

Lesson Three Primary Source

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Father Barat was on hand to greet them, with Father Boyer, vicar-general of Archbishop d'Aviau, who drove with them to the convent of Notre Dame, where Madame Vincent, the superior, welcomed them and gave them hospitality until the embarkation. They had expected to board the vessel immediately, but in this matter the weather had its way, and the waiting seemed very long. The first few days were filled with the business of material preparations that were necessary in the days of ocean travel by sailing vessels. The arrival of mail from Paris and Grenoble helped to keep up the morale of the nuns at a time when there was danger of spiritual depression after the excitement of the departure and the novelty of the trip had worn off.

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March came in with the westerly winds still blowing a fierce gale from the sea and keeping the *Rebecca* at her mooring in the Garonne, but a change in the weather was predicted, so Philippine wrote her promised farewell to Madame Jouve:

My Very Dear Sister,

As my departure has been delayed, I received your letter here at Bordeaux, which we leave perhaps tomorrow, if the weather permits. I knew very well your sentiments toward me, and the thought of giving up such dear sisters has added much to the general sacrifice I have made to God in order to fulfill His designs. If He accepts and blesses our work, I shall dare to ask Him in return the most abundant blessings for you and your family, to whom I remain intimately united. And I shall maintain the bonds between us by giving you news of our work, I have already written to Madame de Mauduit, and I beg you to share this letter with Madame Lebrument.

There are five religious of our Society leaving to found a convent of the Sacred Heart in the diocese of Monseigneur Du Bourg at St. Louis in Louisbourg [sic] in Upper Louisiana. We go by way of New Orleans, where we shall lodge with an Ursuline community that was established there a long time ago. Here we are staying with a very edifying community. I went once to call on the Archbishop and another time to assist at the Mass he offered for us in his chapel. I hope that since so many holy people are praying for us, we too may one day become saints. That is the one and only reward I ask in return for a sacrifice for which God alone can make compensation. Everything seems to show me that we shall have a very holy Bishop. They compare him with St. Francis de Sales. Everyone praises him. Do not forget to give affectionate messages to my brother-in-law and to your children.

Adieu, dearest Sister. I shall never forget you.

The wind had changed by March 2, and the *Rebecca* nosed away from the city wharf and sailed downstream to Pauillac on the west shore, where the passengers would embark. That day Philippine wrote hopefully to Mother Thérèse:

There was time enough for me to receive your letter. It came the very day I had written to tell you I had seen Madame Morange and Mlle. Emiline . . . Today the vessel sailed down to Pauillac, where we shall board it in two days. Father Martial, the vicar general, will be the only priest on board, and if he is ill-and even now he is not very well- we shall be deprived of Mass. But how can I worry when you are so generous with prayer and help!

You have my sincerest gratitude; my heart can never express all it feels. I have little hope of ever seeing you again. You are doing good in France; if Aloysia is called to do good elsewhere, then you two will also be separated. Perhaps God is waiting for that sacrifice before He restores her to health and employs her for His glory . . . How grateful I am to you for all the care you give her and for all your kindness to the Lebrument children. My sister [Adelaide] is in admiration of it and sees in it only Christian charity, which can do what friendship alone would not attempt.

I saw your dear sister and your attractive niece again this morning. You must be patient, but I hope God, who is working in her soul, will draw her to His service. I leave France overwhelmed by their kindness and deeply moved by yours. The Heart of Jesus alone can know all. The picture you are sending to Paris can come on another vessel. One sails every month.

But there was a further delay, which gave Philippine time for another letter to Josephine containing much that she had written to her sisters, but adding a few details straight from her sensitive heart:

The vicar-general with whom we are traveling is not very happy about this arrangement; we add so much to his responsibility. That will help toward my perfection, for I suffer when I see I am causing trouble. No one but you, my dear Cousin, has the art of taking the weight out of gratitude and leaving only the sweetness...Everything seems to promise us a pleasant voyage. A multitude of prayers are rising to heaven for us; even the holy Archbishop of Bordeaux has offered Mass for us. So I leave in peace about all things. If the enterprise ends in misfortune, God will have allowed the efforts for a better purpose than the one we envisaged as His will. May He be blessed in all that happens.

