. Gertrude needed instant people to fill instant vacancies.

The first two Mothers thought differently about the schools as well. Mother Clarke refused a boarding school in San Francisco before accepting the offer of a parish school there. She thought the Sisters could do more good in parishes, being closer to the people.<sup>11</sup>

If Gertrude Regan preferred any type of school, it implied itself in her buying and building for five boarding schools, even during the financial squeeze of building the new motherhouse in Dubuque. However, as time went on, she refused to make some parish schools into boarding academies, and finally leaned toward the parish school for financial reasons—the parish took care of most school expenses.

Both Mothers practiced a real poverty in the use of things. Mother Clarke kept only a tiny fire in her stove even in the coldest weather. Stories show Gertrude's practice of poverty extending to the smallest items given to others as well. When distributing veil material she handed out just enough thread wrapped around a piece of cardboard to make the veil.<sup>12</sup> She herself carefully removed the basting stitches holding her headdress together, then used the same thread to sew on the clean piece.<sup>13</sup> Awestruck novices wondered if she reused every stitch she wore.

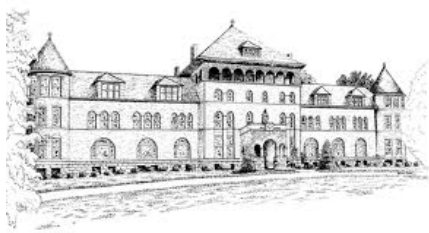
Gertrude's attitude toward money and property meshed with her saving of thread. She mortgaged every building, academy, and grounds owned by the community, sometimes taking out one note to pay another as if determined to use everything twice—to live in the buildings and at the same time to build others from their mortgaged value. Extending her poverty to the value of time, she hurried everywhere, walking with quick little steps.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Gertrude Regan was a puzzling combination of humility and fearlessness. The motherhouse she built tended toward the grand, but her own small room in it contained the oldest furniture. She regularly burned

the stubs of altar candles for light, even though the rest of Mt. Carmel used gaslight. Able to grasp another's idea, particularly as it affected property and land, her own genius lay in making big plans financially possible, moving investments and loans about in the process like the pea in a shell game.

Though she was a leader, Gertrude never tried to lead the community out of debt—only to keep the payments of interest and principal ahead of her need to apply money to other things. Because she juggled mortgages and performed her slight-of-hand with deeds and checks and bankers and lawyers and lenders in the years between Mother Clarke and Cecilia Dougherty, women of extraordinary personal appeal, her own most notable qualities seem more brittle, like the money she handled with such dexterity.

Soon after her election in 1888, Gertrude Regan marshaled all her ability in financial balancing and economic wizardry to initiate a project of such scope it would take both of her first three-year terms to see it ready for use, and part of her second two to complete. From the very first, she had set



her sights on building a new BVM motherhouse nearer the railroad and the world of the schools in San Francisco, Milwaukee and Chicago. Eventually that building would rise on the western bluffs overlooking Dubuque and the Mississippi. Though the Sisters

nicknamed it “our mansion on the bluffs,” Gertrude’s dream was based on practical need, not grandeur.

It is doubtful if Bishop Hennessy's eloquence would have moved Mother Clarke to erect Mt. Carmel on the grand scale proposed by Mother Gertrude, following the bishop's suggestions. Yet even before 1888 there was a definite need for a new motherhouse, novitiate and infirmary. The second Mother moved, acted and planned more visibly than the first.

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### Notes to Chapter 3

1. This may be a good place to introduce Sister Mary Loyola (Alice) Rutherford since she will soon be given charge of two major building projects during Mother Gertrude’s first two terms: the new motherhouse on the bluff above the Mississippi and the rest home for Sisters with TB in Boulder (CO). More about Alice Rutherford (Loyola) in the Appendix to Chapter 3.

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2. BVM Eileen Curran was retired at the motherhouse in 1967 when Doris Walsh began work on a biography of Mother Gertrude Regan. Mother was Eileen's postulant mistress in 1908 and Eileen is the source for the story of the man mistakenly setting Gertrude aside like a child in the Dubuque cathedral. Mother told it to the postulants and Eileen shared it with the author.

3. Gertrude's looks did not improve as she aged. St. Ethel Quinn, secretary in 1966, met Gertrude when Mother visited her school. St. Ethel's impression in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade? "She was the ugliest old lady I'd ever seen." (to Doris Walsh, fall 1966)

4. BVM Rosanna Darragh, in charge of the motherhouse farm for 40 or more years, recalled Gertrude's soft and slightly hoarse voice

5. Young Salome Phillips turned out to be but one of many sent 1) to the attic or 2) downtown on an errand ("take your time coming back") when Mother Gertrude came to town to visit the schools and convents.

6. A resident of the motherhouse in 1967, Sister Mary Thomas O'Connor recalled her novitiate penance for letting a door slam. De Profundis, the first two Latin words, meant Ps. 130, which began "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord." It was often recited in English by the novices and soon memorized. Gertrude often left a novice on her knees reciting at a great pace, which probably acted as a warning to others not to fall over her.

