

LETTERS HOME:

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EARLY CORRESPONDENCE BY THE BROTHERS OF ST. JOSEPH

1841-1849

by

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In 1820 at Ruillé-sur-Loir in France, Father James Dujarié organized the Brothers of St. Joseph, a religious group of men intended to help educate a generation of French children left un-schooled by the Revolution. Fifteen years later, Dujarié, aged and in poor health, entrusted his community of fifty Brothers to Father Basil Moreau, a seminary professor who had himself organized a band of two priests and two seminarians into an auxiliary unit of clerics for the diocese of Le Mans. In 1837 Moreau joined the two groups, Brothers and priests, headquartering them at Sainte-Croix, a Le Mans suburb, thus bringing into existence the Congregation of (from) Holy Cross (Sainte-Croix). Although the Brothers eventually came to be known as Holy Cross Brothers, they were long referred to within the Community as Brothers of St. Joseph or Josephites. As the Community grew, Moreau was pressured to send missionaries out of France, and in 1839, Celestin de la Hailandière, a bishop newly appointed for the Indiana Territory, begged Moreau for help. Already committed to a

foundation in Algiers, Moreau delayed a commitment to Hailandière until the summer of 1841, by which time Moreau had readied a number of religious for the American venture.

On September 13, 1841, seven Holy Cross religious arrived in New York City to pursue missionary work. After an arduous trip mostly by river and canal, the seven settled in early October at St. Peter's, near Black Oak Ridge, a small settlement twenty-seven miles east of Vincennes. Of the band Brother Vincent at age 44 was the senior member, sent by Moreau to serve as novice master for the new establishment. Brother Joachim, a tailor aged 32, soon weakened with tuberculosis and died within three years. Brother Lawrence, 26, was a farmer, and Brother Marie, 21, a carpenter. The two youngest, Anselm, 16, and Gatian, 15, were both sent because their intelligence marked them as future teachers capable of learning English quickly. The two teenagers did, in fact, master the language beautifully, as their later letters composed in English verify. The six Brothers were accompanied by their religious superior, Edward Sorin, a young priest aged 27.

Although their missionary work thrived at St. Peter's, the group's interest in starting a college brought them into conflict with Bishop de la Hailandière, who feared their plans would jeopardize the future of a Eudist college in Vincennes. Hailandière offered the St. Peter's colony a tract of land in northern Indiana near the St. Joseph River. Charmed by the offer of property as well as by the prospect of being far away from a rather testy prelate, the Brothers decided to accept the offer. Two of them left St. Peter's in November, 1842, with Father Sorin and five new Brother novices to travel 250 miles to the north in a particularly

harsh winter. The remainder of the colony joined them the following February. What they discovered near South Bend excited them: their land nestled two lakes joined by marsh and seemed a beautifully remote area on which to build their college. Under snow the lakes seemed one, so despite its previously being called Ste. Marie des Lacs (St. Mary of the Lakes), it was henceforth known as Notre Dame du Lac (Our Lady of the Lake). Not until 1855 would the land be drained sufficiently to discriminate the two lakes, but by then the name "du Lac" was part of history. In the earliest letter we have from the pioneer Brothers, Brother Francis Xavier, the carpenter, remarks how easily he had become "adapted to the woods" of southern Indiana. No less easily did the Brothers become adapted to the lake[s] at Notre Dame.

Francis Xavier was born at Clermont (Sarthe) in 1820, entered the Community September 5, 1840, became a novice February 2, 1841, and was professed July 25, 1841. The name he first took in the Community was Marie, but he changed it to Francis Xavier in September, 1848, at Notre Dame where he died November 12, 1896, having served the area as undertaker for fifty years. Two days before Francis Xavier died, Brother Bernard Gervais arrived as a postulant at Notre Dame and was sent by the assistant novice master to help dig the grave for the pioneer, who is remembered as "the last survivor of that little band of heroes who changed the bleak forest into a bright fairy-land, and reared on stones cemented with their blood the domes and turrets of our noble college home" (Trahey 83). Bernard Gervais, who would one day compile the general matricule for the Congregation of Holy

Cross, thus becomes an important link between the pioneer Brothers and the Congregation in the twentieth-century. Bernard died in 1963.

