

Chapter 18

Re-enter a Familiar Figure



Mother Gertrude

During Cecilia's six years as Mother (1894-1900), Gertrude Regan had not been far from the center of activity. In fact, in 1894 Gertrude and Cecilia literally ex-changed places—Cecilia becoming Mother and the Council appointing Gertrude novice mistress in her place.

Sixteen years before, in charge of the novices out at the prairie, Gertrude had been “so vigilant, yet so interiorly quiet over it, so rarely letting her voice be heard, so unmistakably pleased with her neighbor, so

truly dignified, so far from levity, and yet so companionable,” or so Pulcheria McGuire, an obvious admirer and novice from 1878, wrote in her *ANNALS*.² She also mentioned Gertrude's formula for novice development: “Novices should be allowed to grow in peace in rules, customs, and practices with our eyes upon them.”³

On some occasions in the 1890s, Gertrude watched novice growth from the less exhausting vantage of the windows at Mt. Carmel, preferring to delegate the duty of walking out over the hills with the novices to Crescentia Markey, the secretary general. The type of postulant had changed during the 1880s from Iowa farm girls, Irish or German immigrants that a priest was shepherding into the congregation, to farm girls, boarding school products and Chicago or San Francisco city dwellers.

The schools in which new BVMs would teach required more than a “growth in customs and practices.” At Mother Cecilia's request, Crescentia was there not just to walk with the novices, but to see that they grew in knowledge of Dante and Roentgen, Pasteur, the stars, basic Christian doctrine, and Scripture.⁴ For her part, Gertrude Regan encouraged a willing gift of self and a deep spirit of prayer.

This time Gertrude was left to her novice watching for only seven months before she, Mother Cecilia and Josephine Clarke boarded the train

for the Pacific coast. She had never seen St. Vincent, Petaluma, the school she accepted after her 1892 California visit, and she thrived on travel. For almost two months from early October until November 26, the three explored northern California. There was so much to see that they stayed on even through the feasts of St. Gertrude (Nov.15) and St. Cecilia (Nov. 22) and arrived back at Mt. Carmel barely in time for Thanksgiving dinner.

A few weeks later both Mothers were packing again, this time to attend Agatha Hurley's Golden Jubilee banquet. And what a banquet it was! Forty-three priests concelebrated the Mass in Holy Family church. BVMS and other Sisters filled one side of the nave. Families from Holy Family and the surrounding parishes crowded the aisles to honor “Mother Agatha,” (as parishioners and Jesuits called her).

Agatha was well known. She had directed the two Holy Family schools—St Aloysius and St. Stanislaus for 40 years—since the first BVMS came in 1867. Stories credit her with organizing religion classes for St. Agatha parish children in nearby Douglas Park before the parish could build a Catholic school of their own. A grateful people named their new parish “St. Agatha.”⁵

Gertrude returned from the jubilee to describe as much as she could to novices gathered around her. They asked about the banquet and Mass; the sanctuary lamp and candlesticks; and caught a glimpse of the missal and stand Agatha chose from her jubilee gifts for use in the Mt. Carmel chapel.

Finally they begged for stories about the first Chicago missions.⁶ And then Gertrude admitted with a laugh that superior Agatha Hurley was one of the few experienced teachers beginning the two schools. Bright novice Scholastica McLaughlin received a crash course in math from Michael Nihill the summer before going to Chicago. There had been almost no one else to send out except four of the newest—two only a few days professed and Scholastica, one of two novices sent to Chicago.

On the first day of school, 1867, Gertrude continued, Agatha (always in somewhat precarious health, and the only one who had seen the inside of both schools), collapsed from the Chicago water, the heat or both. One of the Jesuits hurried over to anoint her just as the Sisters left for school. However, the staff of St. Aloysius walked over to school on opening day without any idea what they would face.

It had been easy at St. Stanislaus. Two Sisters went early to the school, met the parents, registered the children and assigned them to their classrooms. By 10 o'clock all was peaceful and in order. Not so at St. Aloysius. There they found the doors locked and girls playing wildly in the yard. The principal took one look and sent Scholastica racing to the convent seven blocks away for the keys to the school. Agatha had been so sick no one remembered to bring them! (See appendix.)