7. The initials "S.M." are short for "Sister Mary" and are used often by Sisters at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. SM Michael Nihill was superior in Des Moines. In 1892, like many people in her time, she had surgery on a kitchen table in a little house behind St. Joseph's Academy. Later that same day, she received word to come home to recuperate at the novitiate and to teach novices and postulants while she got better. According to the Sisters at the infirmary, she became addicted to alcohol prescribed for her intense pain. Lambertina calls Michael Nihill "Brilliant. Excelled in English and poetry. Great friend of Alexis Butterworth" Doran Journal 7

8. For background on the BVM Rule, see Appendix to chapter 3.

9. Letter from Mother Gertrude to BVM Celestine Leslie. BVM Archives

10. The most common killers in the late 19th century were tuberculosis, diphtheria, typhoid, and influenza. Tuberculosis was so common in the community it became known as "the Community Cross." It was not unusual for Mother Gertrude to bring a sick Sister home to the motherhouse, keep the horse cab waiting, and within 30 minutes drive out with her replacement. (Shared by Sisters at Mount Carmel 1967.)

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11. Mother Clarke to Hennessy of Dubuque re/request from bishop of San Francisco for Sisters to teach in a parish school. BVM Archives.

### Letter of Mother Clarke to Bishop Hennessy

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 he wished our Sisters to open, but 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. (BVM archives)

12. Young Sister Redempta Coleman received the veil material and thread when she was first sent out (August 15, 1889) from Old St. Joseph motherhouse to St. Mary school on Cathedral Square, Dubuque. 1954 Oral History tapes Archives. Repeated by Sisters in the infirmary—Fall 1967

13. As a novice, S.M. St. Clara Sullivan, who later headed the Home Economic department at Clarke College, was impressed by Mother Gertrude's re-use of thread. Oral History 19 and infirmary sharing

14. Rosanna Darragh, BVM, as told to Doris Walsh Mt. Carmel grounds 1966 Eileen Curran, BVM, is the source for several stories about Mother Gertrude including that of Mother coming into the postulate with fresh doughnuts in her apron for the postulants. Passed on to Jane Coogan by the author. Coogan 2 394.395

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## Appendix to Chapter 3

### Loyola Rutherford

In 1888, Loyola had just been elected to the new Council. She would be given two major building projects to oversee at the same time: the academy in Boulder and the motherhouse in Dubuque. Because of the mountain air, the Council chose Colorado and located the TB cottage next to Mt. St. Gertrude Academy, Boulder.

Alice had entered the congregation 20 years earlier on October 22, 1867. She was 31. Her early training and her aptitude for management made her a valuable superior at Annunciation and at St. Pius parish schools in Chicago as well as at St. Joseph Academy (13th Street), Dubuque. Her religious name (Loyola) appears often in stories about the 19th century congregation. As assistant to Mother Cecilia, and as councilor and procurator (buyer) for the community, she supervised the laying out of the grounds at the Grandview motherhouse. She also monitored the building of the first infirmary (with the chapel called The Round). Sister Mary Loyola helped in the construction of St. Mary

high school, Chicago. After completing Mt. St. Gertrude Academy, Loyola added “The Loyola,” the rest home for TB patients on the academy grounds. Loyola Rutherford became a dear and trusted friend of both Gertrude and Cecilia; she died December 18, 1915, of the flu. Coogan 2 433, 434

### **The Story of the BVM Rule**

When Father Donaghoe died on January 5, 1869, the BVMs had been in Chicago since the fall of 1867. After making her first vows in 1868, Scholastica McLaughlin forgot her slip with the vow formula on it in her pew. In passing, one of the Jesuits picked it up and read the formula, which said her vows were “under the bishop of Dubuque.” Concerned, he brought the slip to the pastor. Father Damen informed Agatha Hurley those words meant BVMs were only religious in the diocese of Dubuque.

Since BVMs were teaching at Holy Family in the diocese of Chicago, the Jesuits immediately advised them to become a papal congregation under the Pope, able to teach in any diocese without being subject to the whims of any one bishop. That meant having a Rule approved by Rome.

By this time, Donaghoe was too ill to undertake writing a Rule, but Mary Clarke and Margaret Mann began work on the Rule immediately. Five years later, in 1873, Mother Clarke sent the Rule to Rome asking the community’s good friend, Father Andrew Trevis, then in France for his health, to shepherd it through the process. The first Rule was accepted in an amazingly short time. The community tried it out for the next 10 years, redoing some sections. It was truly an original Rule based partly on Donaghoe’s notes, partly on the Jesuit Rule and partly on Mary Clarke’s own spirit and her interpretation of religious life as lived by BVMs.

In 1885 the BVM Rule received Final Approval. In 1886-87 Mother Clarke accepted two schools in different dioceses: a boarding academy in Wichita and six months later, St. Brigid, San Francisco. Coogan 2 32,33.

