

Lesson Two Primary Source

Callan, Louise. *Philippine Duchesne: Frontier Missionary of the Sacred Heart*. Maryland:Newman, 1957. Print.

On her forty-eighth birthday, Philippine sat down to write to Josephine. She was already trying to cultivate that characteristic that seems essential to all missionaries – the begging habit. It was always a difficult habit for her to practice, and she was never very successful at it, though she wrote with ease to Josephine that twenty-ninth day of August, 1817:

My Very Dear Cousin,

I am taking advantage of an opportunity to write to you. I am also very much interested in writing to you, and I am not ashamed to use the word “interested” because the matter is not personal, but regards the service of God and our fellowmen. Since you left [Paris], my desires for the American mission have not diminished, and God seems to be listening to my prayers. I saw the Bishop of Louisiana on the eve of his departure. He must be in America now. Our Mother General promised him six of our nuns for next spring, and I am one of them. So we must prepare what is needed for a sacristy. Furthermore, the vicar-general [of Bishop Du Bourg], who is remaining at Bordeaux as agent for the mission, writes to our Mother General, begging her to procure material, muslin, linen, galloon, all that can be used to make vestments and all that can impress the savages in the pomp of liturgical ceremonies. You are so sympathetic toward physical miseries; I know you will be even more interested in the conversion of souls, since their eternity depends on this.

You told me once that you had in Grenoble a quantity of things which would be useful to us. Look them up, my dearest friend, or beg contributions. God will bless you. But do not mention me in connection with this matter. I am so unworthy of sharing in this inspiring work that I always fear it will escape me. Not a word about me, then, but speak in general about a distant diocese where everyone is poor.

You have learned through my cousin [Augustin Perier] that we have drawn a part of the money you had deposited, and you know why we did so... Remember me, please, to Monsieur de Rollin, to my aunt [Tante Perier], and to all my cousins, especially Madame Teisseire.

I am, in the Heart of Jesus,
Your devoted cousin,
Philippine

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Preparations for the voyage were, however, under way. News of the Superior General’s promise to Bishop Du Bourg had traveled to Amiens, Poitiers, Grenoble, Niort, and Quimper. In all the convents contributions for the mission were being collected and packed for shipment. Many nuns who shared Mother Duchesne’s aspirations offered for the venture to America, but Mother Barat was slow in announcing her choice. The Paris convent had been through a serious epidemic in the autumn of 1817. “For three months we had much illness in the house,” wrote the

annalist, “and we lost several religious and children. Mother Duchesne was on duty day and night, sometimes spending entire nights by the bedside of the sick, never giving a thought to herself.”

The New Year dawned – 1818 – and ran its course quietly enough for nearly three weeks. Then a letter from Father Bertrand Martial, vicar-general of Bishop Du Bourg, announced that he was sailing for America in mid-February and expected to take with him the Religious of the Sacred Heart destined for St. Louis. This advance in the schedule delighted Mother Duchesne, though it complicated life for her family. An eyewitness of those last days in Paris gives an affectionate account of what took place:

Mother Duchesne would have forgotten all that concerned the temporal side of the preparations, had not our Mother General strictly charged her with the whole affair. She set to work vigorously, and God certainly blessed her efforts. What an influx of merchants, tradesmen, workmen of different types! People coming and going, all wanting to see Mother Duchesne! And how joyous she was in the midst of it all! It was a calm, thoughtful, deep joy, that forgot nothing but self. She packed the trunks, cases, satchels, without the least anxiety or trouble. Everything ran smoothly; everything was ready on time. Seeing her joy, we could not be sad at her going; and I fancied to myself the emotion she would experience on setting foot in that land she has longed for so ardently and embracing the first little Indian girl.

The passports gave most anxiety, for it was feared they would not be obtained in time. But a relative of Mother Duchesne took the matter in hand, battled with the difficulties, and brought the papers a few hours before the party left us. All was arranged with so much speed and success that even those most opposed to the enterprise as an extraordinary adventure just at this time, recognized the finger of God in all and His plans for making the adorable Heart of Jesus known in the New World by means of our little Society.

Josephine’s part in the battle to secure the necessary papers shows up in a few notes and letters she saved. Acting as chaperone and messenger, she had a busy time during those last two weeks her best friend was in Paris. The menfolk, too, were busy with notes and bills of exchange amounting to nearly 20,000 francs – their own money or Philippine’s – to finance the missionary venture of this middle-aged cousin whom they loved so sincerely.

