



BVM Archives

**“I have heard so much about myself that I no longer give any heed  
to what is said.”**

**Mother Cecilia Dougherty, BVM**

## Chapter 50

**“If you didn’t know Mother Cecilia, you missed half your life.”**

*Celerina King, BVM*

### **Cecilia Dougherty 1838 - 1919**

By 1919, the last year of Mother Cecilia’s life, Chicago neighborhoods south of the Loop near Holy Family, had changed radically from those to which the BVMs first came in 1867. So had those north of the Loop. The area west of St. Dominic Church was now set up to serve the foreign born, a mostly Polish/Greek wave of immigrants who needed help with the language as well as a grammar school education. They lived in St. Dominic Parish just west of the Cathedral. They were Italian—one generation from the Irish. They did not speak English well and needed more in the way of education. They also had a different orientation toward the parish and were not used to supporting a school.

In 1916, Cecilia offered to staff one school in the Chicago archdiocese without pay and suggested this would be St. Dominic, already taught by BVMs. The pastor, Rev. B. Rogers, accepted two unsalaried BVMs for St. Dominic's in 1917, and a letter from Cardinal Mundelein the same year thanked Mother Cecilia for the six Sisters already “assisting in the training of Italians in Holy Family parish.” This section of Holy Family later became St. Callistus, an Italian-American parish also taught by BVMs.

In 1918, Cecilia tried to improve conditions for the Sisters at St. Dominic. The convent was falling down, there was no janitor, and the rats swarmed about even during the daytime. A better house had to be found or the Sisters couldn't stay, she told the pastor. Things must have improved. St. Dominic remained open for 40 more years until fire regulations condemned it in 1958 after the tragic Our Lady of the Angels fire.

Ackley (IA), often the subject of Council discussion, also owned buildings in a “dilapidated condition.” Finally, falling plaster endangered both teachers and pupils. Since the pastor had no interest in fixing the school, Cecilia withdrew the Sisters in 1919.

Requests for Sisters continued to come in from the west coast. Bertrand Foley, a member of the 1915-20 Council, favored an apostolate to the Northwest and succeeded in convincing Cecilia and enough other

Councilors to agree. One school in Rapid City (SD) and two in Butte (MT) opened in 1917 plus two Portland (OR) schools in 1920.

Cecilia did not seem particularly interested in building, though she supported several construction projects. She was Mother when Holy Angels Academy, Milwaukee, opened in the Senn mansion in 1895. In 1896, Holy Angels put on an addition; three years later the BVMs staffed Gesu grade school in a Jesuit parish which served Marquette University. Mother Cecilia voted for additions to Mt. St. Joseph before 1900 as well as to Mt. St. Gertrude in Boulder (CO). During the same time, she encouraged Hilary O'Regan to begin St. Mary High School. When it proved successful, she planned for a new building.

In Cecilia's 1906-12 terms, St. Mary put up two additions. In her last five years (1915-1919), she opened Loyola Cottage in Boulder for BVMs with TB. "The Loyola" belonged to all provinces and each provincial assumed the expenses for Sisters from her province. For the first time, the brown cottage and its community of recuperating BVMs had its own superior, separate from Mt. St. Gertrude Academy.

Mother Cecilia succeeded in negotiating a salary increase in 1899 to \$20 a month per Sister and in 1919 to \$35 for high school teachers in an attempt to free her Sisters for their principal job of teaching. She hoped to eliminate extra moneymaking projects like candy sales and entertainments. Since Falconio's 1908 visit to Mt. Carmel, Rome had required a two-year novitiate and State Education Boards added more requirements for teachers. BVMs must now meet the cost of their education for certification, support both motherhouse and infirmary, and underwrite the two-year novitiate. The salary increase hardly accomplished all she hoped. In spite of the support of bishops, pastors pled hardship and others but slowly conformed.

Cecilia had phased out three boarding schools to cover the teaching loss of novices. While the closed St. Cecilia Academy, Holden (MO), sat empty she permitted the Holden Chautauqua, the Protestant church in the area, to meet on Academy grounds.

In 1898 a letter to the Sisters in San Francisco addressed their proposal that Sisters take turns "sleeping in." She considered it a novel idea and gently refused permission. The fact that Apostolic Delegate Falconio emerged from his contact with the BVMs as their firm friend, bringing them a papal blessing after deluging them with problems in 1907-08, indicates

two of her strong points—her ability to dialogue and her genuine acceptance of everyone.

