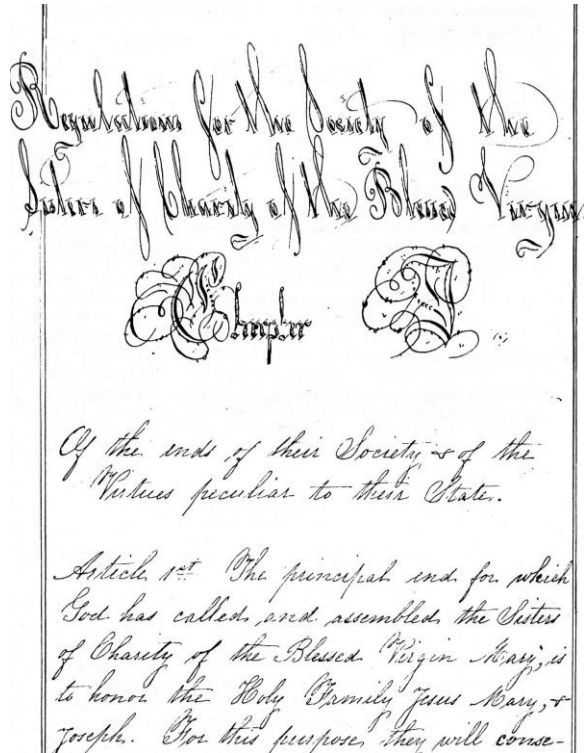


Handwriting and comment from My Dear Sisters edited by Laura Smith-Noggle: “This copy of the Rule was written by Mary Frances Clarke in 1845. It is handwritten on lined paper 8 ½ by 11, folded to make a booklet which is hand-sewn.” (p. 137)
BVM Archives



Chapter 42

Old Rule—New Time

Cecilia Dougherty’s early experience at the old motherhouse on St. Joseph prairie directed her interest not only toward the education of young teachers and the training of young Sisters, but to the Rule and Customs by which BVMs were formed. In 1882, she and Xavier O’Reilly compiled the first Custom Book and from then until 1915, she collaborated on six revisions of the customs:¹ 1882, 1884, 1892, 1899, 1906, and 1915.

Revisions? Yes. Six in 33 years? Customs change. Old ways of doing things are replaced by ways that work better or feel more comfortable. New ones emerge as succeeding generations enter and the old way gradually drops off. Customs arose and were proposed. Voted in and voted out. Custom Books changed on average about once every six years.

Changing the Rule was a much more serious matter. Rules were Constitutions, basics which seldom changed. Cecilia as Council secretary

copied the first Rule from Mother Clarke in longhand and experienced the tedious process of changing it by hand. An April 17, 1885, letter from her to Agatha Hurley finds Cecilia completing the final version of that Rule:

“We have one copy of the rearranged Rule ready to take to the Bishop [Hennessy]. I’m just going to begin the copy for the Rector of the American College in Rome.”²

A July 26 letter also informed Agatha that the Rule was in the press, that Bishop Hennessy himself and Father Ryan were overseeing both the translation from the Latin and the printing.

Gertrude Regan also went through the tiring process of writing and rewriting the Rule in her best hand—each copy a work done slowly like a monk in a scriptorium. She served as secretary and assistant to Mother Clarke from 1873 to 1883 during the Rule’s initial composition and its subsequent revision with the addition of a section on government by the Chicago Jesuits. Gertrude probably learned at least five versions by heart. Each revision demanded 12 copies, one for each priest involved in viewing and reviewing the document and one for each of the five Councilors.

When Cecilia was called back to the Prairie in 1881 as novice mistress, she was valued for her “fine hand.” Both she and Gertrude worked on the Rule before its acceptance by Rome in 1884. Even Agatha Hurley “had a hand” in making the copy reviewed by the Jesuits at Holy Family which resulted in their suggesting the missing section on government. The final copies with revisions came from Cecilia’s hand, carefully and clearly written. In 1912 the Rule lay open once more for revision, and the Sisters looked carefully to see what needed to be changed.

It was also an election year. With Cecilia ending her second three year term as Mother, Gertrude realized that many of the Sisters might automatically vote for her (Gertrude) for a fifth term. It was time for new faces to appear on the Council and for new ideas to accompany a new Rule. Gertrude requested her name be omitted from the list of nominees for any office. Many Sisters now wondered who could muster a majority. Some leaned toward Ascension Lilly; a younger generation looked toward one of the provincials, Isabella Kane.

