



Summer 9-20-2016

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M. Christine Anderson Ph.D.

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, M. Christine Ph.D. (2016) "Sister Justina Segale and the New Woman: Tradition and Change in the Progressive Era," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol33/iss2/5>

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Sister Justina Segale and the New Woman: Tradition and Change in the Progressive Era

M. CHRISTINE ANDERSON, PH.D.



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This paper is part of a collaborative effort with Judith Metz, S.C, and Mary Beth Fraser Connolly examining the pedagogical potential of the journal of Justina Segale, S.C.; a manuscript which documents the first thirty years of the Santa Maria Institute. This social settlement was founded by Sister Justina and her biological sister, Blandina Segale, both members of the Cincinnati Sisters of Charity. Sister Justina's journal is an especially appealing text for undergraduate students because it was written in an engaging style that nevertheless illustrates the complex integration of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion in the early twentieth century. For our purposes, we will focus on the applicability of Sister Justina's writing in teaching about women's changing roles, using examples from the journal to illustrate its possible uses as a teaching tool.

In both the United States history survey and in courses in American women's history, the early twentieth century is identified as the era of the "new woman" as well as the Progressive Era. The terms are, of course, interrelated, reflecting the increasing number of college-educated women, many of whom entered the newly feminized professions of teaching, nursing, and social work. The new woman claimed greater social freedom and independence and an enhanced voice in social policy based upon her expertise in social services and her growing political role. Sister Justina Segale's journal offers a distinctive perspective on the trends underlying the so-called new woman, as well as their relation to the longer trajectory of American women's history. By focusing on Sister Justina and the Santa Maria Institute as we examine the changing status of women in the early twentieth century, American Catholic women's experiences move from the margins of the historical explanation to the center, and students are encouraged to engage the complexity of women's roles.

The opening of new careers for women in the Progressive Era is often portrayed as a dramatic change from nineteenth-century female domesticity. Yet Catholic women religious had filled these feminized professions far earlier and were the most prominent, though not the only, women who founded social service institutions in the nineteenth century. This background to Santa Maria's founding reveals for students the conditions that enabled Catholic women religious to lead the way in the creation of American schools, hospitals, and orphan asylums. Catholic religious communities provided education, organization, and female role models that enabled women religious to succeed when governments lacked the will or resources to care for the poor, who were so often immigrant Catholics. Secular women in the early twentieth-century settlement movement stressed the novelty of their efforts, crafting a new role for themselves that was compatible with their emerging freedom from domesticity.¹ The impetus behind the Santa Maria Institute

1 For example, Jane Addams, who published her account of the establishment of Hull House retrospectively, noted that the Little Sisters of the Poor had earlier operated an old age home in the same building. By mentioning the sisters in the list with other past occupants of the building, Addams implicitly stresses contrast rather than comparison with her own efforts. Jane Addams, "First Days at Hull-House," *Twenty Years at Hull-House with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: MacMillan, 1910): 92. See also: *The Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull House and its Neighborhoods, 1889-1963*, at <http://hullhouse.uic.edu/hull/urbanexp/contents.htm>



A confirmation class at Santa Maria.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati,
Mount St. Joseph, OH*



lay in the traditional roles of Catholic women religious rather than the intellectual and organizational approaches of Progressivism. Nevertheless, the sisters did find ways to succeed in the Progressive milieu. Perhaps professionalization was an easier transition for members of Catholic women's communities than for laywomen because their orders already offered them formal education, supervision, and role models in these occupations. Thus Justina's journal exposes both comparisons and contrasts, inviting a more complex view of social provision and reform.