However, the Sisters never forgot the key to the people's hearts. Daily on their walk back to the convent after school, they visited the homes of the sick. If families needed help, the Sisters pinned up their aprons and capes, took off their sleeves and washed floors, dishes, and children; changed beds and babies; and made supper in homes where mothers were ill, children sick or older people unable to cook.⁷ Following the Chicago Fire in 1871, Holy Family school at 210 Maxwell street stood in the center of the parish as a source of kindness and help to everyone.

Telling these stories to her group of young hopefuls, Gertrude Regan may have wondered how many could stand the physical demands of city parishes in Chicago. The community scourge of tuberculosis felled many of her novices even in the “mansion on the Mississippi,” (the new mother-house). She had sent tall, gentle novice Hiltrude McEvoy home to Emmetsburg, (IA), hoping that a rest would check the disease, but the young Sister died within four months.⁸ Some of Gertrude's novices might survive as her friend Agatha had—so sick from the heat and water during her first year in Chicago that Father Damen thought someone healthier should take her place as superior and advised her to go back to the prairie! But Donaghoe insisted on her remaining “until I send for you.” He never sent, so Agatha stayed in Chicago, built Holy Rosary school and convent in Milwaukee and traveled to Wichita to scout the academy offered by a group of businessmen there. Her report encouraged Mother Clarke to accept the Wichita boarding school.

In January, Agatha's jubilee gifts arrived at Mt. Carmel to be used for special occasions. On July 16th, the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, these appeared on the altar for the first Mass said in the Mt. Carmel chapel. In August, novices set up kneelers and folding chairs for the annual retreat and Agatha's gifts appeared again.

Within a week of the retreat, the Council voted Gertrude back on the Council. Rosalia had died and Gertrude would finish her term, adding this duty to that of novice mistress. Two such jobs were not an unusual combination in a less complex era. Most novices received their practical knowledge of religious life out on the missions, teaching in the schools and living the same life as the Sisters. If they spent more than a few months in the novitiate, it meant they needed more schooling or more sense. A few fell ill and were kept to recover.

Once novices went out to teach, Gertrude wrote short notes to keep in touch. Usually she sent a brief request to a superior to watch over someone sent to her house, as she did in this 1899 letter to Matilda Lahiff, one of her “old novices,” about Robertine Welch, a novice sent to Holy Family.

My very dear Sister

Who is naughty, you or I about writing? No doubt you will think pretty much as I do about the matter that we are both at fault. I am sending My Holy Father St. Joseph (a holy card) to remind you dear child that some little body in your old novitiate would like to see a few lines from you. You will all be good to dear Robertine (Welch)—you will find her unselfish and willing but like all beginners liable to make mistakes. She is very glad to begin with the little ones. [Robertine was six feet tall!] I have no fears as you will all help her... How very glad I will be to see and welcome you home the coming vacation. God bless and protect you dearest child is the heartfelt wish of your old Sister.

M. Gertrude⁹

Many if not all of the novices came back to the motherhouse for part of the summer to receive instructions on the religious life and to attend workshops. Usually an older Sister came along. Some remained at Mt. Carmel for music lessons or were forced to stay behind because of health when others returned to the schools in August. Those on the missions heard from their novice mistress by mail, receiving many little reminders of affection rather than correction. The following four letters from Gertrude’s letters in the Archives give permission to novices asking to make first vows.

My darling little Sister,

Do you think I treat my dear novice children badly—well you know it's hard to make incorrigible sinners good—I will try to make up for all when you come home—won't I be glad to see each and every one! Yes, indeed I will, and so will all at home. Be dear good children, earnest in your service of God and of the Community—May He bless, guard, and protect you all—Maybe you will soon see someone from home.

Lovingly your own

S.M. Gertrude

Gertrude even calls herself an “incorrigible sinner,” in the letter above, joking a little with this novice. The tone of a grandmother sometimes crept into her notes to these youngest . . .

I am sure my dear old child [the superior, Matilda Lahiff again] under whose care you have been since you left the novitiate, will be able to give Mother [Cecilia] a good account of you.

Mother Gertrude had been responsible for two distinct generations of novices, her affection for them evident in the simple act of enclosing a note to explain why two letters appeared in one envelope.