In the period between the 1912 non-definitive election (no one received a majority) and Rome’s decision on who was elected, Cecilia and the former Council began talking about changes in the Rule and realized it

might be a good time to look at the Community's Book of Customs too. The Customs listed the way BVMs usually acted and regulated the lives of the Sisters in little ways. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Customs sometimes seemed to dictate every inch of the habit or hour of the day. But the Customs belonged to the times—past and present—and what the Council saw mirrored a Victorian view of women (including Sisters).

Victorian Society held that women needed protecting and regulating. Folks at the turn of the century commonly thought that women had little business sense, no idea of order, and used intuition rather than reason. As a result of society's conclusions, women could not vote, sit on a jury, manage their own money, and by law had to have a trustee for an estate of any size. Men suspected all the above was not so, but since everyone said it was, a man simply congratulated himself on being lucky enough to have some of the few smart mothers, wives, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, etc. The intelligence and business acumen of a Gertrude was credited to the help and inspiration of God. Some ascribed Cecilia's ability to plan so well for the education of her Sisters to God's Providence.

But women like Cecilia and Gertrude were helping society change its ideas and expectations of women. The Custom Book generally followed the mores of the society of the day except for society's attitude toward intelligent women. BVMs simply acted as if they could do anything for the sake of the Kingdom. Manners dictated the Customs. So did dress codes, tradition, and good sense. Unlike the Rule, the Sisters could change the Book of Customs as often as they wished without speaking to Rome. Out-of-date customs simply disappeared like last season's hats.

The Rule was harder to change and a Rule did not disappear without effort. Changes to a Rule must be discussed and accepted by a majority of the community and then ratified by Rome, i.e. by a committee of men—priests who knew very little of how women thought and felt or if they did! But they did know how men could overwork women and abuse their own power. Most Rules were fashioned to curb the power of other men in the church by reserving certain times to the Sisters for prayer, meditation and recreation. Like everyone, the Sisters also needed time to mend, clean, correct papers, plan lessons and relax.

Parts of the Rule acted as a protection. During retreats to novices, Cecilia often exhorted, "Keep the Rule and it will keep you." It needed to

do just that in the turn-of-the-century Catholic Church. Often without any other power than their own mother wit, Sisters found they could use the Rule as a safeguard against excessive demands by pastors and bishops.

Cecilia faced the ire of the clergy on at least one point of Rule: “The Sisters are to be in their convents before dark.” Yes, it sounds a bit Victorian. It was a serious rule of society in 1894. Virtuous women appeared after dark only if escorted by their husbands or a male companion. It was a convenient rule for Catholic Sisters who taught until four. When pastors wanted them in the church at services some evenings, they simply quoted the Rule to keep a bit of time free to talk to each other.³ It was called recreation and it eased tensions.

The point of conflict as far as pastors were concerned was the attendance of the Sisters at evening services. It should surprise no one that more was involved than going to church. Sisters were expected to direct the parish choir and play the organ, train and discipline the altar boys, set up the altar and vestments, and in some places clean the church. These were chores neither Father Donaghoe nor Mother Clarke supported since they stole time from study and preparation of lessons. BVMs were professionals—teachers, not cleaners or cooks.

During her first term, Mother Cecilia met the problem of evening services head on. She informed pastors in 1894 that she would no longer make exceptions to Chapter 11, Article 8 of the Rule (“The Sisters are not to care for the altar and parish choir or attend night services.”) and was canceling any exceptions made earlier. The Sisters needed some recreation after a long day teaching.

Though Mother Gertrude had granted the exceptions to this rule at an earlier date, she now supported withdrawing them. Superiors had complained loudly about the accumulation of parish duties unconnected with teaching. Were pastors aware that the accumulation of small duties caused overwork and illness? Waiting in the wings was TB, showing up again in younger Sisters. Cecilia summoned the Rule.

As she answers a letter from Father Fowler, pastor of St. Joseph’s in Sioux City protesting her decision to allow no exceptions, Cecilia presents a strong case. “I didn’t force the Rule on the Sisters and I’m not forcing regimentation on you. . . I am sorry laughter from the recreation room comes across to Benediction,” and she concludes that the “convent must be

too close to the church.” The Sisters need their recreation and she will tell them to be quieter. RE adds that after this letter Fowler telegraphed three congregations but could find no other Sisters for his school.