A thousand affectionate messages to the Teisseires and the Periers and all my dear relatives. Farewell, dear Cousin. This carries the sincere and tender expression of my eternal devotedness to you.

In a postscript to this letter of March 5, Philippine adds: "We did not sail today; a contrary wind detained us." Five weeks had passed since the nuns had left Paris, and only on March 14-a Saturday, they noted-did they go from Bordeaux to Pauillac. Sister Lamarre's account of the stay there is a charming bit of narrative, introducing her lively personality which blended courage and ability with the intense affection of a keenly sensitive nature. She had taught in the free school at Cuignières and in the orphanage at St. Pezenne nearby, and had shown there the virtue and power of adaptability that made her a valuable member in any community. She was active and independent by nature, a bit headstrong at times, and inclined to chafe under restraint. Her letter, dated from Royan at the mouth of the Garonne on March 16 is addressed to Mother Prevost, superior of the house at Amiens, where Sister Lamarre had been living when called to join the mission band.

My Dear Mother,

As you see, we are not yet dead. One needs great patience and resignation, however, to go through all that the Heart of Jesus has willed for us and allowed to happen. We thought we were on the point of sailing when I wrote you last, but bad weather made its appearance again and detained us longer in Bordeaux....Fair weather seemed to reappear on Monday of Passion Week, along with a favorable wind. The captain notified us that we must be on board at ten in the morning, and we obeyed...

Kind Father Barat gave us his blessing before we went down to the wharf, where we were to take a small boat carrying the passengers to the ocean vessel, which was at Pauillac, some twenty miles from Bordeaux. During that short navigation the weather changed. After spending a night on the *Rebecca*, we were obliged to land again by means of a little boat that seemed about to be submerged at any moment. There was reason enough for fear. The wind was terrific, but God was good to us, and what confidence I ought to have in Him...We had expected to find lodgings near the pastor's house, and what was not our surprise on learning that we would have to separate into three groups. We have with us a lady from Bordeaux who is none too wealthy and who was glad to share the charity offered us, and of course it fell to my lot to be named with her. So here I am with her. I leave the rest to your imagination...

I meant to tell you about the first night on the vessel. When the time came to retire, I did not know just how to manage in the narrow berths. Of course there was a good deal of laughter among us, but I finally managed with patience and some pain. My berth was the top one. When at last I got into it I found I had very little covering, but I could not get out and down again. When I tried to turn over I bumped first against one thing, then against another. I got settled, but there was no sleep, and there was not room even to raise my head. But it is all for the love of the Heart of Jesus that we endure this and much else, ...the more the better, and God be praised for all. And now fair weather has come. The captain has just sent for us, saying we embark at 7 in the morning, Holy Thursday. God grant we reach America alive.

The *Rebecca* was piloted through the last channel, and on Holy Saturday put out to sea. For a whole week she tossed in rough weather on the Bay of Biscay, and her passengers experienced the desperate helplessness of seasickness. Then things improved and they were able to take some interest in life again, to note the progress of the boat: March 30 they reached the latitude of Lisbon, nearly identical with that of St. Louis; April 2 they rounded the Azores. Then came the long stretch of unbroken ocean, when there were pleasant days on deck and they could think more coherently, pray more peacefully, listen more attentively to Father Martial's little spiritual talks and to the English lessons they all found so difficult. They chatted with subdued gaiety-Father Martial was very firm about its being subdued-each telling of her vocation and the houses of the Society she had known. Three of them had known and loved Sainte Marie, and Mother Duchesne had much to tell them about its history and her own experiences there and in Paris.

