

## Chapter 5



New motherhouse with Sister Benedicta Prendergast and The Mount (Clarke) students

### “Unless the Lord Build...” Ps. 127

By 1889 (according to Bishop Hennessy), the congregation had been invited to New York, Boston, Europe, Ireland and Australia.<sup>1</sup> Of more immediate concern to Mother Gertrude in 1890 were requests for Sisters to staff schools in Emmetsburg, Boone, and Washington, Iowa.

Along with the excitement of the new motherhouse construction, the usual problems appeared on schedule. Leandra Swift, superior at Sacred Heart, Ackley, Iowa, asked what she would do about paying bills again this year. Once more the Sisters had received no salary and tuition fell far short of expenses. Crescentia Markey, at Holy Rosary in Milwaukee, sent brief reminders about payments due on both convent and school, financed completely by the BVMs in 1885 at the request of the parish.<sup>2</sup> Agatha Hurley wrote that she would need more Sisters in September if the Chicago schools continued to grow as she thought they would.<sup>3</sup> In Des Moines, Fr. Brazill had neglected as usual to pay the Sisters their salaries (\$18 per month per Sister). How would the superior manage to collect them this time?

Mother Gertrude corresponded with Father Muldoon of St. Charles parish after she and the Council voted to buy land for a future Chicago high

school.<sup>4</sup>— “A place for the Sisters to have retreats and hold teachers' institutes,” wrote secretary *pro tem* Cecilia Dougherty in CM. Gertrude purchased six acres but the school itself would have to wait until she finished the motherhouse—at least on the outside.

Chicago pastors responded slowly to her plea for funds for the six acres. High schools, especially for girls, did not seem practical to the Catholics of Chicago or their priests. Most Catholic children, especially the girls, left school after sixth (at most eighth grade) to find work to help their families. However, the \$8,000 for the six acres, money for fences and taxes dribbled in slowly from parish benefits, school musicals and other entertainments put on by BVM Sisters and their students.

AND in the spring of 1890, “The Great Accord” between the Bishop of Dubuque and the BVMs threatened to dissolve. Bishop Hennessy had decided to begin his own congregation to teach in the small Iowa towns (like Ackley) where the BVMs and other religious could no longer afford to serve. He would endow his Sisters with land and securities to supply a sufficient economic base to underwrite the Sisters’ salaries. As starters, he wanted a group of BVMs since he thought they seemed “suited to the work.” This desire he delivered personally to Mother Gertrude while the two of them sat in his rectory waiting for Baptist Seeley to return with some contracts for Mother to sign.

To all appearances, Hennessy’s sudden proposal to use Sisters from the BVM community to begin his own congregation failed to shake Mother Gertrude. In a firm hand, she signed the contracts brought by in by Baptist Seeley, but a letter written that night clearly revealed her distress.

...You will be surprised and pained by what I am about to impart. Yesterday the Bishop sent for us about the building, the contractors were there to sign some papers and he wanted us to be present. Sister Mary Baptist had gone back to the house for some bids and while she was gone, the Bishop told me one of his long contemplated designs of starting a community for Parochial Schools, especially for those country schools which he says that we can't take, and that he is bound to look after and make some provision for those poor neglected children who are in danger of losing their faith for want of instruction.

For this purpose he wants four or five of our Sisters for a start—the reason he wants ours is that they are better adapted to the work and he knows them

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better. He said besides that he is only following the example of other Bishops of the country who have done the same thing... He will relieve us of the boys' school as they will need it for their support and the home he is repairing on Third Street will be their residence and he himself will be their teacher in everything.

He laid particular stress on the fact that it would in no possible way injure our community, that there would be no loss but a special blessing both here and hereafter in eternity for its being instrumental in supplying so necessary a want to the church of God for those poor out of the way missions. This is as near as I can remember what he said. My first thought on hearing the Bishop's views was to wish myself in the middle of the Mississippi sooner than bring any trouble now or in the future on the community. Yet, I felt if it ends in this, then it would be well for us to be freed from those little missions where they can neither keep rule nor get their support. I beg you, have a novena offered that God's will be done.

Your troubled little,

Mother Gertrude.

