

Lenses Key:

Hospitality

Philippine the Immigrant – Seeing the New World for the First Time

Obstacles & Uncertainties

Evidence of Prejudice/Racism in 1818

Letter 95

L. 11 to Mother Barat

New Orleans, June 22, 1818

Dear Reverend Mother,

Our captain is going back to France before the date previously announced. I am taking advantage of his good will to send you some handiwork done by the Indians. I think they will be as precious to you as they have been to me. An enclosed note gives a full explanation.

I wrote to you when we were near Cuba, to Mother Bigeu when we arrived here, sending it via Georgetown, and since then via the consul who has now entrusted the packet to the captain of a ship going to Le Havre. My letter contained several others for the fathers, mothers and sisters and the children; here at last is my fourth letter. I have rambled in all of them; or rather, I have often contradicted myself in speaking of events and quoting differing opinions. Moreover, the heart suffers from its sacrifices whose price is often hidden by faith and hope; but love even in distress declares to God: “My God, *laetus obtuli omnia*.”¹

I experienced this sentiment when the doctor announced to me with a sinister look that I had scurvy. The questions he asked showed his astonishment that the doctor who had come aboard on the river had not detected it; others say to me: why did I leave France? Octavie came to tell me aloud in the refectory, “Reverend Mother, do not worry, I beg you...” I was far from being troubled, but I thought seriously that God did not want anything more from me; that Eugenie could captain the ship, that she would do better. I was happier than Moses; I had at least entered the Promised Land. I assure you death had a great attraction for me, for I often feared I would spoil the work of our foundation. God only shows me more of his love! After a few days treatment my legs, which were very swollen, enflamed and blotchy, became nearly normal. I trust the doctor was mistaken. At sea, I did not have any stains on my hands, which I always used to get, nor trouble with my gums; it is only on land that I have had these lumps and blotches, for which I blame insect bites. My teeth and gums were never worth much in France, and he, the doctor, has judged me on them. Anyway, here I am, perfectly well; Catherine had something similar, and without naming her illness, I made her share my treatment. Octavie has had her pain and palpitations but not the clouding of vision. Eugenie sleeps and eats very little; Marguerite is not very regular. I cannot express my gratitude for the touching kindness shown by the Ursuline superior. It is unbelievable how we are the continual object of her attention and that of her daughters. Having looked after us in our troublesome illnesses, she now wants to contribute to the cost of our journey; she talks of fifty francs as the widow’s mite in the Gospel. I told her frankly about the 10,000 F sent from Philadelphia but did not hide from her my fear that it would all be spent by the time of our arrival. She shared my anxiety and wanted me to write to the bishop; she approved of my letter and asked me to say nothing about the 10,000 F to her daughters, so as not to diminish their interest. Here everything is discussed in Chapter. We shall never be deceived by these religious; so of your great kindness please send to Mr. Jouve the necessary information for the commission they have sent to Lyon. They like Octavie and Eugenie very much. They would like us to remain in this town and promise us great success. They would help us with admirable disinterestedness; nevertheless, they think, as we do, that it is more for the glory of God to go to Saint Louis of the Illinois. While they want to contribute to our work, everything in their own house is utterly simple: the church is just a room with bare walls as also in the choir, wooden benches in the parlors, great difficulty in lodging their pupils etc.

¹ 1 Chron 29:17.

The vocation of the superior held no attraction for her but was decided by the Pope himself. She came here eight years ago at the time when this state was becoming one of the United States. Sixteen Spaniards left this house to go to Havana, which was under Spanish rule. The Ursuline superior had seven companions; ten more came last year. They need more, especially well-formed religious of their own order, which will pay the cost of their passage. Here are real saints who have been giving classes for the last thirty years and have saved many souls.

The kind merchant from Havana came to see us. He would welcome us in Havana but promises nothing. The Ursulines who know Spanish say we should not go there. But my impression of that island is of an earthly paradise and that the Spanish contribute freely and generously to religious establishments. The island, although it is nearer to the equator, has a healthier and less high temperature than New Orleans; there are no poisonous insects; yellow fever is easily cured if taken in time, and women are far less likely to be attacked by it. The main difficulty is, of course, the language; we should have at least one who speaks Spanish perfectly.

English is proving to be very difficult. Octavie is the most advanced, and she cannot converse freely with the parents, most of whom are Americans in Saint Louis; nothing mediocre will pass with the Americans; they can go far; nothing European is above them. The Creoles, who form the greater number here, are more lazy, light-minded and pleasure-loving; they marry at twelve to fifteen, as sixteen is too late. One of them after a month's music lessons is already fit to compose; they are like trees that grow quickly and perish equally promptly. Their looks are charming, nothing irregular in their figure or height.

I beg you not to forget our novena at La Louvesc, which I have asked my sister Mrs. de Mauduit, to have said. In leaving France, it was forgotten, and we owe it in conscience for our vow.²

Yesterday was the feast of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, patron of the noviceship, who will be patron of the minor seminary. Father Martial preached; he is well liked here, and his health is good.

