Lesson Seven Primary Source

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"To do Thy Will, O my God, is all my desire."

From the Offertory, Votive Mass of the Sacred Heart

"But you did not expect to live in St. Louis, did you?" The Bishop's question stirred again in her memory, rousing the tumult of emotions Philippine had been struggling for days to control. The carriage, with its clerical outriders, was moving up the Market Street hill toward the old fort. The charette lumbered heavily behind. Philippine prayed. The little procession crossed the "common fields" to the prairie beyond. They were now on the "King's Highway," a worn dirt road, rutted with the traffic of rough carts, and the carriage offered little comfort to its occupants.

Yes, she *had* expected to live in St. Louis. Mother Barat had expected it, too. The Bishop had promised the Mother General exactly that when she yielded to his plea for missionaries. Philippine had expected to begin her work among Indians, not among the children of Creoles and Americans, whether rich or poor. She had had no thought of opening schools for them when she talked so eagerly with the Bishop in Paris-how long ago? It seemed much more than fifteen months. The Bishop had stressed the need of missionaries to bring the light of the Gospel to the savage natives of America. She had built her dream around *les sauvages*. In New Orleans she had begun to suspect the type of work Monseigneur Du Bourg really intended her to inaugurate. Still she had clung to the hope of fulfilling her ambition and the vow she and her companions had made before leaving Paris. She had not allowed herself to dwell at length on her disappointment while in St. Louis. Now as they headed toward St. Charles, the truth was borne in on her with almost sickening realization.

As she prayed, she recalled some other words the Bishop said he had written in the letter that had not reached her in New Orleans. He had written on June 24. How had that letter gone astray? "You say you have come seeking the Cross. Well, you have taken exactly the right road to find it." She had indeed taken the *King's Highway*, and now it was leading west-northwest through stretches of rolling country and meadow land, broken here and there by little streams and groves of oak and walnut, hickory and sycamore, and wild fruit trees. The persimmon trees bore their hard, bitter fruit that only sharp frost in late autumn would mellow to sweet succulence. Dense thickets of wild berry bushes sometimes lined the roadside that was bright with tall blue sage and sunflowers, goldenrod and rose and blue asters in rank profusion, and clumps of scarlet sumac blending with yellowing cottonwood trees. The road was dusty; the day was uncomfortably warm; yet autumn's mark was already on the countryside.

There were some signs of human habitation along the road: here a log cabin near a field of withered cornstalks drying for fodder, with orange pumpkins and striped squash scattered on the ground; there a cleared plot where a woodsman was lopping off branches from newly felled trees and preparing them for a house-raising. A thin wisp of smoke at a little distance indicated the camping place where a pioneer mother was bravely making a home in a shelter of boughs. These were American settlers. What had the Bishop said about English? "As necessary as bread out here… No one could learn that language at the age of fifty." Philippine had begun her fiftieth year just a few days ago. But Divine Providence might aid her in that as well as in other

matters. The road led uphill for a last time, and the Bishop explained that they were nearing the bluffs along the south side of the Missouri River. These stood far back from the stream, leaving wide bottom-lands that made good farms, but were exposed to damaging floods. St. Charles had a well-protected site, resembling St. Louis in several ways. The Bishop always stressed these advantages.

It had been a long drive, but now they were descending the gently sloping approach to the river. Looking across to the opposite shore, where the bluffs rose sharply one above another, the Bishop pointed out an opening in the trees that gave a glimpse of a house with smoke rising from a chimney. But Philippine had caught sight of a band of Indians near the ferry landing, and they absorbed her interest. They were from the Upper Missouri and had come down to see General William Clark, then Governor of the territory, "the Redhead" whom they respected and trusted. Trade and friendship were their purposes; and when they caught sight of the nuns, they expressed reverence and friendliness by gestures of courtesy they had learned from the white man.