Since the 1830s, immigrant Catholics had relied on institutions built and staffed by women religious. American nuns, including Blandina and Justina, were often personally familiar with the problems of immigrant life because they too were immigrants.² The Segale family arrived in Cincinnati in 1854 from Cicagna, a northern Italian town near Genoa, where Signorino Segale had been a land-owning farmer. Maria Maddalena Segale (Sister Justina) was seven and Rosa Segale (Sister Blandina) was three when their family moved to the congested basin of Cincinnati. Their father, Signorino Segale, became a fruit peddler; his daughters assisted in the family business when they were not attending schools operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Sisters of Charity. The women of these orders offered the two young women an education and a model of religious vocation. They entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in 1866, when Justina was almost twenty and Blandina was sixteen years old. The sisters worked separately in their community's schools in the Southwest until the 1890s, when they returned to Cincinnati.

² Suellen Hoy, "The Journey Out: The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women to the United States, 1812-1914," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Winter/Spring 1995), 65, 83-84. See also: Joseph G. Mannard, "A Kind of Noah's Arc: The Vocations of Women Religious in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1790-1860"; and Florence Deacon, "'I said I wouldn't be a woman, but wanted to be a sister': Vocation Stories of Nineteenth-Century Women Religious," Papers presented at the Conference on the History of Women Religious, June 1998. For biographical information on the sisters see Mariana Annette Romano, "Constructing the American Catholic: Sister Justina's *Veritas* and Cincinnati's Italian Problem" (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 1996), 1-5; "1897-1922: Silver Jubilee of the Santa Maria Institute," Box 1, Santa Maria Institute Papers, Sisters of Charity Archives, Mount Saint Joseph, Ohio (Hereafter cited as SMI Papers); and *Catholic Telegraph*, 29 September 1950.

Both had earned teaching certificates and were experienced in the classroom and administration. Their primary aim in starting Santa Maria was to save Italian Catholics from Protestant proselytizers, from “falling away” from their faith. From the beginning, they conceived of Santa Maria in religious terms. Sister Justina’s journals show that, although the sisters experimented with organizational cooperation with local Progressive agencies, they emphasized the institute’s religious identity. Their first project was to establish first communion classes for Italian children, and their paramount concern in any interaction with their immigrant neighbors was always their religious welfare. Marriage, baptism, and last rites were as important as material aid to the poor. Because of their experience Justina and Blandina succeeded in quickly and smoothly establishing a successful, permanent social service agency with ambitious and wide-ranging programs despite the fact that they had little funding.

This was a different trajectory than that of secular women in social service, and it had different consequences. For a generation of young laywomen who had recently gained access to higher education but who lacked the direct political power of suffrage until 1920, settlement work was a central avenue to activism. Despite their often democratic aims, native-born, middle-class, and generally Protestant settlement-women perceived their immigrant neighbors, poor and frequently Catholic or Jewish, with slightly condescending reformist zeal. The most famous settlement leader, Jane Addams, tried as valiantly as any middle-class American to overcome the intellectual baggage of her class and ethnic privilege. In her famous essay on the “Subjective Necessity of the Settlement,” for example, Addams described the costs of social and economic isolation on college-educated young people in moving terms:

You may remember the forlorn feeling which occasionally seizes you when you arrive early in the morning a stranger in a great city. The stream of laboring people goes past you as you gaze through the plate-glass window of your hotel. You see hard-working men lifting great burdens; you hear the driving and jostling of huge carts. Your heart sinks with a sudden sense of futility. The door opens behind you and you turn to the man who brings you in your breakfast with a quick sense of human fellowship.... You turn helplessly to the waiter. You feel that it would be almost grotesque to claim from him the sympathy you crave. Civilization has placed you far apart, but you resent your position with a sudden sense of snobbery.³

3 Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” *Philanthropy and Social Progress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1893): 10-11. Cited in *The Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull House and its Neighborhoods, 1889-1963*, see: http://hullhouse.uic.edu/hull/urbanexp/main.cgi?file=new/show_doc_search.ptt&doc=853



Sr. Blandina Segale, S.C., interviewing a family.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati,
Mount St. Joseph, OH*