I have written to you to tell you that the Consul of France allows us to address our letters to him; there will be no cost and he will send them on. He will also take small packets. As for the large ones, which must be stored, the Ursulines will see to it at no cost to us, and they are willing to keep parcels that are waiting. School effects, like books, instruments etc. must be declared exactly and addressed to the house of education in Saint Louis. They will not be charged customs, which are high here: one year it gave the government 40 million. Commerce is becoming very important.

We do not yet know how much we owe; what is certain is that all our luggage is here in the convent and in good condition (except the wine, half was lost in storms). Through the influence of the consul, nothing was opened at the customs. They were content with the declaration; it is important that our packages in tarred wrappings are not spoiled before our second sailing; they say it is without any danger and that the captain, who knows we are coming, is a very wise man. These steamboats are strictly regulated; the women are entirely separate from the men, so there will be no Mass, no Communion, no Confessions the whole of that time. We do not know the exact date of departure; nothing direct has come from the bishop. Travelers from Saint Louis say they are waiting for us eagerly and that we should lack nothing, that we shall be completely successful. We would need an English woman if one offers herself, but it could be another Sister Benoît as regards health.³ Catherine already resembles her too closely in that respect, and she talks too much.

The priest whom we have seen here is a Benedictine from Florence; he wanted to be a Jesuit and loves them. He looked on us as his sisters and daughters. We like him in spite of the difference in language; he was pleased to be understood by Octavie and Eugenie in Italian; he belongs to one of the noblest families in Florence. The man whose opinions horrified me on our arrival is suspended; he has done harm here,⁴ they are trying to repair it.

² The vow made to Saint Francis Regis to obtain her departure.

³ Claudine Maujot, called Benoît, RSCJ (1774-1839), was received as a choir novice at Grenoble on December 28, 1818. At her request, she became a coadjutrix novice in July 1819. She was superior of the school at Sainte-Pézenne, near Niort, until 1824. In 1825, she went to La Ferrandière as assistant. Her departure for America was discouraged by Philippine, cf. letter 262, December 27, 1825. She died on August 1, 1839, at Bordeaux.

⁴ This is probably one of the assistants of Father Anthony (Antonio de Sedella), Spanish Capuchin supported by the "trustees." He opposed Bishop Dubourg and wanted to remain pastor of the cathedral.

To go back to the subject of Havana: the Ursulines have told me that the Spanish are not attracted by devotion to the Sacred Heart; that when they were in Spain the king paid for their chaplain and the board of eight religious. Under Louis XV, who had the convent built, every object arrived from France postage free. The Jesuits were the ones to get them their establishment, and the first one I got to know myself found them the postulants they needed. The details of the trials of this house and the intervention of Providence, which has sustained it, are very striking to me. To me that is a sign of the Blessed Virgin, similar to my feeling about my picture of Saint Francis Regis.

From my sisters' letters you can see how they are tried; happily, they are given something to do; Octavie is very good with the people of her own class; Eugenie almost irreproachable and so is Marguerite. All live in holy impatience for letters from our good fathers, mothers, sisters and children. The long silence is not your fault, but the slow progress of ships, which are all delayed this year; while we offer the privation of news from your dear self and your advice and comments, it is still a consolation to tell you that my sisters pray a great deal for you. I am at your feet.

Philippine

[On the reverse]
To Madame
Madame Barat
Superior General of the Society of the S.H.
Rue des Postes, N° 41
Paris

Note on the contents of the basket, the folder, etc. ⁵

1. The large and small baskets are the work of the Indians.
2. The little vase is half a coconut, fruit from Havana. This fruit, covered by its double shell, a piece of which I enclose, is very heavy; nevertheless, the branches of the lovely tree that bears it, which are very narrow and very flexible, carry 4 or 5 each one. This kind of closed container in its second shell encloses a very white flesh that tastes like a nut; in the middle is a refreshing liquid that is drunk and with which one washes the face to improve the complexion.
3. Some nuts from this country, relatively rare but as good as those of France and carried on a tree that resembles our walnut.
4. A piece of the shell of the lace tree that splits open in the shape of a piece of lace that we include. From it they make fairly large and fairly beautiful ones for bags and shirts, which one can wash.
5. There are two leaves of the palm, a large plant about which we have already spoken.
6. The fine little herb is a parasitic plant like ivy that attaches itself to all the old trees. Those on the banks of the Mississippi are so covered with it that they look as if someone has hung long pieces of hair on them. This plant when mature is put in piles, decays; and when they take off the first part, leaves a hair very similar to that of horses, from which they make mattresses. Those for the winter here are out of cotton because wool is too expensive.
7. The long plant serves as a sponge to wash tables and dishes. It grows easily; the grain is in the creases and grows well.
8. The little fruit that looks like a bottle-shaped squash comes from it, so large that one can make buckets out of it by digging it out.

⁵ Copy: C-III USA Foundation Haute Louisiane, Box 1, *Part B: Lettres de personnes variées 1818-1828*, pp. 39-40.