Though Cecilia's eyesight began to fade after 1900, her vision of educational needs and the means to meet them was sharp. During her terms as Mother from 1906-1912 she actively engaged in the demand for higher education for religious at Catholic universities and colleges enrolling BVMs in summer schools at Marquette, De Paul, Loyola, St. Louis U., and Creighton. She was a leading player in setting up Sisters College at Catholic U., a year-round liberal arts school opened for religious women. To pare down the cost of sending her Sisters to Washington (DC) she helped bring the Catholic U. Extension to Dubuque.

It was Mother Cecilia who encouraged and applauded Mt. St. Joseph Academy when it became a four-year college in 1912. She celebrated its membership in the North Central Association under Antonia Durkin in 1916, when few Catholic colleges for women were strong enough to qualify.

Mother Cecilia lobbied hard for a BVM Board of Education, rejoiced when it was set up during Mother Ascension's term (1912-1915), and allowed it the time and space to find a workable mode of operating after her own re-election in 1915. In educational matters she showed a spirit of adventure. In her desire for excellence—in education and in religious life—she reached for the means to achieve it, planning not just for a prepared community of teachers, but for a house of studies available for retreats near the Jesuits for Mass and spiritual direction.

Other administrative firsts besides the Board of Education belong in her portfolio. In 1894, she called the first Superiors' Institute, assembling superiors and their principals at the new motherhouse for a meeting on the schools just before the annual retreat. She followed this meeting with the first teachers' institutes in several centers “out on the missions” in 1897. Both institutes attempted to set standards for excellence in teaching and to provide further teacher training using BVM master teachers, an apprentice system in teaching which continued well into the 1940s.

It was Cecilia who worked for perpetual vows from 1896-1914, and she who dared the leap with Hilary O'Regan to begin the landmark St. Mary High School—a central high school for girls built and supported by the BVM congregation. So she acted as an innovator and a leader not afraid to encourage creative solutions from others to meet the time's needs.

Yet none of these advances in educating or organizing tell as much about the person and her effect on her community as her single largest accomplishment—Mother Cecilia took her congregation through radical changes without losing sight of the person. She knew and loved each Sister, welcomed her to Mt. Carmel as to her home, and remained open to those who differed from her.<sup>2</sup> Cecilia emerged from Falconio's visits, from her Davenport trial and her time at the Bluffs still open, generous, and wise. As Eileen Curran recalled, “You could tell Mother Cecilia anything and she would look at you as if she knew nothing about you except the good.” Because she sought to serve and to love, she was followed and loved. Because she moved always toward a practical vision of a challenging future, she was sometimes opposed by strong women holding other views.

So large spirited was Cecilia that she easily looked to the advancement of others. With her encouragement, Lambertina Doran wrote *IN THE EARLY DAYS*, a more recent history of the Congregation's beginnings than the newsy *ANNALS* of Pulcheria McGuire. Mother Cecilia unerringly chose the talented to attend Catholic U.: Antonia Durkin, future Dean of Clarke College and planner of the Novitiate Normal program; Justitia Coffey, involved in beginning Immaculata High School and Mundelein College, Chicago, where she served as first president; and Evangela Henthorne, first Dean at Mundelein College.

Mother Cecilia was flexible enough not only to listen to new ideas, but to hear them, and courageous enough to try a new project in the face of opposition. This proved particularly true in establishing St. Mary High School and in sending the six BVMs for degrees to Catholic U.

During the last nine years of her life, Mother Cecilia lived and worked handicapped by failing vision. Usually she answered letters herself on note cards in indelible pencil and in large regular printing. By 1910 her sight was so impaired that she asked Sisters and students to make a novena to St. Lucy,<sup>3</sup> adding with her usual thoughtfulness and sense of confidentiality, “Until my failing sight is strengthened, I must call upon the Sisters here to assist me in reading and answering my mail.”

Cecilia's respect for persons also made her careful not to encroach on the decisions designated by the 1914 Rule to the new provincials. While in Milwaukee for an eye checkup, she was approached by a Sister for some permission or other. With gentle consideration she refused to legislate. “I

don't know if I have the authority to give that [permission]. Perhaps it belongs to the provincial.” And she added, smiling, “You see, these provinces have made a change.”<sup>4</sup>

Mother Cecilia approached death with the same firm and graceful walk that inspired Crescentia Markey to announce her to Mother Gertrude, “The Queen is coming to see you.” Sisters often went over to talk to her as she sat in the sun at Mt. St. Joseph the summer before she died. It did look as if she were holding court as they knelt beside her chair to be on a level with her face. They thought of her as mother or sister rather than queen.

