

Chapter 36

The Solution is Shared



Mother Emily, O.P.
Sinsinawa Dominican Website



Mother Bonaventure, O.P.
Sinsinawa Dominican Archives



Sister Alexius, O.P.
Sinsinawa Dominican
Archives

Once she had worked through the problem of how to shuttle novices from the missions to a year of novitiate at the motherhouse, Cecilia realized she had not been alone on Falconio's agenda. Letters began arriving at Mt. Carmel from other congregations asking her advice. Apparently, sending out novices had been common practice for half a century among most women religious in the U.S.

Suddenly Cecilia found herself in demand as an expert. The Dubuque Presentations wrote that Archbishop Keane had referred them to her. On May 10, 1908, Mother Emily Power, Mother Bonaventure Tracy, and Sister Alexius Duffy—Dominicans from Sinsinawa—spent hours with her at Mt. Carmel discussing the latest ruling from Rome.

Two days later Mother Herman Joseph, provincial of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Los Angeles, and Mother Fidelia of Tucson called with questions about how Cecilia had managed the added year of novitiate. In August two Sisters from Rome visited Mt. Carmel! “We were not the only ones taken to task,” commented Lambertina in RE.

Meanwhile, Cecilia's failing eyesight caused her to fall again, adding physical bruises to mental buffeting. A 1908 letter to Louise Clarke (herself in good health again) mentioned being “all mended,” but a week later Cecilia admits to a friend that she is still shaken by “that unfortunate fall.” As usual, she speaks lightly of her health.¹

A few days before, notice had gone out to 16 of the 32 novices on the missions to come back to Mt. Carmel as soon as school closed in June to begin their year of novitiate. The remaining 16 must wait another year until the first group finished. There simply was not room enough at the mother-house for all 30 novices to return, nor Sisters enough to replace them.

Simultaneously, Cecilia notified pastors that no novices or additional Sisters could be sent out for at least a year. She closed the boarding section of academies in Council Bluffs and Iowa City, and the whole school in Holden (MO). She had attempted to close Council Bluffs as far back as 1896, but without success. Now she had no choice—unprofitable boarding schools must be eliminated to staff parish schools with contracts with the congregation. Cecilia discontinued three of the smallest and least profitable boarding schools. These needed more personnel, so closing them released more Sisters to the teaching pool. It was the best choice possible.

There is little question the choice involved a loss of money for the community and met resistance from the towns and students involved. St. Agatha Seminary in Iowa City was immediately sold and became a rooming house, purchased later by the university for a dorm. St. Cecilia in Holden stood empty for years except for summer Chautauquas held on the grounds. After 1916, it was exchanged for some real estate in Florida. However, it was 10 years before St. Francis parish finally purchased the academy buildings in Council Bluffs and longer than that before the boarders recovered from the loss of their “old home.”

Letters about novices returning to Mt. Carmel and the closing of three boarding schools had hardly been mailed to BVM houses than a cacophony of criticism began inside and circulated outside the congregation. At the time, Cecilia made little comment, preferring to let the reaction die naturally. However, a community letter two years later on the addition of local consultants added a caution to keep comments on Roman decrees close to home and urged a prudent silence.²

If it is natural for BVMs to be outspoken, it is equally a trait of the community to avoid the repetition of a mistake. Cecilia accepted all criticism as uncomfortable and normal. The tears of displaced boarders whose schools had been closed were only part of the psychological result of the shake up relating to the novices. There was, in addition, the chafing of the returned 16 who endured an entire lackluster year at Mt. Carmel. They

came back to the highly structured novitiate from the more open life on the missions and immediately felt the difference.³

Not only was mission life more open, it was more adult. How hard for novices who had been in charge of children, classes, duties and programs to accept suddenly knowing next to nothing again—like ordinary novices! It had to be endured, but hardly enjoyed. Displaced novices were disturbing elements. With a sigh of relief, after they had served their time, they pronounced their vows and sped back to the schools. Their sighs were hardly louder than those who watched them speed away. At last everyone settled down to the matter of new novices and programs to train them.⁴

One year after Falconio's visit, Cecilia could see plans emerging for the education of new members. The two years keeping novices home convinced her that pastors could do without Sisters if they must. At the end of three years, the newly professed were filtered out to the most necessary positions. Then she dared to choose Sisters from all levels for a year of study. By that time the little Franciscan was clearly fortune, though he had entered her life like black fate.⁵

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Notes to Chapter 36

1. Letter from Cecilia mentioning her accidental fall

May 4, 1908

My own dear Child,

I did so desire to express my pleasure and appreciation to your class—but alas for a distracted troubled anxious life! I am not myself at all ... I am so miserable today—owing to the general shake-up of my old 70 year old body by that unfortunate fall—that I am good for naught but go to bed.

Your own loving old

Sister M. Cecilia

2. Closing paragraph of the November 10, 1909, community letter:

“The matter of this letter is to be kept strictly to ourselves; and no Sister is at liberty to discuss it with anyone not a member of our congregation. The indiscretion of some of our Sisters exposed us to much comment last year, so I beg all to keep silent

concerning this latest direction from the Holy See, and to pray that the will of God may be done in all things.”

Canon Law was only then being applied to active orders of women. It would be revised before 1920 in an effort to eliminate differences in Rules among women’s congregations. Vatican II finally reversed this standardization in favor of diversity in the 1960s. Originally, Rome imposed Canon Law as a means to insure all religious enough time for prayer and instruction in the religious life.

3. RE’s final comment on the novices made to return home for an entire year:

“Fifteen professed. This ends any irregularity in the time of profession. These fifteen had been teaching but returned to make the full year of novitiate. As all could not be brought to Mt. Carmel at one time, these fifteen were obliged to wait a long time for their vows.”

Interviewed 60 years later, Edwina Tansey quipped, “Not one of us was a bit sorry to have it over!” Interview D. Walsh infirmary summer 1969.

4. Mother Cecilia realized the problem without being able to do anything but sympathize with the young Sisters. It must have been intolerably dull spending a whole year in the backwaters of Mt. Carmel. She tried to make their loss in the schools easier. In 1908 she moved the selection of superiors back from July to May and issued letters changing personnel from one mission to another on July 16th instead of August 15th. That way the Sisters could become acquainted with the needs of their parish and school, and superiors would have more time to fit in new personnel.

5. Just when she might welcome some of the blessed dullness that so dismayed the retained novices, Cecilia found herself embroiled in a second tempest—the question of BOYS! It was but one more ingredient in the stew that Falconio's visit had set boiling.

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