A P.S. added by Baptist read: "Mother feels so bad, she was unable to write and asks me to copy her penciled sheet." <sup>5</sup>

The bishop asked specifically for four Sisters then teaching at the Cathedral school. Twenty-year-old Redempta Coleman he approached in the convent yard over a clothesline filled with wash, offering her the post of Mother Superior. He conducted a private interview with Beata Griffin, Maude Tallman, and Columban Heffernan in the Cathedral rectory while a quiet little woman of 64 waited outside the closed door praying that God's will be done. All four refused. Hennessy's new group presented an uncertain future with no return to the BVMs, and the Sisters felt their vocation to religious life included a specific call to the mission and spirituality of Mother Clarke and the BVM congregation. <sup>6</sup>

When she heard the decision of the four, Gertrude sighed with relief, then with set lips immediately turned the wagon and team toward Mt. St. Joseph. She had promised the bishop to ask for volunteers there too. Thirty years later, novice mistress Angela Fitzgerald, on the staff at the Mount at the time of Mother's visit, described the scene to her novices. Gertrude's friend, Matilda Lahiff, wrote the following eyewitness account for Lambertina Doran's Notebook. <sup>7</sup>

When the wagon and team drove up, everyone ran to greet Mother. Without a word she walked straight into the refectory and stood at one end until everyone assembled. In complete silence they heard her soft voice announce that each Sister would have to respond individually to her next question. The bishop wanted volunteers for his new Congregation. Would anyone go? One by one they came up and one by one said “No!” Then she walked out without a word, mounted the wagon and left to deliver the answer to Hennessy.<sup>8</sup>

Gertrude Regan drove to the Cathedral rectory in some trepidation. The bishop had recently loaned the congregation \$15,000 to help with expenses on the new building. She owed him a favor as well as money, making her decision and that of her Sisters to reject his project a delicate matter. She must have handled it well. Though Hennessy seemed less interested in the motherhouse afterward, it was due to his preoccupation with his infant order rather than any ill will toward the BVMS.<sup>9</sup> On her part, Gertrude planned to pay the interest on his loan promptly to protect the new motherhouse. She would give him no excuse to preempt Mt. Carmel by foreclosure.

Outwardly, Mother Gertrude showed few signs of the stress stemming from Hennessy’s attempted raid of her cache of most valued members. It was like this bishop to recruit only the best. How well she had learned that in his help planning the new motherhouse! Only the best limestone! Oak floors throughout! His preference for stone instead of brick! Of course he would pick out four of her best young teachers.

With the problem of the bishop’s newest project handled, Gertrude went as usual to Mother Clarke’s little room near the infirmary. Swiftly she handled the mail, gave permissions, talked to superiors, and answered questions—the familiar and every day demands of being Mother. Novice Lewine Enderle, who addressed Mother’s envelopes, later wrote of her—“She kept calm, unhurried and unruffled.”<sup>10</sup> Tradition marks her occasionally standing at the window of the new motherhouse whispering to herself, “One day they will come and take it away.”<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes in the summer of 1890, Mother Gertrude and Loyola Rutherford (construction liaison) walked from St. Mary school on Cathedral Square up Mt. Carmel road and along the river bluff to Grandview Park. Construction gangs chiseled a foundation hole as large as three football

fields; yet some of the excitement had dropped. Ideas were not quite as grand after Hennessy's interest lagged.

In July, the congregation purchased an adjoining plot of 19 acres from the St. Louis Vincentians (a religious order of men) for \$5,000 to extend the Grandview property line to the bottom of the bluff and the present turnaround on the edge above.<sup>12</sup> Every working day, massive chunks of limestone swung from a railroad siding up to the edge of the bluff on a large pulley as Egan had planned. At last, where Stout once pastured his purebred racing trotters, a great heap of Bedford stone lay ready for the massive foundation.<sup>13</sup>

Then, leaving Loyola to her “motherhouse watching,” Gertrude turned her eyes to the west, opening a parish school in Lincoln, Nebraska and continuing to search out a site for the projected rest home for her sick. So many young Sisters were returning from the schools with lung trouble, to waste away before the eyes of the older Sisters at the prairie that these spoke of the sickness in awe as “Our Community Cross.”<sup>14</sup>

At this point, newspapers all over the U.S. reported that the famous novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson, had come to New York seeking a cure for his tuberculosis. Stevenson had heard that Edward Livingston Trudeau, a doctor in Saranac, New York, used a new kind of treatment for TB of rest and fresh air. His patients showed such improvement that by 1890 other doctors also prescribed dry or mountain air for tuberculosis. With hope, the Council urged a BVM version of the Red House, Trudeau's 1884 rest home at Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks.<sup>15</sup>

When this news reached her, Gertrude lost no time searching for just such a climate and location. In the summer of 1890, she and the Council sent two Sisters, Faustina Kirk and Loyola Rutherford, to investigate a site in New Mexico offered by Bishop Salpointe of Santa Fe. On their way back to Dubuque, the two stopped to visit in Denver where BVM Mary Theodore O'Connor had gone to treat a “dry cough,” a recognized sign of advanced TB. Doctor Walter O'Connor, her brother, praised the Colorado air and arranged a visit with Bishop Metz of Denver. The bishop proposed Boulder as a possible location for the Brown House, the BVM cottage. To solidify the offer further, a Boulder citizen immediately presented a tract of land overlooking the city near the University of Colorado. A site “possessed of a breathtaking view of the mountains” wrote Loyola to the Council.<sup>16</sup>