Lafrenière Chauvin was in charge of a ferry at St. Charles. He advertised good crafts, experienced watermen, and a crossing made with safety and dispatch. As he operated from both sides of the stream, he assured his passengers they would not have to wait, "if the crossing is safe." It took some time, however, to unload the charette. Since the vehicles were returning that same day to St. Louis, they were not taken across, but the seven passengers, the saddle horses, and the baggage gave the ferrymen plenty of work. On the opposite bank another cart was procured and loaded with the trunks and cases and the precious picture of the Sacred Heart. The Bishop entrusted the horses to a man on the waterfront, and the little party went on foot to the house up on the hillside.

St. Charles began as a trade center for white men and Indians on the north bank of the Missouri, some twenty miles from its confluence with the Mississippi, at a spot where the river's almost due north-south course gave the trail along its shore a fairly straight direction. The first streets of the village lay parallel to the stream, but the steep bluffs rising in a first and second gradient taxed the endurance of those who made the ascent and offered a dangerous downward trail to riders or drivers of heavy carts: Blanchette Chasseur, a French Canadian, had been shrewd in his choice of the site in 1769. The town and Philippine were the same age. For some twenty years or more he acted as civil and military governor of *Les Petites Côtes,* as he called it. He had not thought of a town with streets carefully laid out, a public square in front of the church, a government house and all that went with Spanish town-planning. The first huts and houses were built well back from the river's edge where the bluffs dropped down on the north to a sheltered cove. A belt of good timber crested the bluffs, and the prairie land gave open fields for farms and pastures.

When the English colonies on the Atlantic coast were declaring their independence, Blanchette the Hunter was directing the construction of a log church for the village, and missionaries were beginning to visit there, finding hospitality in the founder's log house and served by his Pawnee Indian wife. The French name of *Les Petites Côtes* (Village of the Little Hills) had given place to the Spanish *San Carlos del Misuri* when Blanchette died in 1793, but French customs and language prevailed for many a year. Each villager had his lot of land in the town, a share in the "common fields" to cultivate, and a right to cut wood and to pasture cattle on the "commons." Indian dangers may have been an influence in all this, for there were Osages on the Missouri near the mouth of the Kansas River, and Sioux on the Mississippi above the Des Moines, and Kickapoos in the neighborhood of San Carlos, where in the earliest decades of its existence the bulk of the population was made up of Indians and Canadians.

Another French Canadian who left his mark on the town was François Duquette. He had come into Upper Louisiana as a young man, lived for a time at Ste Genevieve, then moved to St. Charles, where he obtained a grant of land at a short distance south of the village. There he built a frontier home, roomy and substantial enough to be called a "mansion" in those days. It was constructed in true French pioneer fashion, of upright white oak posts, with slant roof of pegged shingles and a five-foot gallery around the house. The dimensions given in the contract are thirty-five by twenty-give French feet, with three partitions. Duquette married Marie Louise Beauvais of Ste Genevieve and brought her to this new home while the Revolution was in full swing in France, and religion was proscribed there under a rule of tyranny. The Duquette house became a religious center for the Catholics at St. Charles, for priests were seldom able to visit the town. Devotions were held there on Sundays and during Lent, with François Duquette reading the prayers and passages from the Gospels. He was a merchant, trading peltries and merchandise, not always successfully, but he and his wife lived comfortably and were highly respected in the town.

In 1816, François Duquette died at the age of forty-two. His widow then opened her home to boarders, and in September of the same year the Reverend Timothy Flint and his family came to occupy half of this "peaceful and pleasant residence," which stood "between the first and second bluffs, a little distance from the village, in a situation delightfully sheltered by fruit trees and shrubbery." Flint seems to have found the house comfortable enough, but he described its setting rather than its interior arrangements.

> The town [he wrote] is partly visible from this retirement, although the noise is not heard. The river spreads out below it in a wide and beautiful bay adorned with an island thick set with those regular cotton[wood] trees which so much resemble trees that have been planted for a pleasure ground. The trees about the house were literally bending under their load of apples, pears, and the yellow Osage plums. Above the house and on the summit of the bluff is a fine tract of high and level plain covered with hazel bushes and wild hops, a great abundance of grapes, and the red prairie plums.