Readers of these letters may wonder why the title of the collection of letters refers to the Brothers as “founders of Notre Dame” since most of the letters were written far from the campus, written from Vincennes, from Brooklyn, from New Orleans, but anyone who reads the letters carefully will discover that wherever a pioneer Brother was, he longed to be with the Community at Notre Dame, a place formed by the dreams and hard work of more than one man. Thus we must come to understand “founder” in a wide sense of the word. Sorin himself, traditionally considered the “founder” of Notre Dame, realized that he could not have succeeded in his efforts without, for example, Brother Vincent. In his 1861 chronicle, Sorin notes that he had dug a burial vault for Vincent and himself under the nave of the campus church where they are “both to rest in the expectation of a blessed resurrection” (Sorin 274). He refers to Vincent as the “pious patriarch of the Brothers of St. Joseph.” Vincent was revered with good cause. Born at Courbeville in 1797, he had entered the Josephites November 1, 1821, and became a novice in August, 1822, under Father Dujarié, the eighteenth novice to receive the habit from the hands of Father Dujarié himself. In his first year in America, he directed a dozen candidates and started a novitiate in which nine novices made their year of probation. Three of these nine died at Notre Dame. He was a member of the Provincial Council almost without interruption until his death, and he was the man usually sent to oversee new foundations. Directing schools in St. Peter’s, Brooklyn,

and New Orleans, he also served as a baker and commissioner. In 1858 he was named procurator of the American houses. He died at age 93 on July 23, 1890.

No less important to the “founding” of Notre Dame was Brother Lawrence. A farmer and steward, he was sent by Sorin to look for gold in California with Brothers Placidus, Justin, and Gatian in February, 1850. He returned to Notre Dame a year later. At his death in 1873, the Superior General noted, “If anyone is to be named as having contributed more than others by earnest and persevering exertions, both of mind and body, to the development and prosperity of Notre Dame, if I did not do it here, the public voice would declare it, and name Brother Lawrence” (Trahey 72). He was highly popular with the farmers and businessmen in the South Bend area.

The brightest of the early pioneer Brothers is Gatian who was born at Chéméré-le-roi (Mayenne) in 1826, became a novice August 23, 1840, and came to America with the first colony in 1841 at the age of 15. At Notre Dame he taught mathematics and appointed himself watchdog on Sorin. After being sent west by Sorin to look for gold with Brothers Lawrence, Placidus and Justin, he left the Community in 1850. Remaining in California for about two years, he returned to France on hearing that his father was seriously ill. He is the only one of the original six pioneer Brothers who did not persevere in the Community. His letters are vibrant, sometimes harsh, and some are very long. His mind is agile and sharp, and he knows the Constitutions well as evidenced in letter #2. He organizes his attacks like a fine lawyer (e.g., letter #4), but the letters also give evidence of a troubled

mind, one possibly plagued by delusions and suspicions. Although he made a proposal of marriage to a young lady after he left the Community, there is evidence in his letters (#5 and #20) that he had a strong emotional attachment to one of his students (John Hays) at Notre Dame. He died in France July 29, 1860. His is a restless soul: in his earliest letters he wonders if his vocation is to priesthood rather than not. He is one of the few letter writers to show interest in American politics (the Mexican war in letter #3, mayoral elections in letter #21), and his insight into Community politics, e.g. the separation of provinces (letter #4), seems prophetic. We sympathize with Gatian when Sorin sends him to New York in the middle of the winter: he loses much of his hearing (letter #18) as a result of harsh travel conditions. Outspoken, brash, he shows throughout his correspondence a youthful zest for power. It is difficult not to like him.

The most touching of the early Brothers associated with Notre Dame is Anselm who lived but a few months at the northern Indiana location. He yet deserves a niche in its founding no less than the other members of the Community since his heart was ever there. Born March 19, 1825, in Gennes (Mayenne), he became a novice August 23, 1840, at Le Mans and went to America with the first colony in 1841 at the age of 16. He taught school with Brother Vincent in Vincennes in 1842, but by the time of Anselm's June 18 letter (letter #1), Brother Vincent had already been assigned to Notre Dame, and Anselm at age eighteen was left to run the school alone. He suffered miserably under Bishop de la Hailandière, begged to go to Notre Dame, and angled to study painting in France, torn by his love for the

