

Letter 92

L. 8 to Mother Barat

SS. C. J. et M.

[A] Near Havana, on the island of Cuba; we are sailing along the channel between this island and the Great Bahama Bank, 180 leagues from New Orleans, May 16, 1818.¹

(This letter is for you alone.)

Very Reverend Mother,

Last year at this very hour and on this day, we received the last visit of the bishop of Louisiana, and you gave your consent to a foundation in the New World. However content I was at the time, I never thought the anniversary would find us so near the end of the first stage of our journey; for what is 180 leagues in comparison with the 2200 we have traveled in fair weather and foul since leaving Royan?

An officer, detained because of some irregularity in his passport, joined us at night in a small boat. He informed us that some disturbances had taken place in Paris and in Bordeaux. The idea that you and other beloved persons would be suffering from them was the greatest sorrow I could have; for if we had perished at sea, it would have been the destruction of but one branch of the tree, a branch useless until now, but if the trunk of the tree were attacked!

How impatiently we are awaiting one of your letters. We are living in the hope of finding one in New Orleans; for if the ship that was to have left after us made a quicker voyage, I do not doubt the possibility that it brought us letters. I gave strict instructions that all be forwarded to us, but certainly one of those I wrote to you from Bordeaux was lost. I told you that I would have time to receive an answer, and that time was exceeded before the departure.

We are nearly at the end of our voyage and are in fairly good health. The weather has allowed us to sail along the coast of Cuba, a route not ordinarily taken because of the currents. It shortens the voyage by 400 leagues. The ordinary route is between Martinique and Guadeloupe. We avoided that detour, but we were so becalmed south of the Tropic that there was question of passing between Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico, taking a northerly course and then coming south through the Bahama Channel, which separates Florida from the Great Bahama Bank near the United States.

We have been 52 days seeing nothing but sea and sky; only on May 11 did we sight land from a distance; this was Caicos, the first of the Lucayan Archipelago, which belongs to the English. We passed between it and Marignane. At one moment we passed over the Bahama Sand Bank; the following days in a spot where the water was deep enough to keep the ship afloat. Everyone rejoiced at seeing that Lucayan island, as the land is so much more appealing than the sea.

That sea is terrible; at certain moments, I thought of writing to you to beg you not to send anyone else before receiving more precise news of us and being assured of the worth of so much sacrifice. I would greatly regret missing the opportunity of Father Velay and the Ursulines in September, but all things considered, you will not be able to have news of us from Saint Louis or to estimate our needs before October at the earliest. So if you are thinking of sending us help, I shall count on nothing before next spring;² and I will be the first to beg you to send no one to this mission who is not mature, without conceit and in whom you see a well-marked vocation from God rather than desires expressed only in words.

We had bad weather the first three weeks. Catherine was beside herself; I feared she was out of her mind with terror. She gave many signs of it and kept repeating that she had certainly said clearly to Father

¹ On the original, the bottom of pages 3 and 4 were cut off; the letter was reconstructed by J. de Charry from three manuscript sources: [A] Original autograph, C-VII 2) c Duchesne to Barat, Box 2; [B] and [C] Partial copies: C-III USA Foundation, Haute-Louisiane, *Lettres de la Haute-Louisiane 1818-1823*, I, pp. 5-7; J. de Charry: *Correspondance*, II 1, L. 92, pp. 56-66; Hogg: pp. 38-45. Cf. Ch. Paisant, pp. 108-113.

² The first reinforcements arrived only in 1822.

Sellier, to Mother Prevost³ and even to you, that she did not feel that she had the courage to go so far away. I answered her that I was sure that you would not have chosen her if she had not really been willing and had even asked to go; at that she replied that she had *indeed asked to go to Martinique because she believed it was near but that she had always felt repugnance for Louisiana*. During the bad weather she turned night into day and day into night. In the end I told her one day that if she wanted to get up, she should come to share my bed; she chose to stay put. At present, she is better, declaring that once on land everything will be marvelous and that she would not want to go back.