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On Sunday, February 1, she found time and courage to write her sisters. The letters to Melanie and Adelaide are missing. A fragment remains of the one Madame Jouve received, while the letter to Amelie is intact:

My Very Dear Sister,

I received from Cousin Augustin the sum of 1514 francs, for which I enclose the receipt. I have entrusted to Madame de Rollin the contract made between us. I see her rather frequently. The wedding has taken place and everyone is happy. I also see Madame Teisseire, who is kindness personified.

I have confided to these two dear cousins news of a project which I also want to share with you. For a long time a very strong and definite attraction has drawn me to the teaching of the infidels. I even thought of going to China, but that is not practicable, as women cannot appear in public there. God has listened to my prayers and has let me find nearer home and at less financial cost the happiness for which I prayed. In Paris I met the Bishop of Louisiana, and it is in his diocese that I shall work to instruct the savages and found a house of the Society. The departure was at first set for May, but other missionaries are going this month on a vessel that is well known and has a good captain, so it has been decided that we shall go with them. I leave Paris next Sunday. Only five of us will sail this time, but in September others will embark.

I hope you will write and give me news of yourself. I wish you would send me a supply of seed of all the kinds you have, labeled and marked with the time for sowing. The land is so fertile in the area where we shall live that the cattle are entirely hidden in the prairie grass. If you can send this little shipment by wagon, address it to Monsieur Caseaux, c/o M. Jhonoton, Façade des Chartreux, Bordeaux, for the Bishop of Louisiana. Put a letter inside the package indicating that it is for me.

Believe me, my beloved Sister, I shall always be closely united to you. You and your daughters, your husband and your son will be continually in my prayers. Tell Amelie to recall the days of her first fervor and never forget the *one thing necessary*.

Adieu, my dearest Sister. Have a Mass offered in honor of St. Regis.

Philippine

The fragment preserved by the Jouve family makes the same announcement and adds some affectionate personal touches:

... I am leaving Paris, perhaps within a week. Bordeaux will be my first halting place; and if God raises no obstacle, Louisiana will be the last. Here in Paris I had the opportunity of meeting Monseigneur Du Bourg, Bishop of Louisiana. For a long time I have wanted to do so in order to open my heart to him about my desire to instruct the infidels – a desire long combatted by my superiors and confessors. But at last Providence has arranged everything for the accomplishment of this very desire.

Monseigneur Du Bourg showed me much kindness. We shall live in his episcopal city [St. Louis]. It had been arranged that six of us should leave in May, but the earlier sailing of a vessel whose captain is well known and which is carrying one of the vicars-general and other missionaries, made us leave sooner than expected. So, unless untoward circumstances arise, I shall leave France this month. But in doing so, I carry with me my memories and my affection for my dear sisters, and their children. You will pray for me, as I shall for you. At the moment when I am leaving all to work for the salvation of souls, I pray most earnestly that you will cling to the *one thing necessary*. Say this above all to Henri and to my Amelie, to whom I shall not have time to write. One does not make a change like this, and so hastily, without having much to do.

I am leaving Paris, my dear Aloysia, and soon I shall be leaving France. We shall meet in heaven at least, I hope, if we never have that consolation again here on earth. Offer your sufferings for us and we shall pray for you.

Yesterday we made a pilgrimage with Octavie to obtain new protectors in heaven. We visited the shrine of our Lady at St. Sulpice and that of St. Francis de Sales. We went to the Church of the Foreign Mission Society to hear Mass at the altar of St. Xavier and received Communion from the hands of the Bishop of China. From there we went to Montmartre. Our Mother General is better.

I hear that you are ill again. Let your sufferings be your prayers for me and for my poor charges. I shall offer for you the eloquent prayers of the poor. Envy my happiness and relish your own. God wishes us to be separated on this earth and reunited in His Heart. Affectionate messages to Mothers, Sisters, and children at Sainte Marie. I have announced my departure to my sisters and my brother.

The six months' journey to St. Louis began on Sunday, February 8.

On the eve of the departure [wrote a member of the Paris community] our Mother General assembled us all and gave Mother Duchesne her obedience as superior of the mission band. She dreaded this office and believed she would never be able to bear it. She certainly had not foreseen, when begging for the foundation, that she would be placed at its head. She submitted to the burden, however, realizing, no doubt, that it would offer her more opportunities for suffering. Our Mother General recommended, above all, union among themselves and inviolable attachment to the Society in France as the surest safeguards in their efforts to glorify God. And she told them to send us news of themselves as frequently as possible.