Historian Louise Knight has shown Addams' effort to challenge the paternalistic implications of the "ethic of benevolence" that characterized the philanthropy of her race and class. According to Knight, in her essay on the 1894 Pullman Strike, entitled "The Modern Lear," Addams advanced an 'ethic of justice:' "The thrust of the essay was to explain that the workers owed Pullman no gratitude at all; he owed them justice."⁴ Yet, in spite of Addams' struggle to jettison the moral and social standards with which she had been raised, she accepted the cultural superiority of the wealthy and native born, those who had "the social tact and training, the large houses, and the traditions and custom of hospitality," in her hope to share these benefits with the urban poor.⁵

In describing efforts to overcome social differences Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* sometimes seems clinical, while Sister Justina's ethnographic style focuses on individuals. Both accounts attempt to convey the urban immigrant experience to those unfamiliar with it. In Justina's case the result is a series of narratives that enthusiastically embrace the rich diversity of the city's population. As religious, she and Blandina are authorities on spiritual matters; in the daily life of their Italian community they are simply participant-observers. For example, in the fall of 1913 Santa Maria received a trunk filled with clothing for the poor that caused what Sister Justina called a "comical incident." Sister Blandina emptied the trunk and began to distribute its contents to the needy. "In the meantime," Justina reported, "a poor, homeless penniless woman who had been received a few days previously was taken to the trunk room to see if... anything in the trunk could be of use to her. When she entered the room, she exclaimed in distress, 'Who has been at my trunk!'" Sister Blandina was dumbfounded. "She had ransacked the trunk which had just been

4 Louise W. Knight, "Biography's Window on Social Change: Benevolence and Justice in Jane Addams's 'A Modern Lear,'" *Journal of Women's History* 9 (Spring 1997), 118.

5 Addams, "Subjective Necessity," 4.

received and the woman claims it as hers!" As it turned out, the donated trunk had been left in the yard, "whilst the poor woman's trunk had been overhauled, the contents parceled out to give away and she herself invited to help herself to what was her own, the pitiable remnant of what she once possessed." Sister Justina assured her readers that "the whole matter was too comical for anyone to take offense."⁶ Whether or not that is completely true, the story is noteworthy in that it documents a personal interaction between individuals rather than a sociological analysis of their social positions.

Sister Justina's journal also illustrates how these Sisters of Charity responded to new conditions produced by the rise of social scientific authority and more complex social welfare bureaucracies. It depicts Catholic women's agency at the same time that it offers evidence with which to critique the potentially negative consequences of these changes: nativism, elitism, and rigid bureaucratic structures. Sister Justina conveys her awareness that as Italians and Catholics she and Sister Blandina, like the recent immigrants they served, could be judged according to ethnic and religious stereotypes. This did not dampen her enthusiasm for the excitement of urban life, as when she began her entry for 18 May 1923: "Truth [is] stranger than Fiction." What follows is the story she unraveled for a reporter from the *Cincinnati Post* during the era of prohibition. Professor Di Girolamo, who taught Americanization classes at the settlement, borrowed their automobile in order to bring back a jug of communion wine for the chapel from Mr. Cimaglia. When he returned the professor left the wine, a bundle of clothing donated by Mrs. Cimaglia, and his class records in the auto in the garage. The car was then stolen and abandoned. The *Post* planned to report that the police had found it with the:

...names of many Italian men and women, a jug of wine and men's and women's clothes strewn around indicat[ing] that a party had had a joy ride. The auto belongs to the Santa Maria Institute. It appears that these prominent Italian citizens are implicated in this nocturnal ride.

The professor was arrested and later released. Sister Justina noted what "a strange thing [it] is that such a commotion is made over a jug of wine which so innocently found itself in trouble, and not a word about the stolen auto or the thief who stole it."⁷ While Jane Addams could, and to her credit did, examine both benevolence and justice, for the Italian sisters justice for the people they served was also justice for themselves and their reputations. The status-difference at the root of benevolence was, at least partly, absent in their relationship to their own neighborhood.