I know and quite understand that those who are going to the same place as we are describe only its beauty in order to discourage no one. That is Father M[artial]'s request. But I must tell you the whole truth, hiding nothing, whether it be the perils of the sea or my cowardice. A storm at sea is a truly terrifying spectacle. The noise from the breaking waves and roaring wind would drown any thunder or cannonade. It is absolutely deafening, and added to that is the rolling of the vessel itself. The sailors shout to encourage one another in their work; it is a lugubrious sound, but their silence is more dismal and still worse is the sight of the captain pacing the deck in an anxious mood. The ship tossing violently in an angry sea gives the impression of the confusion of the last day. The sky seems to roll up rapidly behind the mountains of water, dragging the stars with it. The sea, nearly black in the storm, constantly gapes wide, disclosing bottomless depths; the waves sweep over the deck as the ship rolls and pitches. Twice the waves have forced open our little portholes and drenched our beds at night. The masts bend, the sails are furled or torn; the helm is abandoned in order not to strain the vessel. All this is no laughing matter unless one sees God in the storm.

[B] The odor that pervades the ship is another trial. The foul air, the tar, the pipes, the hold above all cause sickness that is relieved only by going on deck to get fresh air; but this is not always possible in bad weather or in the evening when the men are going to bed, in the morning when they are getting up or in bright sunlight. Some days we have been the only ones, with one other lady, not to sleep on deck. Besides all this, we are condemned to stay in our little holes very late because people are getting dressed in the lounge.

[A] But if I have thought regretfully that some would not overcome their fear, I have realized with even more pain that a great number, above all you, Mother, Mother Bigeu and others, would not be able to survive the stifling atmosphere of the cabins, the hard, narrow berths, the incessant noise, the handling of the ship's rigging, which is often carried out at night. Talking is as loud as in the daytime. Eating and drinking go on in the lounge, where two of us sleep, and the cabin of the other three opens onto this lounge.

Seasickness is a wretched malady. Besides making one feel as if one had had four or five emetics in a row, it affects the head as well as the stomach. One is incapable of anything, even a short consecutive thought; short aspirations can hardly draw any affection from a cold heart. I could say only *Ita Pater*,⁴ or "I have left everything for you, O my God." And in this state if one asks for water, it often arrives five or six hours later, the same for tea. When one can take only broth, it is cabbage broth laden with grease and often made with spoiled meat. It is a mistake to think that one must eat during this illness. For several days, I took only one or two cups of broth in twenty-four hours and that while lying down; and afterwards I felt quite well. Eugenie and Marguerite have suffered less; either they are more courageous or in better health. However, for two or three days, we were all in such a state that we could not help one another, and the steward had to render us humiliating services. Either he or the captain's servant came and opened our curtains to give us tea or broth.

As for Father M[artial], we did not see him at all; he was very unwell also. [C] For a fortnight he suffered severe digestive trouble. I cured him by means of Glauber salts.⁵ During our sickness, the ship rolled terribly; one fell at every step. Either the captain or another had to give us his arm to go to the latrine, and they waited for us at the door. If one used a glass, the rolling ship whisked it from one's hand spilling the contents on the ground or over us, and one risked breaking the precious utensil.

³ Marie-Élisabeth Prevost (1584-1871), RSCJ, was the superior of the house of the Sacred Heart in Amiens where Catherine Lamarre lived. Louis Sellier (1784-1854), SJ, was prefect of studies and spiritual father at the minor seminary, Saint-Acheul, near Amiens.

⁴ "Yes, Father," *Mt 11, 26*.

⁵ A remedy bearing the name of the pharmacist, Jean Rodophe Glauber (1604-1668), who discovered the curative properties of sodium sulfate.

