



Chapter 8

Cecilia Dougherty—Third Mother

So the third Mother took office. And she was new, kept young by her 10 years with the novices. And she was wise and seasoned, made so by her 10 years on the Council. She had ideas and plans, but they were not plans for buildings. They were plans for people, for making BVMs into excellent teachers. Only four months ago, she had told her last group of novices the story of her entrance day. ¹ There were some in every group near tears because parents were against their “joining the convent.”

Mary (Cecilia) had been surprised at the strength of her own mother’s reaction to her decision to join the BVMs. Much to her dismay, her mother was so opposed to her entering that nothing would budge her. So Mary Dougherty decided to wait until her 18th birthday on February 2, 1856 when she would be of age. Then she quietly packed her trunk folding and laying in clothes on the list for postulants to bring. Though she expected her mother to keep her threat, she felt called to be a Sister in Aunt Letty’s order. Her mother made one final attempt to dissuade her. ² Standing next to the half-full little trunk, her mother warned, “Mary, if you do this, I will never see you or speak to you again!” But she could no longer legally prevent her daughter from going to the novitiate. At 18, Mary Dougherty could make

her own decisions. Her call to the BVMS came with a strength far greater than her own mother's anger.



In fact, Mary took encouragement from what her aunt Letty Burke told her about Agatha Hurley. Though both Letty and Ellen Hurley (Agatha) were 21, Agatha faced similar opposition in 1844. She had entered before Aunt Letty and been summoned home to deal with her family's objections. As a result, Aunt Letty (Sister Mary Agnes) became #22 in the community and was labeled the first to enter from Dubuque, a week ahead of Ellen Hurley (Agatha). When Agatha returned, she received #23—seen as the first to arrive but the second to enter.

Cecilia skipped most of the information about Agatha to tell the novices about her own departure from home. “Cold, like today,”³ their novice mistress said, surveying the most recent group of young women to arrive for her welcoming words. One of the three girls from Chicago had left Union station on the morning train with a heart full of sadness—the disappointment of parents' words in her ears and bitter tears in her eyes. All needed to know others had come before them despite opposition, to be reminded by Cecilia that the Spirit would comfort their hearts.

Cecilia continued her story. Outside the house Papa had already hitched the horse and now waited to load the trunk into the sleigh. He sensed the tension between Mary and her mother could best be handled by acting quickly. He lifted the trunk into the back thinking he could cut a mile or two off the route to the motherhouse. The sleigh would go straight across the fields all the way on a solid frozen crust. There was such a crust she noticed as Papa bundled her into the cutter for her February 2nd birthday ride to the novitiate. Mary looked in vain for her mother's face at the window, but her mother was famous for never changing her mind. Knowing Mary's mother well, Aunt Letty could predict the clash of wills between mother and daughter.

As Cecilia continued her story, the postulants imagined Papa and 18-year old Mary crossing the fields, going over snow-covered fences, making twin lines behind them, hearing the whisper of the runners in the quiet air. Mary wiped away her tears with a whisk of her long braids so Papa wouldn't catch the white flash of her handkerchief. By the time they reached the pale yellow stone buildings of the motherhouse, her blond braids were stiff with ice. She noted that Papa had a bit of ice on his beard as well.

Then the horse turned into the drive and paused at the door. Mary folded the rugs back from her legs, jumped down and turned to hug her stepfather. He swung the trunk onto his shoulder and they walked toward the warmth of a blazing fire showing through open door. She could see novice mistress Margaret Mann waiting, and behind her Mother Clarke. Next to Mother Aunt Letty! Mary ran to greet them. Papa brought her trunk inside, greeted everyone, gave her a final hug, turned the sleigh and started for home, wiping a glove across his eyes. Then Letty hugged her, whispering in her ear, "Was your mother so very bad?"

"You must be cold. Come by the fire," invited Margaret Mann. Cecilia easily imitated her Dublin brogue, much to the delight of her audience. "Why, even your braids are frozen!"

Here they all laughed—Cecilia and the postulants and novices—in on the joke of the salty tears and the long, stiff braids. She mimed taking off her thick coat and scarf and the Sisters pulling a chair up to the big potbellied stove in the community room for her. Cecilia shuffled the chair closer to the pretend fire, put her feet up to an imaginary brass rail in front of

her and sat on her hands to warm them. Then dropping into the brogue of the novice, she said, “You're # 86.”⁴

“#86? Whatever for?” queried Cecilia, doing both voices. And in the Irish voice “So's you'll get your clothes back from the wash. You sew the number on and they get passed back to you.” She captured the earnest tone of one with important information. Now her audience grinned, exchanged glances. Just like now, the young women nodded to one another.

For Cecilia Dougherty was a performer, especially in these first days in the novitiate when everyone missed home so much. Sometimes she entered the room, turned around and raised her hood high off her shoulders as if she were “growing in grace.” With the black veil covering her head and shoulders she grew very tall and shrank very small at will. It was the lesson of the Novitiate—to grow in grace. At the same time each one was to discover how great a part God had in the process, and how small yet how important each BVM was when united to the work of God in the world.

It seemed to Mary the postulant, Cecilia confessed to her charges, that the five months between February 2 and July went by quickly. In the middle of a torrid summer, she suddenly found herself between names. On the eve of her reception as a novice, she was in reality #86, neither the Mary Dougherty of her entrance day nor yet the Sister novice of tomorrow. On July 1, 1856, her number was the constant. No matter what her name tomorrow, she was and would be the 86th member to enter. Hardly anyone among the postulants hearing her story had thought of a community number that way. No one else would be given her number ever.