This was the home to which Bishop Du Bourg led the religious of the Sacred Heart. Madame Duquette received the party kindly and turned over to Mother Duchesne the house with its furniture, reserving for herself temporarily the use of one small room, but she did not occupy it after the nuns arrived. When Mother Duchesne described their lodgings as "five small rooms and one that is larger," she was referring to the parts of the house the nuns were occupying during the first weeks in the Duquette "mansion." On another occasion she stated that the house had seven rooms. Mother Lucille Mathevon, who lived there later on, gave the dimensions of these seven rooms: the large central room extended twenty-eight feet across the front of the house and was almost square; the six little rooms, three on each side of the big room, were eight feet by five, with three doors and two windows each. So one could enter the house by either the front door or the back door of the central room, or one could come in from the gallery by any one of the small rooms, and these also had communicating doors in all contiguous walls, and windows looking out on the gallery. It was a house with eight outer doors, ten inner doors, and fourteen windows, none of which could be locked securely. And there was a loft over the central room which could be reached by a ladder against one wall. Two chimneys gave fireplaces in the central room and in one of the small rooms on each side of the house.

Tradition has placed the first chapel of the St. Charles convent in the large room of the Duquette house, but a close study of the documents relating to the foundation seems to indicate a different arrangement. In her *Journal* Mother Duchesne wrote:

> Madame Duquette welcomed us kindly on September 7. The next day, September 8, we arranged an altar hastily and the Bishop said the first Mass for us. While he paid a visit to Portage des Sioux, we prepared a little chapel in the house, which has just five little rooms and one that is larger. The Bishop said Mass there on September 11 and left us the Blessed Sacrament, our greatest Treasure. He took his departure on the 12th, after naming Father Richard pastor here. The latter will lodge near us, will say one Mass on Sundays in our chapel and also on week days.

The nuns had been very busy while the Bishop was installing Father John Acquaroni as pastor at Portage des Sioux. Unpacking the furnishings they had gathered in Paris nearly a year before, they found them all in good condition and placed them where they would show to best advantage. Mother Duchesne was pleased with the effect and noted one detail in her *Journal*:

> We placed in the chapel a picture of St. Regis before which prayers for the American mission had so often been said. He has been chosen as special patron of the house in accordance with a promise made in Paris, with our Mother General's permission, on condition that he obtain this favor for us. We also promised to erect a shrine in his honor and celebrate his feast as the patronal feast of the house. Monseigneur Du Bourg has agreed to this.

In her first letter from St. Charles, Mother Duchesne speaks of the "tiny chapel" *(très petite*), and compares it in size to the sanctuary of the provisional chapel she had helped to arrange in the Paris convent of the Rue des Postes. To have placed the chapel in the central room, which was the general passageway, not only in and out of the house but also in and out of each of the small rooms, would have been a very inconvenient arrangement and one lacking in reverence for the Blessed Sacrament, whereas a little corner room would offer greater opportunity for silence and devotion. Mother Duchesne compared the size of the central room to that of the parlor of the Paris convent. It was a schoolroom by day, a recreation and study room after school hours, and a dormitory at night. When a few boarding pupils arrived in October, they slept on mattresses in this room, as did Mother Duchesne, Berthold, and Audé, and Sister Lamarre, while Sister Manteau put down her pallet on the kitchen floor.

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Mother Duchesne's first letter from the little frontier convent was written to Mother Barat on September 12 and sent to St. Louis for mailing by the Bishop himself. It is a brave, loyal letter, without suggestion of the intense personal disappointment that was weighing her down. The Bishop is the central figure. His views, his activities, his remarks are recounted, and his troubles hinted at sympathetically. Some of the problems and needs of the nuns are touched upon, and some of their hopes, though the sense of the impending failure of their mission at St. Charles is already felt. The Bishop had evidently tried to encourage them by the suggestion of some property at Florissant, but he had no intention of giving them the "large tract" he owned there. Certainly Philippine must have made a tremendous effort to restrain the outpouring of her

heart and soul to the saint, who always understood her and who would read much between the guarded written lines.

SS.C.J.et M.

