

Lesson Four Primary Source

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

The *Rebecca's* passage through the Gulf of Mexico was fairly smooth, and the nuns used this opportunity to write letters announcing their safe arrival, in the hope that these might catch a vessel leaving port soon after they docked in New Orleans. Mothers Berthold and Audé had kept a diary of the voyage, as had Mother Duchesne. Their account of the landing in America is more detailed than hers and better than any secondhand description could ever be, though repetition has made it something of a classic in the literature of the Society of the Sacred Heart:

May 25. We have reached the point where the waters of the Mississippi mingle with those of the sea, forming a distinctly different color. Today the pilot from New Orleans boarded our vessel to guide it through the difficult channel. The customs officer also came on board to talk with the captain. We entrusted to him letters we had written to St. Louis, to Madame Vincent at Bordeaux, and to the Mother House and our families.

From this point on we were directed entirely by surroundings, which diminished as we advanced up the river. Once the vessel touched bottom. Passing Balize, we saw huge rocks in the channel which only a skillful pilot could have avoided. The view is becoming more and more interesting. Dense shrubbery lines both sides of the river, and at night fireflies twinkle here and there, much brighter than our glowworms of France. We saw several crocodiles at a distance. The sailors caught a small one measuring about an arm's length. It looked like a lizard, black skin mottled with yellow, scaly and rough...

Every day things grow more interesting. There are plantations with big houses, Negroes large and small on the banks of the river, herds of cattle, beautiful groves. We anchored so close to the bank several times that some passengers got off for a stroll, bringing back for our benefit anything curious they found. We have seen the kind of straw from which they make hats, sycamore trees like those of France, other trees that produce enormous thorns, and still others from which hang huge masses of green hairy stuff which they say is used effectively for making mattresses both by the poor people in the country and by the townsfolk in New Orleans. As to the birds, the only one that sings well is the *mocker*, but there are cardinals, blackbeaks, and one they call the green pope, interesting because of his name and his plumage...

May 28. Four of the passengers left for the city in a little pirogue. This same evening the mosquitoes attacked us for the first time, and in spite of our nets they gave us no chance to sleep with their continual *bourdonnement* and their stings, which get very badly inflamed...

May 29. The great Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Father Martial gave us a little sermon, and we renewed our vows at Holy Mass. All day we crept slowly up the river. The country along the banks is becoming ever more smiling and open. Wide fields of cotton and corn under cultivation bespeak the industry of the inhabitants. While we were gazing at these new sights, came a message that a carriage awaited Father Martial on the

river bank to take him and us to the city, for we were still some twenty miles downstream. Actually there were two carriages and it was about seven o'clock. By eight our satchels were packed and we were being let down into a small boat by means of the famous armchair which we had eyed so often with fear and envy during the crossing...

It was with the deepest emotion [continued Mother Audé in the diary on the following day] that we set foot on this soil which is for us, in the eyes of faith and the designs of God, the Promised Land. Mother Duchesne's heart could not contain its sentiments of gratitude. In spite of the marshy ground she knelt and kissed the very soil. Her eyes were wet with tears, tears of joy, the kind Father Varin desired for us. "No one is looking," she whispered to us. "You kiss it, too." If only you could have seen her face! It was radiant with joy that only the Heart of Jesus could inspire in a soul filled with His grace and bent on glorifying His Sacred Heart.

It was a glorious night. The stars that studded the deep blue heavens were mirrored in the silvery waters of the stream. Fireflies sparkled in the low bushes... At a plantation we bought some fresh bread, which we had not tasted for seventy days. Father Martial had sent a letter to the Ursuline religious announcing our arrival. Two priests who were at the convent when the letter was opened did not wait to hear it through, but went off immediately to engage the carriages, which came for us with a cordial invitation from the Ursulines to hasten the pleasure they anticipated in welcoming us. It was about two-thirty in the morning when we reached New Orleans, so we went to the priests' house to await the dawn. As the *Angelus* was ringing, we reached the Ursuline convent. The religious received us with a charity of which every moment has given us new proofs...

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The gracious welcome extended to them by the Ursuline nuns made the travelers from France feel at home immediately. Their very first day in New Orleans was filled with experiences they would record and long remember: the joy of Mass and Holy Communion in the convent chapel after eleven weeks out of cloister; the visit of Mr. Du Bourg, the Bishop's brother, and the French consul; Mother Duchesne's first sight of Indians-two of them begging near the convent grille-"sad-faced but vigorous," she thought, and she gave them an alms; a brisk tour of inspection through the convent and its adjacent buildings; news about the house that was being prepared for them in St. Louis-false report, they learned later on-but no news from Bishop Du Bourg. That was rather disconcerting, but this was only the first day. The nuns were fascinated by all the works they saw conducted so efficiently by the Ursulines, and they began to write glowing letters to France. As the weeks passed, however, and still no word came from the Bishop, anxiety clouded the eager eyes of Philippine Duchesne. She was, moreover, very sick, though at first she tried to conceal this fact, hoping she could be her own physician.