The Sisters of Charity who founded Santa Maria were, however, very similar to the "new woman" in their creativity and innovation. They adapted their religious and organizational traditions to professionalization and bureaucratization. By the 1920s the

6 Justina Segale, J-4, 13 November 1913, SMI Papers.

7 J-10, 18 May 1923, *Ibid.*



The Santo Bambino day nursery provided care for young neighborhood children.

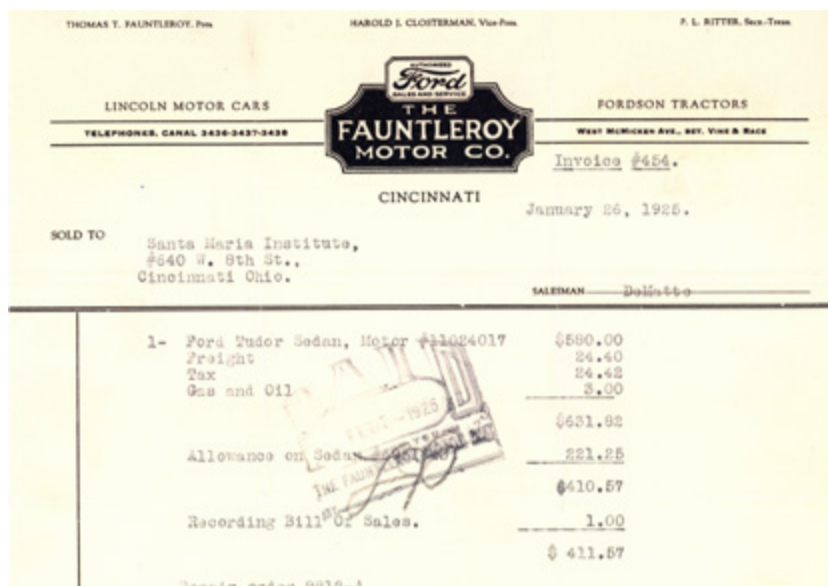
Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH



Santa Maria Institute resembled successful nonsectarian social settlements. It included buildings in three locations offering boys', girls', and mothers' clubs, instruction in English for young men, a residence for girls and young women, and a day nursery. Sisters Justina and Blandina established cooperative relationships with many of the social welfare organizations characteristic of Progressive urban reform: the Juvenile Court, the Council of Social Agencies, and the National Council of Catholic Charities. They even began to call their institute a "settlement" in order to gain public support and funds from the Community Chest. Yet, they also rejected some of the methods and values of the new "scientific charity" represented by the Community Chest (as Judith Metz, S.C., explains in her paper).

Sister Justina's journal challenges assumptions about poor immigrants, about women in general, and women religious in particular. The sisters' previous experiences with teaching and social provision also prepared them to efficiently use new technologies such as the telephone and automobile in their work. Annual reports and Justina's journals record that Santa Maria had a telephone at least by 1903. Although sisters continued to conduct visits on foot, they and their staff were connected to a bureaucratic network of agencies by phone. Justina and Blandina also joined other members of their order in adopting automobile transportation; Santa Maria purchased a Ford for \$1,050 in January of 1920. "Sister Blandina and Miss Crotty, our Field Agent, will learn how to operate it," Sister Justina reported. "With an auto we shall be able to do social work which would otherwise be left undone."⁸ The image of a seventy-year-old nun learning to drive a Model T challenges a number of age, gender, and religious stereotypes, in ways that suggest why the sisters' acceptance of modern technology and methods strikes some as surprising. For the sisters, however, these new methods were not incompatible at all. In fact, their traditional expertise poised them to take advantage of Progressive organizational networks, professional standards, and greater religious toleration, as well as the technology of the industrial age.