St. Charles on the Missouri
September 12, 1818

My Very Reverend Mother,

Having made the rounds, either in spirit or in person, of St. Louis, Ste Genevieve, Florissant, and St. Charles, we are now settling down in the last named place, which seems to put us as far away from you as possible in America, because of the many halts and detours one must make in order to get here. Monseigneur Du Bourg, who looks very far into the future, considers this place quite important, as it is the largest village on the Missouri, about 20 miles from its junction with the Mississippi. American settlers from the eastern states are constantly pouring into this section of the country—restless people, who hope St. Charles will become a great commercial link between the United States and China, for the Upper Missouri rises not far from another river [the Columbia] that pours its waters into the Pacific Ocean at a place where the crossing to Asia takes just two weeks. Hence everything is very scarce and very expensive here. We cannot get a workman even for ten francs a day. We are renting a house, but it is too small; and the rent is exorbitant. The village is willing to give the Bishop a plot of ground for us, 180 feet by 30 feet, but two Presbyterians are withholding their signatures and so preventing the donation. The Bishop is going to take up the matter with them. The parish would build for us near the center of the lot and close to the church, as the pastor will also be our chaplain, and he will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass twice on Sundays. If we do not succeed in St. Charles, we shall be able to count on a large tract of land at Florissant.

As for St. Louis, there is not the slightest chance of our going there. The Bishop has troubles enough in that quarter. On the trip to St. Charles he was extremely friendly, riding close to our carriage, seeing us safely on and off the ferry boat, and bringing us to this house, where he has visited us several times. He leaves St. Charles today, and I do not know when we shall see him again. He spoke of writing to you. He did not have time to read our Constitutions, but he bade us be faithful to them and said we would merit a severe penance if we failed to do without necessity. There is no difficulty about wearing the religious habit, but cloister is less marked here than at Cuignières and St. Pezenne. We have a tiny chapel in one room, and we hope to open our school for the children of the poor the day after tomorrow. For the boarding school we have only two or three pupils promised, and no Indians at all. Those who live around here are less well disposed than the Canadian Indians, who are good Catholics. Still, the seed is being sown for a future harvest.

A company has been established in St. Louis to carry on trade with the Indians who live along the river. They are growing more friendly with the white people and come down the river at times. We met quite a band who were going to make a treaty with representative of the United States at St. Louis. They followed us as far as the river, kissed the Sisters' hands, and watched us until we reached the other side of the stream.

Monseigneur is appointing to the Missouri mission some of the priests who are coming here from Rome. The Holy Father takes a great interest in this part of the country. It is no longer called Upper Louisiana, but the Territory of Missouri, and soon it will be a state of the Union.

The men who ferried us across and those who brought out baggage up to the house in a cart would not accept a penny, saying that we represented our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bishop wants us to accept Protestant children, though many of these people say that girls educated by nuns never want to leave them. He inspires us by his example and says that we are the mustard seed and that great good will come of all this labor. He is quite pleased with our sacristy equipment and still more so with Eugenie and Octavie. Seeing them laughing as they helped arrange our poor little house, he said to me, "Look at those two young women who might have shone elsewhere, and who are so gay in this situation! Oh, that is splendid, splendid! As for you and me, we are just *old sinners*." Another time he told me that they are all well disposed and that several are making strides in perfection. He was afraid we might waste the priest's time, but he was the first to mention confession.

I wrote to you from St. Louis. It is hard to have no news from France. They say we must allow six months for letters to come to us and three or four months for ours to reach you. I asked for some English books. Here everything is in English-prospectus, newspapers, bills, addresses. Monseigneur is sending us an American postulant.