Cecilia wrote to a pastor caught between his bishop and herself, throwing in an obvious reference to the bishop, who would know that “those who possess jurisdiction” referred to him, a letter Tihen would surely show to the bishop.

Mother Cecilia to Father Tihen in Wichita:

. . . I have only to add that—if those who possess jurisdiction in the matter think that by observing their Rule the Sisters will become a scandal and an obstacle to the best interests of Catholicity in Wichita, we shall take this as an evident sign that Wichita is a field in which God does not intend us to labor.³

Quite a strong statement from Cecilia to the bishop via Tihen!

In many missions, pastors scrimped on heat, offered no salary except whatever tuition the Sisters could collect, and grudgingly allowed the Sisters to keep whatever they earned teaching music. Some pastors refused to release music money claiming this belonged to the parish and school. When Sister after Sister came home to Mt. Carmel with tuberculosis, Cecilia acted to cut the volume of work and gain time out for her Sisters. The simplest way was to insist on Rule 11, the “after dark” rule.

Rather than explain all the above to bishops and pastors, she simply appealed to the Law, the Rule—something they understood. She quoted the Rule, insisted she had no power to grant an exception, offered to withdraw the Sisters if the pastor desired, and did so within days of his request. There were plenty of schools waiting for BVMs, especially in the Chicago area. Pastors quickly learned that Cecilia was not bluffing. Nor could they prevail on her to return once they offered her the ultimatum, “And if you don’t like it, you can just go back to Dubuque.” Her answer? An empty convent.⁴

When the 1912 election failed to give a majority to any candidate for Mother, changes in the election process became practical.⁵ Having the whole community vote worked with a smaller number of members but it had obviously failed with over a thousand. Because Ascension Lilly won a plurality, not the majority needed, the results went to Rome for a decision. The Sisters were unanimous in wanting their elections out of Rome and in

their own hands. To assure this they gave up voting directly for Mother in the 1914 Rule and substituted an elected Chapter to choose her.

Cecilia continued to leave parishes whose pastors made unreasonable demands. She carried out the removal of BVMs in LeMars (IA) and St. Aloysius, Wichita, in short order, closed St. Kunnegunda in Davenport because of the pastor's demand that the Sisters continue to clean both school and sacristy, tend to the altars, and direct the singing in the parish choir. That plus the intense cold they suffered in dilapidated parish buildings and the pastor's refusal to supply heat at last moved her to action.

On the other hand, the Rule had caused the complex dilemma about missioning novices and teaching boys. It was a two-edged sword. By 1911, Cecilia and her Council agreed with Archbishop James Keane that the 1885 Rule needed revision. Provided with books on Canon Law from Falconio and his answers to her questions about altering various sections of the Rule, Cecilia began work on changes at least two years before the 1912 election. First, she asked for suggestions from the Sisters. Before long, Archbishop Keane offered a few of his own, none of which reached the final copy.⁶

Recent dealings with Falconio surfaced a few more things needing adjustment. A new Rule must include boys in their apostolate as well as co-education, two sources of friction with bishops and pastors. Most Sisters wanted to live without all the exceptions resulting from Falconio's compromise solution—otherwise where was the Rule? Finally, changes in the Rule had to be acceptable to the Sisters who would live it. It must also pass the scrutiny of a conservative Roman board of male clergy.

Cecilia continued to act as Mother until the community heard from Rome. Ascension remained as 1st Consultor. The Old Council under the Old Rule continued to meet, each with one vote, and listed needed changes in the Rule under four major areas—

- #1—Method of electing Mother and the Council;
- #2—Provision for teaching boys;
- #3—Provinces that unite rather than divide—to share responsibilities of the Mother;
- #4—Perpetual vows to replace three-year vows.

Mother Cecilia had been in favor of perpetual vows since the late 1890s and hoped to include them in the revisions. She also agreed with the Archbishop that a division into provinces was practical, but she sensed

resistance to this among the Sisters. Everyone searched for a compromise to be united as one community even though divided into provinces.

Now in Rome as a Cardinal, Falconio stressed again that the Sisters themselves must be involved in all changes. That meant working papers, informative articles and feedback from the community on parts to be changed. Indeed, all members must read, discuss and share their ideas since it would be their Rule to keep. Cecilia expected the most discussion and disagreement on perpetual vows and provinces. She was right.