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In November, Loyola (a practiced eye where real estate was involved) and Josephine Clarke (a consultor) traveled to Colorado to see the Boulder acreage and sent back enthusiastic reports about the beautiful scenery and healthy climate. Finally, in December, the Council (in spite of the heavy debt on the motherhouse) dared vote to build a school and rest home in Boulder. “Thank God!” Cecilia Dougherty remarked in CM.<sup>17</sup>

Faced with the dilemma of financing two major projects at the same time, without hesitation the BVM Council cut back on the motherhouse, choosing to finish the inside of only two storeys (for the time being) and, instead of stone facing, to use Dubuque brick on the front and pressed brick on the other three sides. Then they picked nominees for the coming general election and adjourned.<sup>18</sup>

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### Notes to Chapter 5

1. CM July 1889
2. Coogan2 229
3. Ibid 261-263
4. CM March 28, 1890. The decision to buy was made with the approval of Archbishop Feehan of Chicago. A later entry in CM mentions that the Lake is washing the land away. These were not the lots for St. Mary high school on Damen and Roosevelt road, west of the present Dan Ryan freeway. Information also in Coogan PRICE2 229.
5. On April 22, 1890, Mother Gertrude wrote the letter about Hennessy’s new congregation to Councilors Agatha Hurley in Chicago or Gonzaga McLoskey in Davenport. The other two on the Council lived in Dubuque and would have been informed in person. Letters, Mother Gertrude Regan. BVM Archives.
6. Coogan2 228
7. Angela Fitzgerald held the office of novice mistress from February 2, 1909 until January 7, 1928. During that time she directed 929 novices. Coogan2 436. Angela entered on August 15, 1885 from Holy Family. Coogan Ibid The Sisters at the

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infirmary in 1954 and in 1967 knew the story of Gertrude's visit to The Mount. Angela had also told them as novices about Hennessy's plan to recruit BVMs for his community.

8. Written source of The Mount account was Matilda Lahiff's typed interview with Lambertina Doran in her Notebook November 1932 BVM Archives.

9. Bishop Hennessy's congregation, the Holy Ghost Sisters, in which his cousin became the first Mother Superior, began on September 6, 1890 with a Mass in the convent of the Visitation Sisters in Dubuque. Coogan2 243 n8. Archbishop James J. Keane suppressed Hennessy's community in October 1913. Archdiocese of Dubuque archivist Father Loras Otting 9/17/09 e-mail

10. Lewine Enderle Memoir Section II 5

11. Information from BVMs at the infirmary (summer 1967) Group sharing of Sisters from the infirmary and from the motherhouse communities with the author about Mothers Gertrude and Cecilia.

12. Source for 19-acres information., Coogan 2 22

13. Architect J.J. Egan suggested a siding on the railroad tracks at the foot of the bluff. From there, pulleys hauled materials up the 226 ft. bluff to the building site. Water pumped from the river supplied masons and bricklayers working on the construction above. Coogan2 227

14. Interviews of Sisters at the infirmary from 1954—1967. See Appendix to Chapter 5 for TB deaths of young Sisters and background on TB in the U.S.

15. Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau began The Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium in Saranac Lake, New York in 1884. See HISTORIC SARANAC LAKE website: A BRIEF HISTORY, Saranac Lake Settlement, Pioneer Health Resort, (no author) 2008.

16. BVM Theodore O'Connor spent some time in Denver under the care of her brother—Dr. Walter O'Connor—surgeon general for the Denver and Rio Grande railroad. The doctor drove the three Sisters (Theodore, Loyola Rutherford, Josephine Clarke) to Boulder, urging that they “open a house in which TB patients could be accommodated.” Coogan2 230 See Appendix to Ch. 5

17. Though there were only thirty Catholic families in the Boulder area, none of them rich . . . plans went forward for building at the foot of the Flatiron Mountains. The new school would be called Mt. St. Gertrude Academy in honor of Mother Gertrude. Theodore O'Connor became its first superior. Coogan2 230 See Boulder appendix to Chapter 5.