I am anxious about your health, also about Mothers Bigeu, de Gramount, and de Charbonnel. Only when one is as far away as I am can one realize how strong are the bonds of respect, gratitude, and love that attach us to the best of mothers…

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On September 14 Mother Duchesne opened at St. Charles the first free school for girls west of the Mississippi. The children whom Father Richard had gathered throughout the village came to learn the elements of the Christian religion, along with an introduction to reading, writing, and counting. In them Philippine saw a living counterpart of one class of children for whose instruction St. Madeleine Sophie had provide in her Rule, and soon that section of the Rule was being admirably applied: "Their poverty, which makes them so closely resemble Jesus Christ, their ignorance and roughness of manner, everything [about them] will only give them additional claims to the tenderness and zeal" of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. They were impetuous, undisciplined children, a rather motley group, to whom Mother Duchesne devoted herself wholeheartedly, delighting to find that many of them spoke French. Gradually they responded to the efforts of the nuns, and an atmosphere of affectionate respect was created, which made the schoolroom a homelike place where devotion to the Sacred Heart could develop.

In St. Louis that fourteenth day of September, Bishop Du Bourg was writing Mother Duchesne a letter of approbation of the Society of the Sacred Heart for his entire diocese. He added some encouraging words after the grand manner in which he was accustomed to write and speak, but Mother Duchesne does not seem to have been deeply impressed by them. An increase in the number of children attending the free school, however, was very gratifying, and soon there was a separate class of day pupils who could pay a nominal tuition fee. This was a small group of girls-Creoles, half-breeds, mulattoes-whose program of studies was quite as elementary as that of the free school. When the weather was pleasant, they had class on the gallery with one of the nuns, while Mother Duchesne and the others taught in the central room. The house looked out across the rolling waters of the Missouri to the meadowlands beyond. There were small boats on the river frequently, and these were at times far more interesting to the girls than were catechism and the alphabet and the mysteries of arithmetic. One period of the day brought all the children

together for prayers and the singing of hymns. This assembly was held in the big central room with the chapel door open.

On Saturday, October 3, the boarding school opened, when General Pratte redeemed his promise to Emilie and Therese and brought them, with their cousin, Pelagie Chouteau, to St. Charles. The girls were delighted to be with the nuns again, no matter what inconveniences they had to put up with. Pelagie's affection for Mother Duchesne had begun in St. Louis, and it went on increasing until her death in 1823. This happy trio of cousins came under the special care of Mother Octavie, though all five nuns helped at times with all the children under their care.

General Pratte also brought with him on that first Saturday of October mail from France-letters from the Mother General, Fathers Barat and Perreau, and copies of letters from Cardinals Litta and Fontana which had accompanied the blessing of Pope Pius VII for the American mission. The letters were six months old, but that did not lessen their value. One can fancy General Pratte and the girls left to entertain themselves while the nuns ran hurriedly through the three packets of mail and then came to tell the General about the Holy Father's blessing. On Sunday morning a Mass of Thanksgiving was offered in the tiny chapel, and there was some extra recreation after the *Te Deum* had been chanted. Mother Duchesne read again and again the lines written by Mother Barat on April 21: "You see, our Holy Father the Pope has approved your mission; it was, then, God's will and that is why all circumstances converged so remarkably to make it succeed…How happy we shall be to learn that you have reached the end of your journey safely."

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(1818-10-8) A few days later Philippine began a long letter in answer to this, first giving free rein to the joy that filled her heart, then describing sketchily both the work the little pioneer community was engaged in and the living conditions in which they were trying to carry on:

> After we had languished with desire for news from our dear Society, three packets of mail arrived at the same time, two addressed by Father Barat and one by Mother Girard. No doubt they came on different boats as far as New Orleans, but the same steamboat brought them to St. Louis, where they were again delayed. We received all this dear news from France last Saturday, when our three boarding pupils arrived. So our Lady, on this day dedicated to her, added to the many graces we owe her that of the foundation of our first American boarding school and the arrival of the letters from Rome. We are invoking her under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as we promised the kind Ursulines we should do.
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> We shed happy tears on learning that the Sovereign Pontiff has added his approbation and blessing to the many signs that our mission is God's will. Tomorrow we shall chant the *Te Deum* and have a Mass of Thanksgiving offered. Fancy our joy in looking forward to the coming of two more religious to help with this foundation. It was good to hear about the progress of our schools in France, your trip to La Louvesc, … and to have news about all our dear ones… My companions and I intend to answer all these letters by way of New Orleans. This one must be less voluminous as it will go by way of Washington. That is the way I sent the last letters I wrote from St. Louis and the first from St. Charles.