Note -- As I was getting the mail for John to take, the scratch I wrote this 17th of May turned up. I thought it would reach you before she [Cecilia] did. I only send it now that my little girl would see that her old Sister was not entirely neglectful of her—God love and bless you—G

The “little girl” might be 16 or 30 years old, so the letter must be read with the humor intended by the 72-year-old Gertrude. This is the same Sister that has Matilda Lahiff for superior; Gertrude not only thought the novice a capable teacher, but wanted her to see that she had written her often. In 1900, after the community elections made her once more responsible for its direction as Mother, Gertrude wrote to Matilda Lahiff, her “dear old child.”

. . . This is that we may not forget each other and that you may know that in the prayers of each other, we will ever be remembered. Is it not so, child? I am always pleased that you are doing well.

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Notes to Chapter 18

1. The Council chose novice and postulant mistresses, and the superior of the motherhouse, the secretary, and the treasurer of the congregation.

2. According to BVM Baptist Seeley, who entered in 1867, (the year BVMs went to Chicago) there were only a few novices left at the prairie at the time since most had been sent out to staff the new Chicago schools. Coogan¹ 377-388 describes BVM beginnings at Holy Family based on an account in the Holy Family annals which Brother Mulkerins, SJ, published in 1923. Scholastica McLaughlin, one of the novices sent to Chicago in 1867, wrote the account of the first day at St. Athanasius school. Holy Family Parish—Priests and People BVM Archives. See chapter 18 Appendix.

3. Gertrude as novice mistress Pulcheria McGuire Annals.

4. Crescentia Markey Diary

5. Douglas Park RE December 1894 entries.

6. Many of the stories about the early days at Holy Family were passed down to younger Sisters by those who started the Holy Family schools. The Chicago fire began only blocks away from both school and convent and spared both. Until the wind suddenly turned, the fire was headed straight for the center of the parish—the church. The generous actions of the BVMs are recounted in Brother Mulkerins' book, now out of print. Agatha Hurley sent letter after letter to the motherhouse and to people in Dubuque begging for food, clothes, "whatever you can send." And there is a copy of the list of what was sent to Holy Family in the BVM Archives in Dubuque. Mother Clarke stripped the motherhouse shelves of provisions and blankets and sent her own shawl. The people of Dubuque donated wagons of canned goods and clothes to Holy Family Parish.

7. Sharing of Sisters at infirmary or motherhouse. 1967

8. A feature story detailing a trip to Hiltrude McEvoy's grave in St. John's cemetery, Emmetsburg, (IA) gives a good summary of this novice's last illness and that of two other young Sisters who died of TB within a few weeks of her. BVM Newsletter December 2006 2ff BVM Archives

9. All four letters in this chapter may be found in the collection of letters of Mother Gertrude Regan. BVM Archives

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Appendix to Chapter 18

Holy Family Schools—First Day

The heavy weeks of preparation for classes in the barren warehouse which was to serve as St. Aloysius school, together with the intense heat had left Sister M. Agatha prostrate, so ill that Jesuit Father Niederkorn administered the last sacrament as the Sisters, excited and troubled, were setting out [for school]. The girls of the parish had been under the direction of lay teachers during the summer, and the Sisters hoped that some degree of organization might have been established, but their first problem was to find the school in which they were to teach. In this they had little trouble, for as they approached the general area, they were alerted to its location by a bedlam of high pitched feminine voices and soon came in sight of a milling crowd of hundreds of girls of all ages, pushing, shoving, chasing each other about, jumping over gates and climbing over fences. Then sudden panic struck the Sisters, for in all the excitement of the morning, none had brought the keys to the gate or the school doors. Sister M. Angela Quigley quickly dispatched the young Scholastica to bring them, so, with skirts gathered up and veil flying, she hastened back the seven blocks to the convent...When the school and classroom doors were finally opened, a throng of squirming girls crowded in, before, beside and behind the Sisters, each making a dash for a desk wherever one could be found.

Source of the above story: “In response to a request of Brother Mulkerins, SJ, who was then engaged in writing the history of Holy Family parish, Sister M. Scholastica McLaughlin supplied him with ten pages of reminiscences. These have served as the basis of the account given here.” Jane Coogan, note 1 380 identifies the sources her story

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