On the evening of her reception, “#86” filed with five other postulants into the mud and straw chapel that had been a sheepfold.⁵ “According to number (81,82,83,84,85,86) given in the order of our entrance,” Cecilia continued, “we knelt at the altar rail and one by one reached into the basket held by Sister Mary Margaret [Mann]. Each of us took out an envelope. At the end of the line, I removed the last one, wrote “86” on the outside, and handed it back still sealed. Tomorrow at Mass I would hear Father Donaghoe read the name inside.” Cecilia remained still, as if standing reverently in the adobe chapel, on the threshold of the great adventure of the rest of her life, never guessing how much it held for the congregation as well as herself.

However it happened on the day of her reception, Mary Dougherty left after the ceremony with Cecilia, her mother's name, a bittersweet name. Her mother would keep her word never to see her or speak to her again. She avoided that idea to think of St. Cecilia the organist. Mary had been organist at Garryowen and in the novitiate. She would probably teach music, so the name fit well for a musician, even if it hurt the daughter to recall how her mother turned from her!



Mother Cecilia Dougherty

Her sense of humor turned her mouth up in a smile. She knew the story of St. Cecilia—how an angel appeared when the Saint played the organ, mistaking it for heaven. No angel had ever appeared when Mary Dougherty played at Garryowen, she assured the young women seated in front of her. And she doubted if one ever would, even though she was Sister Mary Cecilia. She laughed into the eyes of the postulants who were sure she could do almost anything. Play the organ and bring an angel down if needed!

Her postulants became reflective as she told them about the ceremony of the names. They were no longer strangers, but felt at home with this tall graceful woman who had shared so much with them. They really knew her! Going to the door, they shrugged into their coats for the walk she had promised them, talking cheerfully as they strolled into the yard.

The postulants in white sunbonnets usually crowded around Cecilia at the start of their walk down the lane. As the farm wagon, back from Dubuque, turned in at the gate, it suddenly stopped and someone in black with news got out to intercept the little group, “MOTHER CECILIA, Wait.” a small figure called out.

All the heads in their white bonnets turned. In the center, Cecilia in her pink sunbonnet turned with them.

(No one said this is how it was, but one can imagine it this way.) It was February, a time when postulants entered as well as the time for the General Election of Mother and the four Consultors.

The election news certainly came on a February day with the wagon from Dubuque. Cecilia did indeed win the 1894 election. She was the new Mother. The informality of her learning about the election result fits what we know of the love the congregation felt for Mother Cecilia.

Mother Gertrude (for it was she who had called out from the wagon) hurried over to give the new Mother the first hug. What will Cecilia be like as Mother? thought the future congregation in their white bonnets.

So very different physically, Cecilia and Gertrude walked back up the path to the door.⁶ The tall one reached out to open and hold it for Gertrude, who walked in first as usual. A postulant caught it open for Cecilia. “Thank you, dear,” she smiled.

“You’re welcome, Mother,” answered the white sunbonnet, gazing up under the pink one. Then the young woman turned and led the line of postulants in after Cecilia. Many young Sisters would continue to follow Cecilia Dougherty for the next two decade.

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Notes to Chapter 8

1. The beginning of this chapter is based on “The Pattern Stands Clear,” a biographical sketch of Mother Cecilia written by Acquin Lally when she was a BVM and published in the September 1958 VISTA 14-18. Acquin taught the novices in the late 1950s. Her classes researched BVM history as part of the course, and she used the work of her students in a VISTA series on the Mothers after Mother Clarke. Her articles marked an attempt before Vatican II to find the BVM charism.

2 All the older Sisters interviewed as a group in the infirmary in 1967 told the story just as it appears here. The next day more older Sisters appeared to share, correct, add to, corroborate, and insert details.

3. The Farmers Almanac describes Iowa winters as extreme in the 1850s— blizzards, months of snow and temperatures of -20° to -40° sometimes for days or weeks. Farmers hung their meat up high out of the reach of starving wolves, locked their livestock up securely at night, took a dog and a gun with them to the barn. Packs of wolves howled around Iowa farmhouses at night. Sometimes up to a hundred circled the

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smokehouse. Mary Dougherty would not have attacked them with sticks of firewood as two city-bred BVMS did in 1845. A half dozen young Sisters spent some part of the winter in a log cabin with Mary Clarke near the first prairie motherhouse while it was being built. Pulcheria writes that two of them took sticks of firewood and drove the “dreadful dogs” into the ravine because their “dismal barking” kept a sick Mother Clarke awake. The wolves never returned that winter. Pulcheria McGuire ANNALS 145.

4. In later years the "86" identified Cecilia in letters to dear friends, sometimes reminding Sisters of common origins and background and erasing any difference in status. At other times the short signature teased, “Yr. old 86,” or was its informal self at the end of a P.S. “86.”

5. The original rock chapel at the 1846 motherhouse was destroyed in the fire of 1849. It was then that Father Donaghoe had the sheepfold walled with adobe, roofed and floored as a temporary chapel. The sheepfold chapel, attached at one end to Father's house, continued in use from 1849 until the move to the Grandview motherhouse in 1893/94. The chapel's disintegrating adobe walls were torn down in 1902.

6. This imaginary scene shows both Mothers and their leadership styles. Cecilia kept Gertrude informed and active in community affairs. Gertrude valued Cecilia and respected her ideas. The two cooperated but might not agree on priorities.

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