Sometimes she sat a little apart from them and meditated on the contents of a creased sheet which she guarded carefully from the wind and ocean spray. Her companions recognized the handwriting and knew it was the document the Mother General had given to her when she named her superior of the mission. It was the supreme mark of trust on the part of St. Madeleine

Sophie toward her “eldest daughter,” bestowing on her the exceptional authority which alone would enable her to carry on the Society’s work in America, “clothing her,” as the document stated, with powers which normally only the Mother General herself could exercise. The admission, retention, and dismissal of subjects, temporary changes in the religious costume, the disposal of funds, the acquisition of property, the foundation of convents, nomination to offices in the community, changes of employment, dispensation from cloister during the day for the sake of teaching in free schools and for hearing Mass on Sundays and feast days in the absence of a chaplain-such were the powers delegated to her who was to bear the responsibility of a mission undertaken, as the letter of obedience stated, entirely for the honor and glory of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

On this transatlantic crossing the *Rebecca* encountered as many tribulations as a caravel of fiction might have to its credit in a fantastic tale of the sea. Terrific storms that threatened to drive the vessel on rocky islands, torrential rains and violent headwinds, excessive heat and calms that kept the helpless boat drifting idly in the doldrums, an encounter with a pirate ship from Buenos Aires, manned with one hundred and twenty sailors and armed with eleven cannons. “They forced us to stop,” noted Mother Duchesne, “but on being informed that this was an American vessel, they allowed it to pass unmolested.” The stench of the hold came up sickeningly when wine casks burst and food was rotting; the water was contaminated and the ship-biscuits were moulding. Superstition was stirring among the sailors: who could interpret the double sign of a partial eclipse of the moon, followed shortly by a comet that was visible for several nights? And then a fire on the deck, with Sister Catherine giving the alarm and the passengers extinguishing the blaze.

But the voyage was not all of that pattern. There were stretches of beautiful weather, when a good stiff wind filled the sails. There was Holy Mass at four or four-thirty in the morning whenever Father Martial was well enough, and Communion for the nuns followed by a long thanksgiving, before the ship’s bell sounded for breakfast. Often in the late afternoon the nuns stood together in the bow of the boat, their full skirts rippling out in the breeze, their thin veils waving in the fading twilight. Then the captain called for “the hymn,” and the sweet strains of the *Ave Maris Stella* floated over the waters. As her nuns sang, Mother Duchesne’s intent gaze studied the sky, the waters, and the western horizon. The long weeks of the voyage, the stench, the nausea, the still tender memories of separation from loved ones, laughter, news about people and things that were part of her life-all seemed to drop away as she stood there, looking westward toward the sunset and her promised land.

When the evenings lengthened and were fair, they remained on deck “as late as nine o’clock,” Father Martial sitting quietly near them as they talked of France and the friends they had left so willingly, yet so reluctantly, or of the events that had broken the monotony of the day: a ship sighted and signaled to-“bound for Granada,” they learned through the *porte-voix*; a porpoise caught-“so big it took several men to haul it in, and when served at table it tasted like beef, but the fat was like pork”; latitude reckonings and islands coming in sight, and “the trail of light behind the vessel when it made good speed.” That phosphorescence was a phenomenon they gazed at with astonishment and delight.

While the nuns suffered a good deal from their crowded and stuffy sleeping quarters, they had no complaints to make about the meals served on the *Rebecca*. Mother Duchesne said only that the food was nourishing and abundant, though she found cabbage soup disgusting when she was seasick. Mother Audé, however, praised the menu, remarking that:

Dinner was usually an affair of six or seven courses-soup, fresh roasted chicken, ham, vegetables, fish or eggs, dessert, dried fruits, liqueur. At breakfast there was omelet, herring, anchovy, ham, sausage, fruit, tea or *café-au-lait* three times a week, preserves. Once a week a sheep or a pig was slaughtered, so there was very little dried meat served. Fresh fish was caught frequently, and there was plenty of excellent wine.

The captain [she continues] was very nice to us; but after four passengers left the vessel, he was much nicer. The sailors of the crew were as meek as lambs, working quietly and without any objectionable language. The second-in-command was a very intelligent man, silent and reserved, whom the sailors obeyed without a word of objection to orders. As for the passengers, they were all bound for New Orleans to rejoin their families. They were polite and friendly on the whole. One lady [Sister Lamarre's partner at Pauillac] stayed close to us during the whole voyage.

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