At last, word came from Rome confirming Ascension's election. Cecilia stepped down to First Consultor; Ascension stepped up to Mother and the work on the Rule continued. During the next three years Cecilia and Ascension collaborated, discussed, prepared papers to go out to the Sisters, and sheets to be filled out and sent back in by them.

When she received word of her election as Mother, Ascension Lilly, superior of the new Infirmary, was found, scrub brush in hand, on her knees cleaning a bathroom in the Infirmary. For six years she had been a member of Cecilia's Council and knew the problems with the 1885 Rule. As a good math teacher, she showed herself a practical problem-solver especially in the matter of the provinces.

Cecilia Dougherty had educated her teachers, planned for higher education for women, acted to free her Sisters to teach well, opposed overwork or work that squandered energy needed for the ministry of teaching. She improved school curricula and aimed at making higher education possible for her Sisters and their students. The fourth Mother, Ascension Lilly, most often called "motherly" by the Sisters, worked best with problems and used compromise to set up win/win situations. Her creative solutions won others by their practical simplicity. She was a gentle resolver, a peacemaker. A true mother, she proved herself the right leader in a time of change and potential conflict.

‘ ‘ ‘

Notes to Chapter 42

1. Customs are ways to act in a place or a society. In religious communities they are written down in a Book of Customs. The book is changed when a majority of the group wants to review it. Some families have definite places to sit at the supper table, are expected to help with dishes or take turns setting the table. These can change if everyone wants to do something else instead. Since Sisters come from many different cultures and families, the Customs are written down to settle how a group acts as a family.

2. More letters of Cecilia during the period of pulling back to the provisions of the Rule in Coogan² 251- 257. A favorite sentence occurs in the letter from Mother Cecilia to Father Fowler of Sioux City:

Yes, I heard that you applied not only to one, but to three different communities for Sisters to take your school, and I regret very much that none of them could accommodate you.

3. Unless one has some idea of the hardships in parish work in 1895, Cecilia's refusal to allow her Sisters to go to evening services might seem petty. But the day of a Sister teacher was full. Besides specified prayers said together, she made all her own clothes, cleaned in the convent and sometimes in the school. After school, she often visited the sick in the parish, especially in those families whose children she taught. When she visited, she might help with the cleaning, cook the dinner, or care for the younger children if the mother was ill. At night, Sisters corrected homework for as many as 70 pupils and prepared lessons for the next day. The Rule allowed BVMs one hour of recreation together at night—an hour they badly needed to revive their spirits, quill their borders and darn their socks. [For those unfamiliar with these terms, they refer to parts of the early BVM headdress. The border was a white piece of starched cloth like the empty case for a sausage. A border fit around the face and was pinned at the side of the chin. Quilling was a method of fine pleating the border by forcing it onto two one-and-a-half-inch-wide flat sticks about a foot long. It had to fit tight. It was then wet-starched right on the sticks, dried flat in a heated oven and when dry carefully broken loose from the sticks. These sticks or quilling needles were removed leaving a long hollow starched frame for the face].

4. Quite a strong statement. Pastors quickly learned not to say these words aloud. BVMs were scarce; schools needing them plentiful; Cecilia and Gertrude quick to respond. Sisters seem never to have returned to any pastor who invited them to “go back to Dubuque.”

5. In the general election of 1911 according to the Rule of 1885, the democratic process of everyone under vows for five years or more voting directly for the Mother resulted in no majority vote. Ascension Lilly = 345; Isabella Kane = 243. Some Sisters voted for eight other candidates—two from the official list and six as write-in votes. The 1911 election was the first to produce no winner.

6. Archbishop James J. Keane of Dubuque met with Mother Cecilia and her Council on November 21, 1911. He had four suggestions to offer, most concerning his diocese and all revealing his idea of the relation of an archbishop to a community of women in his diocese.

Coogan² 361 lists four:

- 1) Revision of the BVM Rule—necessary .
- 2) BVMs must teach boys in his archdiocese as long as they stay in school. Teach boys and girls in separate classrooms if possible, but accept co-education if not.
- 3) BVMs not open colleges (outside Dubuque) for many years to come.
- 4) BVM congregation too Jesuitical. Sisters must get the archbishop's permission before inviting priests to give retreats.

Archbishop James Keane would have other suggestions when the Rule was actually being discussed. Only #1 and #2 above were followed; #3 was advice; #4 was changed to a suggestion that older priests give the retreats. None was in the revised Rule or Customs, but the Sisters wrote them down for the record.

/ / /