Community and the miseries he experienced in Vincennes. His pitiful letter of August 4, 1844, must have moved Sorin to effect a change. After a serious illness of two months, in which he was delirious (see his letter #14), he was sent alone on November 17, 1844, from Notre Dame to teach a school of sixty students in Madison, Indiana. We must question Sorin's judgement in sending this young man off alone when Anselm's schooling was minimal and his need for Community was so obvious. By February, he was homesick for Notre Dame. His final letter is full of plans for the annual summer retreat, and details show he has had a successful year teaching. Unfortunately, he did not get back to Notre Dame. He drowned in the Ohio River at Madison, July 12, 1845, and is buried in the town. The details of his death were reported to Father Moreau in a letter which Moreau circulated to the Community. The writer was the pastor at Anselm's school:

My dear friend:

I have sad news for you. Sudden death has taken Brother Anselm away from us. He came to see me Saturday afternoon, July 12, to tell me he was going swimming. After hesitating a bit, I agreed to accompany him. He went into the water about seven or eight hundred feet away from me, in a place which did not seem the least bit dangerous. He went out more than five hundred feet without finding water deep enough for swimming. I was in water about three or four feet deep, a little distance off the bank. All of a sudden, while he was swimming, I noticed an expression of suffering on his face. He went down, but I

thought he was doing it on purpose. He came up, then went down again, while uttering a cry for help. What a moment for me! I was more than three hundred feet away from him and did not know how to swim. We were two miles from the city, with no houses nearby. He came up again and then sank. A moment later he lifted his arms and I saw him no more.

All aghast, I hastened to give him absolution. He had probably received it that morning for, as usual, he had gone to confession, and he went to Communion at least every Sunday. I ran to a cabin. A child told me that there was an old man not far away. I ran to him and brought him with me and pointed out from afar the place where the Brother disappeared. "He is lost for good," he told me. "Right there is a drop-off at least twenty feet deep, and the current all around is very swift. Anything I could do would be useless." I went home, got some good swimmers together, and procured boats and nets.

All our efforts proved useless. It was ten o'clock in the evening before he was found, five hours after he had drowned. An inquest was held by the civil authorities, and then we brought him back to the church at one-thirty yesterday morning. He was laid out in the basement chapel. Some of the Irish settlers watched beside the coffin until daybreak. I clothed him in his religious habit and he remained exposed in the Chapel until yesterday afternoon at four. Everyone was dismayed by the event. Thank God for having borne me up throughout this trial and its accompanying fatigue. Sleepless, and almost without having tasted food, broken-hearted and yet forced to stifle my grief in order to look after all the details, I suffered more yesterday than I ever thought I could.

At four in the afternoon we brought him to the church. The coffin was uncovered, and the calmness of his features made him look as though he were only asleep. Protestants and Catholics alike gathered to the number of more than a thousand. The choir sang the Vespers of the Dead. With painful effort I preached on Chapter Four of the Book of Wisdom, beginning with verse seven. ["But the just man, if he be overtaken by death, shall be in rest. For venerable old age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years... He was taken away lest wickedness should alter his understanding, or deceit beguile his soul."]

I had the thirteenth verse written in English on a black banner: "Being made perfect in a short space, he fulfilled a long time." After the *Libera*, the children from his school kissed his forehead; then the coffin was closed and covered with the funeral drape. The two schools led the funeral procession with the banner and the cross. The hearse followed, and then the people, two by two. I marched between the school children and the carriages. We crossed the city to the cemetery, which is a mile from here.

Your friend,

J. Delaune

The Brother founders of Notre Dame are forgotten on campus today. Their names are found on a plaque behind the architecture building, but the names listed are incorrect as the plaque lists the names of the Brothers who landed as a band in New York in 1841, not the names of the Brothers who arrived at Notre Dame in November, 1842. The credit for founding the university has settled on one man, Edward Sorin, whose statue stands on the