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18. The planning committee for the General Election of Mother and the Council continued to meet in December and January since the term of office began February 2. Mother Clarke's death in December 1887 set up this timeline. [CM—December 1890.] Not until the summer of 1967 with the introduction of a new government did the time of election change to the Summer Senate. Later the Senate of Election met during Easter vacation. In 2010 the Senate sets the time of the Senate of Election

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## Appendix to Chapter 5

### **Angela Fitzgerald, BVM**

Coogan<sup>2</sup> 228 locates Angela on the staff at The Mount during Gertrude's famous visit in 1889. Though a September 2009 inquiry to Sara McAlpin, BVM archivist at Clarke College where the Mt. St. Joseph records are stored, found no list of teachers for that period. Sara added that The Mount's catalogues show only classes offered, not instructors. A search of Angela's file in the BVM Archives

### **Redempta Coleman, BVM**

Redempta Coleman (who entered the BVMs in 1888) was 18 years old and had just made her first vows when Hennessy invited her to be the Mother of his new congregation. The prospect so frightened her that many Sisters in 1967 said she asked to be moved as far away from Dubuque and Hennessy as possible. In 1897 she was changed to St. Brigid, San Francisco. She became superior at Petaluma, (CA) in 1903.

### **Matilda Lahiff, BVM**

Matilda Lahiff must have received the background on Hennessy's attempt to lure BVMs into his new congregation and the description of Gertrude's visit to Mt. St. Joseph from Gertrude herself. A former novice of Gertrude and a dear friend, her account contains information about what occurred before and after Mother's polling of the Sisters at The Mount. Letters of Mother Gertrude saved by Matilda Lahiff indicate an ongoing correspondence. The bishop's plan to use BVMs to begin his new congregation was common knowledge according to Sisters in the motherhouse complex interviewed in 1954. Sisters in the infirmary also recalled the story in 1967. Those who were novices under Angela remember her description of Gertrude's visit.

### **New Motherhouse dimensions.**



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Blueprints called for a frontage of 250 ft.; a 220 ft. long south wing housing the chapel and novitiate and a four storey wing on the north referred to as the professed wing, extending 245 ft. Limestone quarried on the grounds and faced with Bedford stone made a solid foundation 7 ft. wide at the base. Interior partitions (walls) were 15 inches thick of solid brick finished with plaster. All floors, including the ground floor, were hard maple; all other woodwork solid oak. Coogan PRICE2 227

### **St. Gertrude Academy. Boulder, CO**

Dr. O'Connor arranged a visit with Bishop Metz of Denver. In an October 21, 1890 letter to Mother Gertrude, the bishop assured her that "a day school in Boulder would face no competition from other orders and that the Benedictine Fathers would gladly serve them." But since the Sisters of Loretto were just then opening a boarding school in Denver, he wished no other order to accept boarding students until they had gained a foothold. Loyola Rutherford returned to Dubuque delighted with the prospect of a Boulder day school.

Letters of Mother Gertrude Regan, BVM Archives. More on Boulder may be found in Coogan PRICE2 230, 231. And in BVM NEWSLETTER

### **Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau**

Dr. Trudeau, himself a TB patient, began The Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium in Saranac Lake, New York in 1884. With his fresh air treatment based on European experimental procedures, Trudeau developed a whole new treatment for TB, and a building type known as *cure cottage* evolved. The first such patient cottage in Saranac Lake was named Little Red—the Red House mentioned in BVM discussions in CM. Robert Louis Stevenson visited Saranac as a tuberculosis patient from October 3, 1887 to April 16, 1888. "Stevenson's fame increased public interest in Dr. Trudeau's sanatorium (sic)." Also see HISTORIC SARANAC LAKE website: A BRIEF HISTORY, Saranac Lake Settlement, Pioneer Health Resort, (no author) 2008.

### **Young BVMs and Tuberculosis**

60% of all who died or left the community before Mother Clarke's death in Dec. 1887(119 out of 192) died of TB. Coogan2 192 n.2. In the cemetery at Mt. Carmel, rows of headstones bear the names of young Sisters who died within two to three years of entrance, most of them from tuberculosis. Their deaths compelled Mother Gertrude to turn from buildings to people—from the motherhouse construction to an almost desperate

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search for a way to stem the epidemic among the congregation's young members and a place for them to recover without endangering other members. The Mt. Carmel cemetery headstones mark the period between 1885 and 1895 as the peak in the deadly presence of TB in the BVM community. According to the brochure of the American Lung Association, "100 Years of History," the US suffered an epidemic of TB in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the crowded and unsanitary immigrant sections of large cities.

Tuberculosis (TB) was the most feared disease in the world during the late 1800's. People of every status; young, old, rich, and poor were being stricken. As the disease ravaged its victims, they grew pale and emaciated; TB became known as the "White Plague." The poet Keats, the pianist Chopin, the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, and many other famous people of the 19th century were among the victims of TB. At that time there was no cure and little hope of recovery from tuberculosis.

American Lung Association's Christmas Seals - 100 Years of History



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**Blocks of Bedford stone form foundation of Mount Carmel Motherhouse. Unknown family in front.**