From them you have learned that Divine Providence has brought us to the remotest village in the United States. It is situated on the Missouri, which is frequented only by those trading with the Indians who live not very far away from here, but I have not seen any little Indian girls since we came here, only a *half-breed* who is promised to us as a domestic or postulant, according to her aptitude. Against this race there is not the same prejudice as there is against *Negroes* and *mulattoes*. Monseigneur Du Bourg has said positively that we may not admit them to either of our schools, and he has appointed one day a week for the instruction of the colored people; otherwise, he says, we should not hold the white children in school. He told us of an experience he had in the college in Baltimore, which shows how difficult it is to overcome race-prejudice in this country. He consulted the Archbishop of Baltimore on the matter and was told that this attitude would have to be maintained as the last safeguard of morality and manners in this country.

I am sending you Monseigneur's approbation of the Society in his diocese—such as it is, for he had not time to read the Constitution. He is now at The Barrens, or *Bois Brulé*, not far from Ste Genevieve. The seminary is being built there at the expense of a congregation made up of Americans from Kentucky. These people were instructed by Bishop Flaget and the Trappists, and they live like the first Christians of Jerusalem or the Guarani in Paraguay.

In St. Charles things are very different from this, though there are some signs of improvement. A few years ago, however, one might have witnessed conduct comparable to pagan bacchanalia: girls scantily clad, holding a bottle of whisky in one hand and a man with the other, dancing every day of the year and never doing any work. Now there is more exterior decency, but these people are as ignorant of morality as the Indians are. In our free school we now have twenty-two children, and in proportion to the population this equals a school of one hundred in France. These children have never heard of our Lord, of His birth or His death, nor of hell, and they listen open-mouthed to our instructions. I have to say to them continually, "Yes, this is really true." All except two are learning the alphabet. Among the children who pay a little fee there is the same ignorance. When we complain to the Bishop that we have no savages, he replies: "Indeed you have, and your work among these children will be wider and more lasting because of the influence of the rich over the poor." We have to combat worldliness as well as ignorance. Some of the boarding pupils have more dresses than underclothes or handkerchiefs; they have embroidered dresses of gaily colored silk, with lace trimmings and fancy sleeves of net or lace. The day pupils who pay tuition dress on Sundays like our boarding pupils in Paris. They scorn black shoes and must have pink or blue, yellow or green ones, and the rest to match, but they do not use handkerchiefs. We have had to require them to do so at school.

We are very inconveniently lodged and shall have to go elsewhere at the end of the year, for we are paying nearly 2,000 francs for seven small rooms badly in need of repair, a large garden and orchard left uncultivated, and we have no one to work them. We need a French gardener. Our baker and carpenter are French. As we cannot find a larger house, we shall be obliged to build. There are in this neighborhood more English-speaking people than there are French or Creoles, but, as both languages are fairly well understood and the children are accustomed to hear both, Mother Octavie can take care of the English part of the school just now, as all these children are very ignorant… Everyone likes Mother Eugenie. The most marked characteristic of the Americans is scorn for

anyone and anything that is not American. Since they are not given to flattery, I think Eugenie will not be harmed by their kindness.

Our furnishings arrived in good condition. Monseigneur was very well pleased with all the chapel equipment. The statue of our Lady over the tabernacle touches the ceiling of our tiny chapel, which is about the size of the sanctuary of our chapel in Paris, but all is very devotional in this little corner. There is a beautiful picture of the Sacred Heart with more than fifty figures. This came from Rome. The picture of our lord showing His Sacred Heart is also from the Eternal City. The paintings of the Nativity and of the Adoration of the Magi are ravishing. There is a reliquary containing small fragments of the True Cross…relics of many saints, including St. Ignatius and St. Francis Regis—more, all told, than you have, and finally that picture of St. Regis which I found in the garret of the church in Grenoble, and which I promised to have honored if he should bring us to America. We placed it above the tabernacle the day it was framed, and the Mass in honor of St. Regis was said.

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