Main Quad. A dormitory bears his name and another the name of his patron. He is honored in stained glass and scholarships. He is at the heart of any history of the early Notre Dame and is the subject of biography. Part of this skewed heritage derives from his position as superior of the group, a position which afforded him a natural deference that surfaces in letter after letter written to him by the Brothers, and part derives from the fact that he kept the Notre Dame *Chronicles* so any official spin on events revolves around his persona, but readers today will find in the Brothers' letters characters as fascinating as the established character of Edward Sorin. Vincent, the patriarch, reminds Sorin of his religious obligations, and Joseph manipulates Sorin's favors; Anselm begs for a new assignment, and Gatian lashes out at Sorin's imprudence and stupidity. Sorin the compassionate priest emerges from these letters as well as Sorin the politician: when Sorin sees a pet project meeting with opposition, he wins enough votes in the Council to have the project approved, but he then casts his vote against it so later he cannot be accused of officially favoring the project. Sorin is never far from these letters: the bulk of them are addressed to him, and his personality emerges in ways that it cannot emerge in his own chronicle and letters.

Readers who expect pious letters from pioneer missionaries are going to be disappointed by these letters, very few of which are "religious" letters. These men reacted to practical matters like floods (Brother Vincent), epidemics (Brother Théodule), persecution by Bishop de la Hailandière (Brother Anselm), and lack of supplies (Brother Gatian). The young men seem particularly frank with Sorin, and one of them (Gatian) appoints himself to spy for the

Le Mans motherhouse, reporting on Sorin's maneuverings and indiscretions, even the matter of Sorin's rendezvous with the local mother superior of the Sisters. The drama of ordinary life is heightened, of course, by the pioneer need to adjust to new surroundings and new ideas, but the letters also reveal a drama particular to an all-male world where survival regulates all details of daily living. Pettiness turns Théodule against Vincent on mission in New Orleans, and cruel nastiness turns Gatian against Basil the bed-wetter.

The poverty of the early Brothers is everywhere evident. Brother Francis de Sales abbreviates his name on a letter to Sorin (9-26-47) because he cannot afford the postage and presumes the letter cannot be returned to him postage-due because no one in Vincennes will recognize the name behind "B.F.deS." This seems a naive trust on his part. Everyone begs for money: Brother Anselm loses socks in the wash, and Vincent asks for money to send a Brother back to Notre Dame from New Orleans.

Some of the Brothers were poor writers. Transcribing a letter written in poor English (e.g., from Brother John of the Cross) is difficult, but to wrestle with a letter written in poor French can be exasperating. For example, Brother Théodule spells as he wishes and ignores tense endings ("je ne croit pas"). If this were not enough, a translator has to fight Théodule's idiosyncratic handwriting: he crosses his f's. New words appear not found in Boyer's nineteenth-century dictionary (a dictionary the missionaries knew because Anselm mentions it): words for New World pests like ticks and mosquitoes appear (Vincent #4).

For Brothers who were native speakers of French, the transition to an English speaking frontier was not always smooth, but their facility in the new language is often amazing. In fact, they sometimes thought in two languages at once. In the middle of a parenthetical aside, Gatian (3-29-49) slips into English: "et alors vous n'auriez à lui fournir neither board, nor lodging nor anything whatever." Then he goes back into French. Gatian has a rich vocabulary, but even he, the most brilliant of the letter writers, occasionally slips through haste. In a letter to Sorin (8-20-48), he writes that he thought it impossible to become a priest after having been a priest, but he means he thought it impossible to become a priest after having been a Brother, because in the first half of the sentence he strikes through the word "Brother" and corrects it to "priest," but he does not correct the final word ("priest") to "Brother."

The Josephite Brothers thrived in America. By spring of 1843 the Community at Notre Dame had grown to twenty (see Brother John letter #3), the Brothers all recruited in America except for the six who had come from France in the first colony of 1841. To help them in their work were three of Basil Moreau's Auxiliary Priests and five Marianite Sisters who left France for Notre Dame in June and September of 1843.

That the letters of these pioneer Brothers survive we owe to the admirable organization of their religious superiors, Edward Sorin and Basil Moreau, who had the sense of history to realize the importance of the Brothers' work in the New World. Would we had the correspondence the Brothers exchanged among themselves and with their confreres in

France, but scores of such letters have probably disappeared, gone because their authors considered their work unexceptional and because they had been trained to consider worldly attachments and friendships impediments to spiritual perfection. A simple life meant few possessions and an ability to move hundreds of miles with little baggage. Letters were things that administrators, not lay Brothers, kept and filed. Fortunately the correspondence we do have can give us an appreciation of pioneer Brothers who would be otherwise lost to the dust of history.

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