She became acquainted with the Ursuline community so quickly that on May 30, her first day in the convent, she was writing about them to Mother Bigeu:

Here I am in New Orleans since two o'clock this morning. Yesterday we renewed our vows on board the vessel in union with you and all our loved ones in the Society, and the Heart of our good Master seemed to carry on a little rivalry with the heart of His Mother in answering our prayers after that holy ceremony. At eight o'clock in the evening of the feast of the Sacred Heart I set foot on land, which I had not touched since Holy Thursday.

I kissed the ground reverently under cover of the darkness-this land that has been the object of so many prayers. All the vivacity of my desires had surged up again as we drew near to it.

The Ursuline religious, whose kind welcome simply overwhelms us, had gotten word of our arrival, so they sent carriages a distance of seven leagues to the place where the vessel had stopped for lack of wind. We rode in procession and arrived at two o'clock in the morning on the last Saturday of May. So you see why I say there was some rivalry with her Divine Son to favor us...

I am very eager to receive the blessing of the Holy Father. He himself wrote to the superior of this house while she was still at Montpellier. She had written him, without the knowledge of her confessor or her bishop, to get a decision about coming out here. The answer was prompt and favorable, and Monseigneur Fournier told her it was a unique case for a pope to answer an individual's letter without first consulting with her bishop.

In this hospitable community there are several Creole nuns, one of them the daughter of a very early settler in the city. Two came from Pont-Saint-Esprit thirty-two years ago, and I had the fun of repeating to them all I remembered from the account of their trip. Their third companion is dead. Eight of the community came from Montpellier with their superior eight years ago by way of Philadelphia and Baltimore. In the latter town they were much discouraged, but a holy man told them that a lay-sister had predicted that the Mississippi River would one day have many religious institutions along its banks. That encouraged them. The other members of the community are the religious whom Monseigneur Du Bourg chose in France. Ours will be the second institution [on the Mississippi], at a place 500 leagues higher up the river-but when will it deserve to be called an institution? ... For undertakings like ours it is important to choose silent, mortified people with good judgement. Americans are not soft in their ways, nor do they seek delicacies. They admire culture as much as the French do, but they do not like the French...

The Ursuline convent is the haven of religious in this city. Besides the five of us, the nuns are now housing six ecclesiastics. Ordinarily they board and lodge two priests, who live here and have no source of income. In this country there are no revenues set aside for ecclesiastics. If they band together, they come under the law and their apostolic efforts are censured... Cotton, linen, black material, and bread are medium-priced here, also crockery, but food and lodging are very dear.

This paper ends too soon. Get many blessings for us from our Mother General and from the [Jesuit] Fathers. Many affectionate messages to our Mothers and Sisters. We are all writing, and the consul will dispatch our letters.

To her brother and sisters she sent a long letter on June 2, addressing it to the eldest, Madame de Mauduit, at Grâne:

I am sure the love that unites us has caused you some anxiety as to the outcome of my voyage, anxiety increased, perhaps, by the length of time we were at sea. But here on land and in a city where the language and customs make one think one is in France, and the convent in which we are given hospitality is so like our own. Nowhere could we have received greater proofs of affection or more attentions. As our vessel was becalmed

about six leagues below the city, the Ursuline nuns, to whom we had been recommended by our Bishop, sent a carriage for us that must have cost them at least fifty *écus*, and they thought nothing of it. Once we reached their convent, we were given a touching example of all the virtues of hospitality, along with every kind of care: medicine to forestall the effects of the change of climate, baths, refreshing drinks, the best of food, all kinds of clothing, and our own clothes taken away and washed the same day by the Negro women. Mothers could not have done more for their children. They even talk of giving us many more things for the rest of our journey, for we have to ascend the Mississippi some 400 or 500 leagues on a steamboat—a wonderful invention that makes the trip in twenty days, whereas settlers two years ago spent at least six months on it. There are now forty of these boats in operation. Commerce on the Mississippi is becoming more important every day, and Upper Louisiana, where we are going, is making daily progress in civilization...

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She had had to admit, moreover, that she was ill, so ill, it turned out, that she had been put to bed soon after her arrival. The doctor recognized at once the disease so frequently contracted on shipboard in the days of sailing vessels. Mother Duchesne had scurvy. Her physical discomfort did not worry her, but to be a guest in such a busy convent and to need so much care caused her real embarrassment. In a letter to Father Barat, written on June 4, she mentions the doctor casually, for she had other things on her mind and heart. Happily her soul had at last shaken off the “desert dryness” of the long voyage, and hope and love were again in command as she initialed the letter paper SS.C.J.etM., and wrote:

...The closer I approach it, the more clearly I realize how very difficult our work is going to be and how meager are our means for getting started. But God is in the work; His will was manifest; and far from feeling an increase of that dryness of heart which was such a trial for me at Bordeaux and on the ocean voyage, I feel my heart expand now with hope. I am the more blameworthy for not being more virtuous, since I have to recognize the fact that so many graces have been poured out on us. Help me by your prayers, and recommend me, I beg you, to the prayers of all your sons. I beg the same favor from Fathers Roger and Druilhet, to whom I offer respectful regards....

Mother Duchesne was spared a very severe case of scurvy, thanks to the competent nursing of the Ursuline infirmarian, Mother Gerard.

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