Next morning Father Perreau offered the holy sacrifice of the Mass, at which Eugenie Audé made her vows. Then the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for adoration all day, for this was a great day in the history of the Society. There were many visitors that morning, among them Fathers Varin, and Druilhet and Father Roger, now master of novices at the Jesuit house of Montrouge. The Periers were there – Augustin, Josephine, Marine – and Camille Jordan, all adding to the provisions already prepared for the trip. Hippolyte and Coralie Duchesne may also have been there, for they had been in Paris for the wedding, and Duchesne had contributed a generous sum toward the expenses of the journey. Subdued excitement and the sound of many footsteps were audible as novices hurried through the halls, carrying baggage. Joy and heart-suffering struggled in Philippine's soul.

The missionary group was summoned to lunch. It was a hasty meal, for in the midst of it Mother Bigeu came in to say the carriage was waiting. Philippine rose from the table immediately for her final goodbye to Mother Barat and the community. Then she went quickly to the parlor for a last word with the family she loved so dearly. The nuns had gathered near the outer door, and one of them noted briefly afterward:

The moment of separation was very painful for us all. As for Mother Duchesne, she did not shed a tear, though we know how deeply she felt it all; for she is naturally so affectionate. Seeing Mother Octavie crying as she said goodbye, ... Mother Duchesne

took her gently by the arm and led her out of the house. The carriage was waiting and there was no time to lose.

In the emotional crisis of the departure Mother Duchesne's response was one of fine controlled maturity. She would admit later on how costly the sacrifice had been, but at the moment she gave no outward sign. Happily she could not see the length of the way that stretched ahead nor the circumstances in which she would be called upon to sustain that generosity. Her gift for sustained effort was one of the splendid natural endowments of her character.

A crowd of curious onlookers gathered around the stagecoach before the nuns climbed in with their satchels and packages. The trunks and packing cases had gone ahead in a wagon. With a smile and a last wave of her hand to friends who had come to see them off, with *bon voyage* outside answered by *adieu* from within, Philippine took her place in the coach with her companions. The reins were lifted over the horses, the whip cracked sharply in the chill air, the crowd shouted a noisy send-off, and the coach headed south on the road to Orleans. The nuns prayed silently. An army officer, soon bored with the journey, sang lustily to while away the time. Evremond Harrissart, a seminarian bound for the American missions, intoned psalms and hymns to drown the words of the drinking songs he feared might shock the nuns. He was a tall, spare, ascetic-looking young man, grave in manner, deliberate and earnest in speech. Sister Lamarre would have liked to join him as he sang, for she had a very good voice and enjoyed using it.

Mothers Berthold and Audé had dried their tears even before they boarded the coach and were alive to the changing scenes through which they were passing. Like Mother Duchesne they had been born and reared in mountain lands. Octavie Berthold was from Geneva. A well-educated Swiss convert, her beauty might have attracted attention, but her reserved manner and religious bearing impressed all who saw her. Eugenie Audé's home was at Moutiers in Savoy, some fifty miles northeast of Grenoble. She had lived in Italy, had been presented at the court of Napoleon, then under the impulse of grace had chosen the cloistered life at Sainte Marie.

A new world was already opening up to Philippine and her companions. This was for them a new part of France, a section in sharp contrast with their Alpine country, and they were interested in every feature of the countryside and towns along the way: Orleans, with its memories of Jeanne d'Arc; Tours, with its tower of Charlemagne and the ruins of St. Martin's ancient church and the River Loire that she found so beautiful, but the town was especially appealing to her as the birthplace of Marie Guyart, who as Mother Marie of the Incarnation had set out from here on her journey to Canada in 1639. A halt at Blois gave an opportunity to send letters back to Paris, and every morning there was Holy Communion in a different place. At Poitiers the travelers were at home again for just two hours, and Philippine saw for the first and only time the old monastery of the Feuillants that Mother Thérèse had so often described to her. Here, too, she met Sister Marguerite Manteau, fifth member of the missionary band. Then on to Angoulême, and into Bordeaux, the fine old seaport on the Garonne, with its beautiful thirteenth-century Cathedral of St. Andrew looking out over wharves and ships and commerce from the four corners of the world.