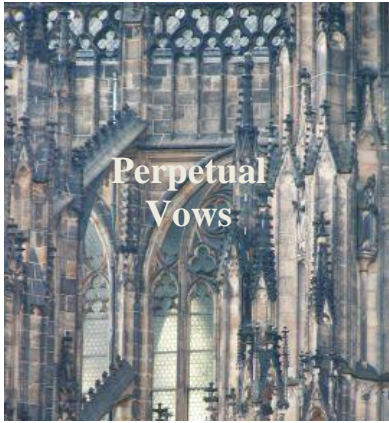


## Chapter 43

### 1914 Rule and Perpetual Vows!



From 1912—1914, Sisters across the BVM community discussed every article in the Rule that might possibly be changed. Cecilia and Ascension closely followed the advice of Cardinal Falconio to involve the members of the congregation in all proposals. In June 1912, Ascension began circulation of the main issues with points for discussion. A major concern was the proposed change from three-year to perpetual vows.

The idea of perpetual vows was not new in the community. Since 1897, Cecilia had been sending out information on perpetuals to prepare the community for changing to them. RE dates her first inquiry to Rome about these vows as October 1896. She had been Mother two years. In January 1897, she wrote the Rev. M. J. O'Connor, SJ, at St. Xavier College (Cincinnati) asking what changes must be made in the Rule to obtain perpetual vows. He answered on January 28<sup>th</sup> that the changes were simple and the process short.

On September 14, 1897, Mother Cecilia mailed a circular letter to superiors advising them to read the enclosed monograph, "Simple Vows of Religious in the United States," once a month to the Sisters so they would "be fully instructed in everything that relates to religious life." It was not until January 15, 1899, after a year of such preparation, that she proposed the subject of perpetual vows to Archbishop Hennessy. Father Louis Carew of the Trappists was in Rome and had already offered his help in bringing the matter to the Vatican.

"Her interview with the Archbishop proved a disappointment. His Excellency thought it best not to make any change." (RE) Cecilia had prepared everybody but the bishop! At this point and at one other a few years later, the Council moved to ask for a Cardinal Protector, but tabled it both times. Cecilia failed to achieve perpetual vows for her congregation before her term ended in January 1900, but she was never one to give up.

For the six years of Gertrude's two terms, the subject of the vows slept, but after her own re-election in 1906, Cecilia woke it again. Patiently she repeated the slow education of the Sisters on the meaning and value of perpetuals. During the three-year term of Mother Ascension,<sup>1</sup> (1912-1915) the subject was never dropped. July 14, 1912, RE announced, "Mailed circular letter asking opinion of Sisters re/perpetual vows."<sup>2</sup> Ascension's signature ended the letter, but Cecilia had spaded the ground.

Some Sisters still did not understand perpetuals. Why make vows any differently? they asked. Everyone said her vows every three years intending to be a BVM the rest of her life. Some thought the shorter period kept the promise fresh. Others liked the idea of committing themselves again. And some wanted the shorter time, saying "forever" was too hard to think of.

Round and round the discussion went with a peculiar intensity now that the moment of choice lay in front of them. And there were dire predictions! Two kinds of vows—three-year and perpetual—would mean those with three-year vows would be looked down on by the rest. Some argued that different commitments would divide the community. "We have always done it this way! "Can we go back if we don't like it?" "Could we just try it awhile and see?" "No? Well—"

Discussions pro and con filled convent laundry rooms, dining rooms, community rooms, school rooms and letters. Jesuit speakers provided more information to BVM convents. Many viewed perpetual vows as an opportunity to ratify a promise always meant to be forever, no matter what the formula said. And there were some who hoped it meant an end to wondering if permission to renew vows would be granted. To the latter, perpetual vows offered a welcome security. The main concern always returned to the effect of two kinds of vows on the spirit of equality in the congregation. Would one kind devalue the other?

Cecilia Dougherty at 75 searched her heart finding perpetual vows a good thing for herself. Others of an equal age argued for triennial vows, saying they would be content to live out their lives in three-year promises. It was an issue—these vows—calling forth many a jeremiad predicting that a community rift would come. None did, perhaps because the July 16<sup>th</sup> letter from Ascension and the Council said that those making triennial vows would continue to have the same rights and be eligible for all offices in the congregation as before. And with that the issue disappeared. In the end, all

chose to make perpetual vows—all, that is, but one Sister in a coma in the infirmary.<sup>3</sup>

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### Notes to Chapter 43

1. Elected under the 1885 Rule, Mother Ascension served one three-year term. At the end of that time she opted not to run again. Much of the groundwork for her time as Mother had been done by Cecilia and the Council on which Ascension was a member. Cecilia continued as 1st Consultor on Ascension's Council, so the matter of the new Rule proceeded without a hitch.

2. RE entries on perpetual vows—1914 .

Sept. 30—Making preparations for perpetual vows.

Dec. 30—will be the day. Since it is not a holy day of obligation, it will be easier to arrange Mass in the convent. Propose a triduum be made before, and if possible, meditations printed and sent out to all.

Oct. 23—Ascension and Cecilia called on Archbishop John Keane and secured permission to print and send to BVM houses meditations and spiritual reading in preparation for perpetuals.

Nov. 16—Fr Jasper, OFM—[talk] on perpetuals at Mt. Carmel and The Mount

Nov. 17—BVM Stella Reed—almost at the point of death—made perpetuals at 7 pm—the first one.

Nov. 20—subject of perpetual vows constantly with us.

Dec. 14—Father Jasper—conference on the vows.

Dec. 31—We made perpetual vows this morning, thank God! Before Mass, Mother Ascension made her vows followed by all the Sisters in the Infirmary. At 6:30 Mass—75 made perpetuals. Sisters in Dubuque did triduum at The Mount.

3. According to the provisions of the 1914 Rule, Mother Ascension sent out letters asking that each Sister decide whether or not she wished to make perpetual vows. If the Sister's decision was affirmative, she signed a form witnessed by another Sister. If she desired to continue making triennial vows, she simply wrote as she always had for permission. No Sister was to be forced. In the end, everyone signed for perpetual vows except one. In a coma in the Infirmary, Valentine Zimmermann missed all Vow discussions and died on December 31, the last BVM under triennial vows.

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