8 J-7, 14 January 1920, *Ibid.*



An invoice for the Santa Maria Institute's automobile; a good example of the Sister's use of new technology.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati,
Mount St. Joseph, OH*



Rather than an impersonal documentation of working conditions, Sister Justina's narrative also contains many anecdotes concerning immigrant life, including many about young women that highlight their individuality and their choices. For example, when four girls from the neighborhood were moved from Santa Maria's home for girls to St. Joseph's Orphanage, they ran away, returning to Santa Maria "a sad, woe-begone group... exhausted, dirty and hungry.... The sight of the trembling little culprits in their sad plight would move a heart of stone, let alone the hearts of the Sisters who loved them." They were fed, bathed, and tucked into warm beds, and did not receive "their merited lecture" until after breakfast the next day. "I gave each a one a pretty bag containing two balls of crochet cotton, two center pieces and a crochet needle," Justina said, "and they were smiling and happy[,] ready to go back when they found there was no alternative. A Sister went with them to the Orphanage. 'Now, you'll be good, won't you?' asked one of the Sisters. They all smiled and said, 'Yes,' except the youngest [their 'promoter and leader'], and she smiled too but shook her head, 'no.'" Rather than diagnostic explanations offered in juvenile court records, or the professional notes of social caseworkers, Sister Justina acknowledged and celebrated young women's independence — even when it resulted in broken rules.

As they cultivated independence in girls and women who received aid from Santa Maria, Sisters Justina and Blandina stressed education and autonomous, even moral, choices. Adolescent residents of Santa Maria's home for girls received a Catholic high school education and the opportunity to attend the Sisters of Charity's Mount Saint Joseph College. For some working-class immigrant girls this was an avenue to the same professional occupations that were opening to their middle-class contemporaries. For others, the commercialized leisure activities of the city held more allure. In 1924, three older girls snuck out "when everybody was asleep" and "did not return until near midnight," probably attending a "ball" or dance hall. Although Justina recognized that the discipline imposed by the home was "a great struggle" for some of the residents, in this case the



The open air dining room of the nursery in May of 1918.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH



rules were strictly enforced and the girls were expelled from the home. Friends reported seeing them at work and at church, and Sister Justina seemed satisfied that they “are well instructed and we believe they can take care of themselves, work and support themselves.”¹⁰

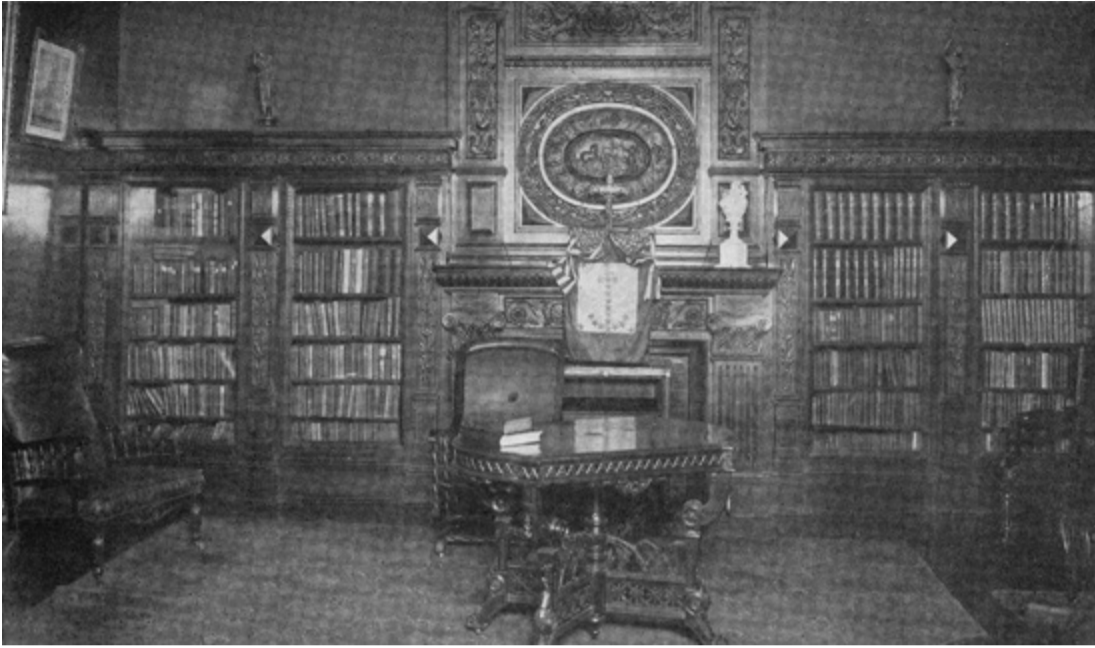
Having grown up in an immigrant community the sisters were familiar with the conditions of working-class life. They were aware that women’s inability to earn or control their wages made them vulnerable to domestic violence and to prostitution. Several times battered wives obtained shelter at Santa Maria. The sisters did not condone divorce, but they also did not force a Greek woman to return to her husband even when “he was willing to make peace with her.”¹¹ They collected support for a woman whose husband spent his earnings on drink and helped an Italian woman return to Italy rather than continue living with a violent spouse.¹² In order to fulfill her mission as a member of a religious community, Sister Justina had to manage money and act as a professional teacher and social worker — although that term was not applied to her work until later in her career. She was sympathetic to the difficulties facing women who lacked such occupational and financial skills. Unlike so-called new women struggling against domestic ideals in order to achieve personal independence, Sister Justina did not imagine that wage-earning and domesticity were in opposition. Instead she encouraged women to obtain skills and independence as resources to supplement or even replace domesticity when necessary.