In August she was confined to her bed in the large room next to the stairway near the chapel entrance—near enough for her wheelchair to be pushed in for Mass or prayers. For weeks, lines of Sisters waited in the hall to go in one door and out the other—pausing at her bedside to say they loved her and were praying for her, receiving a brief greeting from Cecilia and some sign of affection. Her eyes were all but sightless and yet they retained their clear blue. Her heart was faltering, but she drew all who knew her with her affectionate interest.

When she died on the 7th of September, her doctor leaned on the mantel above the fireplace in her room and wept.<sup>5</sup> Bishops, Sisters and superiors, men and women who had loved her for many years came from all over for her funeral. Perhaps the most telling tribute of all the affectionate or sorrowful notes to the congregation at the news of her death came from the pastor of St. Dominic, the poor parish in Chicago near Holy Name Cathedral.<sup>6</sup> The letter was sent to Ascension Lilly, Vicar General, in response to a memorial card she had mailed to him.

St. Dominic's Rectory  
Nov. 6, 1919

Many many thanks for the beautiful and appropriate “in memoriam” of dear saintly Mother Mary Cecilia. No one knows but myself and God how indebted I am to her for her sincere and holy friendship as also for her many kindnesses. She loved us because we were poor, and she knew that our path here was strewn with difficulties. Favors were granted to us that were denied to others more influential and more worthy of consideration from a worldly point of view. She never denied me a single request.

In dear Mother's death I have lost the dearest of friends. She held out sympathy to me and extended to me her cooperation in my work when it was

denied me elsewhere, and I never left her after a visit about school matters without feeling more courageous to continue our uphill struggle...

Rev. Bernard D. Rogers

Mother Cecilia Dougherty's monuments will never be in stone, just as it was not in stone that she made her contribution. She dealt in people -- always in people. The long lines of those waiting to see her during her last illness broadcast this. More than any of her long list of achievements this is the message of her life. She enabled people to be and to do their best. As one BVM put it, "If you didn't know Mother Cecilia, you missed half your life." May you know her now.

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### Notes to Chapter 50

1. The provision Cecilia made at The Loyola for BVMs who had tuberculosis referred expenses to their provincials. By 1916, so many Sisters had been sent to the brown house in Boulder behind Mt. St. Gertrude Academy that the superior of the Academy asked to be relieved of their care. In March 1916, Cecilia ordered The Loyola to continue as a residence for Sisters with TB, but selected a separate superior for it and asked the provincials to take over expenses. Before the division of the congregation into provinces in 1915, the community treasury supported it.

The Loyola was named for Loyola Rutherford who oversaw the building of both Mt. St. Gertrude Academy and Mt. Carmel and planted the orchards and pine trees on the grounds of both. She also planned and built the cottage with its large outdoor sleeping porches for the Sister-patients. This



**Cecilia Dougherty in her later years.**  
Mundelein College Archives

feature she adopted from the Red House, the original Saranac Lake (NY) cottage built for TB patients.

2. A story passed down through generations of Sisters illustrates how important this idea of the Motherhouse as the home of all BVMs was to Cecilia. One of the Sisters had a persistent cough which annoyed the Chaplain, Father Clarke, so much that he turned in the middle of Mass and invited whoever was coughing to leave the chapel.

As the Sister stood up to go out, Mother Cecilia also rose from her place in the back pew. "Sit down, Sister," she commanded firmly. "This is your home!" Raising her voice, she addressed the priest: "She can do as she wishes in her home, Father. Please continue the Mass." The story was related by a group of older Sisters at the Motherhouse in 1968. They may have been novices 60 years earlier.

3. St. Lucy is the patron of the blind and those with eye trouble. According to the legend, she was a young Roman Christian who decided to remain a virgin. When her relatives sought to marry her off, she refused. The family tortured and blinded her yet she continued to see. At last they killed her. Her feast is December 13, the winter equinox and the darkest time of the year. Making a novena, nine days of prayer (from the Latin for nine) is a traditional time to spend praying for a favor. A novena to St. Lucy would begin nine days before December 13 and end on her feast.

4. Story from Evangelina Henthorne, principal at Holy Angels.

5. Related by BVM Francis Rose Urbanowski, Cecilia's nurse: Cecilia's doctor was an alcoholic and Mother Cecilia had listened to him with compassion and affection. He was losing much more than a patient.

6. St. Dominic's Church stood at the east side of the Cabrini Green in 1990. At that time, Mass was still said there. When the school closed in the '50s, the parish tore down both school and convent. The diocese set aside the church as the Chapel of St. Peregrine [patron of cancer patients], a place where people with cancer, their families and friends could attend Mass and pray together. Its new status was never highly publicized and when the expense of keeping it open outgrew its use, the diocese tore it down.

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