We have left Havana behind us, good Mother, and maybe we will see New Orleans before the end of the week. We long to visit our Beloved at leisure, and my heart beat fast on seeing the steeples of Havana, whose churches are magnificent, they say! When shall we see these holy temples? However, God has allowed us to have Mass about three times a week, and Communion, too, except that from Wednesday of Holy Week until the first Sunday after Easter, when the bad weather and sickness deprived us of everything. God took from me the memory of all that could make me want the end of the voyage and all hope of success, and during the long nights of storm and insomnia, in the silence in which God seemed deaf to all our prayers, I often asked myself if I should have repented of having risked lives so precious to the Society, so many resources that would perhaps be more useful elsewhere, to have pursued our project of emigration too far; but this feeling was never able to penetrate my heart. The peace was bitter, but it was always peace.⁶ The will of God has been shown by your consent, Reverend Mother. We have been helped by so many fervent prayers; my only anxiety was not being able to confess, because Father Martial, who was as sick as I was but less concerned about the outcome than I, when I asked him if he was going to let us die without absolution, answered: "At the end of the week." I remember how Fathers Perreau, Joseph [Varin], and Louis [Barat] were always ready to listen, in less grave circumstances.

At Bordeaux, the captain had been advised not to take priests and religious, which would lead to certain shipwreck. He answered: "I have found that they do not bring misfortune." At the end of three weeks of misfortunes, one day someone said to the captain at table: "If by tomorrow the weather does not change, we will have to draw lots to see who is bringing the bad luck. On other voyages, we used to strip and beat the cabin boys, and that brought good weather." We prayed very much and the next day, at the end of twenty-four hours, the captain told me: "We are saved! We are now on good seas, under the influence of the trade winds near the Tropic, which we have crossed and recrossed seven or eight times."

We were wearing only our winter habits in the tropics because we could not unpack our luggage, which was in the hold. For all voyages, we must remember that when leaving even in December, they may need their summer habits. Excellent sea air is needed to counteract so many disadvantages. Octavie left off her flannel underwear and felt her rheumatism only when we neared land. We had to watch ourselves in the midst of so many religions and different opinions! So much impious talking, banter and revolutionary songs, from "Ça ira!" and "Aux armes, citoyens!"⁷ Nevertheless, their conduct was decent, and we were able to follow our spiritual exercises. But because of lack of space to have Mass just for us, Father Martial was miserly about it. He has a gift of getting along well with everyone; he is of very cheerful character.

God has taken away all pride during this voyage. I thank him for it. I have found it a remedy against the seven capital sins. Oh, how good it is to see only God, and he hides his gifts! I always await them, and after this, I hope for martyrdom, which will be the crowning glory. My soul expands at this thought, and I embrace this happy lot in advance!...

Nothing can be less sure than our foundation in Saint Louis. Bishop Flaget⁸ of Bardstown, Kentucky, who is more familiar with this city than Bishop Dubourg, advises him rather to choose Sainte Genevieve, inhabited by the Irish, who are offering to build his cathedral for him. The steamboats do not go all the way to Saint Louis; we will have to go 50 leagues by land, and the cold is such in winter that the ground freezes to a depth of six inches, and all the little plants are destroyed. If you want details about the United States, you will find much that is true in the work entitled: *Journey through the two Louisianas* [in 1801-1803] by Mr. Perrin du Lac. Since then, Louisiana has become part of the United States and has made much progress.

Philippine Duchesne

⁶"Behold, my bitterness changed into well being" (Isa 38:17).

⁷ Refrain from *La Marseillaise* written in April 1792 by the military officer C. J. Rouget de Lisle, sung by the Marseillais to whom it owes its name, when they entered Paris in August 1792. In 1795, it was declared the national anthem by the Convention, then prohibited from 1815 to 1870, and officially restored as national anthem in 1879.

⁸ Benedict Flaget, SS (1763-1850), born in Auvergne, France, joined the Sulpicians in 1783, and was ordained a priest in 1787. He arrived in Baltimore in 1792. He became the first bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky, in 1808, and transferred the diocesan center to Louisville in 1839. He traveled much for his pastoral work and spent four years in Europe to recruit missionaries (1835-1839). Renowned for his holiness and pastoral effectiveness, he died in Kentucky in 1850.