A key difficulty in teaching history is how to explain concepts such as women’s shifting roles without oversimplifying the changes taking place. One of the greatest strengths of Sister Justina’s journal as a teaching tool is that it is clear, humorous, and contains many specific examples and anecdotes without sacrificing the complexity of urban women’s roles in the early twentieth century. The introduction of the automobile to Santa Maria’s

¹⁰ J-10, 28 October 1924, 166, and 22 October 1924, 164, *Ibid.*

¹¹ J-4, 8 July 1914, 114, *Ibid.*

¹² J-7, 11 March 1915, 153; J-5, 3 July 1916, 40-41, both in *Ibid.*



The library at the Santa
Maria Institute.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of
Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*



work, for instance, prompts students to question women's use of new technologies, how they imagine the aging process for women, and how this might impact our understanding of their adaptability. Sister Justina's accounts of Professor Di Girolamo and the stolen automobile, and of Sister Blandina and the poor woman's trunk, encourage examination of ethnic and class relations in the Progressive Era. Central to the significance of the journal as a text for college history courses is that it continually returns to the spiritual impetus of the sisters' work, and that it opens for its readers the often unfamiliar methods and routines of social provision by Catholic women religious.





A confirmation class at Santa Maria.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH





Sr. Blandina Segale, S.C., interviewing a family.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH





The Santo Bambino day nursery provided care for young neighborhood children.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH



THOMAS T. FAUNTLEROY, Pres.

HAROLD J. CLOSTERMAN, Vice-Pres.

P. L. RITTER, Secy.-Treas.

LINCOLN MOTOR CARS

TELEPHONES, CANAL 3436-3437-3438



FORDSON TRACTORS

WEST McMICKEN AVE., BET. VINE & RACE

Invoice #454.

CINCINNATI

January 26, 1925.

SOLD TO

Santa Maria Institute,
#640 W. 8th St.,
Cincinnati Ohio.

SALESMAN DeMatte

1- Ford Tudor Sedan, Motor #11024017	\$580.00
Freight	24.40
Tax	24.42
Gas and Oil	3.00
	<hr/>
	\$631.82
Allowance on Sedan #60000148	221.25
	<hr/>
	\$410.57
Recording Bill Of Sales.	1.00
	<hr/>
	\$ 411.57

Repair order 9812-A

An invoice for the Santa Maria Institute's automobile; a good example of the Sister's use of new technology.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH





The open air dining room of the nursery in May of 1918.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH





The library at the Santa Maria Institute.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH

