

Spring 1988

Notice Concerning the Origin, Progress, and Current State of the Mission of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States of America (1838)

Stafford Poole C.M.

John E. Rybolt C.M., Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Poole, Stafford C.M. and Rybolt, John E. C.M., Ph.D. (1988) "Notice Concerning the Origin, Progress, and Current State of the Mission of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States of America (1838)," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol9/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu, wsulliv6@depaul.edu.

Notice Concerning the Origin, Progress, and Current State of the Mission of the Con- gregation of the Mission in the United States of America

This report is translated from the Annales de la Congregation de la Mission, 4 (1838): 1-19. It is the earliest printed report in Vincentian Community sources about the work of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States. It describes the American mission in a very general way, sometimes with minor factual errors. Remarkably, the report makes no mention of Felix de Andreis, the first superior of the American Vincentian mission. The author is unknown, but he does not appear to have been an eyewitness or participant in the events described. Internal evidence seems to indicate that John Timon, C.M., first provincial superior of the American Province, may have been one of his informants. Explanatory footnotes have been added in brackets by Stafford Poole, C.M., and John Rybolt, C.M.

In 1815 Father Dubourg¹, having made a voyage to Europe to try to obtain evangelical workers for the great field which the New World offered for their zeal and arriving at Rome, made strong appeals to the Lazarists² of that city to obtain some missionaries of their Congregation in order to set up an

¹Louis William Valentine Dubourg (1766-1833) was born in Santo Domingo. He was ordained to the priesthood in France around 1786. Having come to the United States to avoid the French Revolution, he joined the Sulpicians in 1795. He was president of Georgetown College from 1796 to 1798. In 1803 he founded Saint Mary's College. He was consecrated bishop of Louisiana and the two Floridas in 1815. He resigned the see in 1826 and was appointed bishop of Montauban (1826-1833) and then archbishop of Besancon (1833). He died after a month in the latter see.

²An early name for Vincentians.

establishment in the state of Missouri. Father Dubourg was later bishop of New Orleans³, then was transferred to the archdiocese of Besancon. His wishes were heard, and on his return to America, he was able to bring six priests of the Congregation.⁴ He established them in [what was later] the diocese of Saint Louis in a somewhat deserted place called Saint Mary of the Barrens in the midst of uncultivated lands and forests in need of clearing. His intention was that they might be able to begin the establishment of a seminary to teach and form native priests.

Deprived of resources in an uninhabited and savage country and on very difficult land, they had need of constancy and apostolic courage in order to try such an undertaking. Their beginnings were very difficult, and they had to undergo privations of every kind. They needed to recall for themselves the example of the great apostle [Saint Paul], who had no means of livelihood except the work of his hands. They put themselves to work, having no other resources than confidence in God. The first house for the missionaries was a miserable cabin made of tree trunks placed one on top of another. Later on, in order to turn it into a seminary, they enlarged it in the same manner of construction and made it sixty feet long by thirty feet wide. The roof was similar to the rest of the building. Thus the missionaries and the seminarians experienced all the inconvenience of rigorous seasons and quite often woke up in the morning having to shake off the

³As indicated in note 1, he was actually bishop of the Louisiana Territory and the two Floridas.

⁴The Vincentians who sailed from France to establish the mission in the United States consisted of four priests, one professed brother, and three postulant brothers. Two of the diocesan priests who sailed with them later joined the Congregation.

snow which had fallen during the night on their poor coverings, under which they took their rest. "It was really a touching spectacle," wrote an eyewitness who worked there,

to see priests and the seminarians having at their head their reverend superior, Father Rosati⁵, today the bishop of Saint Louis, each one with a sack on his back and walking in the woods to gather beans and other wild vegetables to furnish food for the community, to make carts, to handle the axe, to cut down the trees in the forest, to cut the logs for building or for firewood, and themselves to bring home winter provisions. At another time, they would themselves place trunk after trunk of a tree to build up the poorest hovels here and there which were to serve as schools or chapels.

Only with difficulty would they find any inhabitants in this wild country. Once it became known that there were missionaries there, the population grew perceptibly; they then had to think about building a church. They made a small one first and in the same manner of building as their house, with tree trunks placed one on top of the other without any cement other than mud and without any siding. Then they soon had to enlarge it, so they added to it a second building of the same type, and finally a third was joined to it by the missionaries themselves, ten years after their arrival in the country. This church is still relatively large, but it is poor and quite without

⁵Joseph Rosati was born at Sora, in the kingdom of Naples in 1789. He joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1807 and was ordained to the priesthood four years later. After doing mission work in the area of Rome, he joined the first group of missionaries recruited by Dubourg. He was consecrated Dubourg's coadjutor in 1824 and in 1827 became the first bishop of Saint Louis. He died in Rome in 1843.

any ornamentation. They use only the sanctuary -- as much as the resources of the missionaries permitted. The living faith of those who frequented the church is its only real decoration.

Today a numerous population lives in this country that formerly was deserted. There are about 3,000 Catholics there. On every Sunday and feast day the church is so filled with the faithful (according to a missionary), that only with great difficulty can one get through the crowd to go up to the holy altar, and since it is not sufficient for a larger number, people are both outside as well as inside. And their fervor is so great that they can be seen kneeling down during a very long period by the doors, the windows, and in the sacristy, in order to be united to our holy solemnities and to hear the word of God. In a population of nearly 3,000 Catholics, there are only twenty-five persons who have not made their Easter duty.⁶

After the foundation of the establishment, they took in some 120 young men who were destined for the ecclesiastical state. Of this number, forty-five have received the priesthood and have worked with zeal and success for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Some have already received the reward of their apostolic works, thirty-four are still full of life and carry with the greatest edification the burden of the day's heat in the vineyard of the Lord. This seminary work, so important for the church, has constantly been the responsibility of the missionaries. They had to furnish all the food and support of their students. In order to obtain the means for this, they have opened their home to the rich families of America who desire to give an education to their children, and they have organized

⁶The estimate of the Catholic population of the area seems rather high. Probably no more than 40 percent of the population of Perry County, Missouri, was Catholic, and their total number probably did not reach 2500. Timon's own estimates, however, ranged between 2400 and 3000.

a college, which, while giving the necessary help, has allowed them also to do a great work because the country was deprived of educational institutions. They have brought together in their poor house about 135 students at one time; at this moment there are still around 100. As to the admission of students, they have not made an exception for anyone. They receive Protestants and Catholics as well, and have had the good fortune to see a goodly number of them open their eyes to the light of the truth and to leave behind the error in which they had been raised.

This grain of mustard seed, so small and imperceptible in the vast expanse of the New World, softened by heavenly dew, has developed and become a great tree. God abundantly blessed the efforts, the sacrifice, and the zeal of the missionaries, and they were soon able to gather a rich harvest of the fruits of salvation. Many priests who came from Europe and soon found themselves in America wanted to join them and be admitted into the Congregation. These new workers set themselves at the same time to enlarge the work which had been entrusted to them. Soon there were numerous conversions, especially among Protestants. The ministers of error went everywhere to oppose the progress of religion. The missionaries also went all over in this pursuit to frustrate all of their efforts, and success has been such that now all the country in which the missionaries are found is completely purged of Protestant ministers. They do not even dare to approach it any more, since the people are so attached to the Catholic faith and devoted to the missionaries.

At Potosi, a sizable village in Missouri, they rented a poor cabin and set up an altar and summoned the people there. They had been so deprived of the help of religion that they hardly knew the name of their faith and had forgotten all of its practices. Both Catholics and Protestants lived forgetful of God and of their salvation. Grace soon touched their hearts and it brought about marvels of conversion; a most ardent zeal

replaced indifference. A subscription was opened for building a church and shortly after the thrice holy God had a lovely sanctuary and fervent worshipers in that place which formerly was so abandoned.

The missionaries obtained the same success at Saint Michael, at New Madrid, and among the Arkansas. Encouraged by the blessings which the Lord spread over their works, they broke out of the boundaries of Missouri and went into the sate of Illinois. A missionary was sent to Kaskaskia, an old French village in that state, where there had not been a priest seen for a good number of years. Protestant ministers were there in great numbers. They went from house to house, perverting souls and using all their resources to extinguish the faith down to the last spark. The Missionaries went right to the church; it was in a sorry state of degradation. It had been so abandoned that it was used for a sheep pen at nights. Moved by the sentiments of the prophet who saw the ruins of the temple of Jerusalem, the missionary gave himself completely to a burning zeal.⁷ He touched the hearts, reawoke the faith, and soon the church was repaired and purified. The sacraments were received. Scarcely six months later, the bishop of Saint Louis came there and had the consolation of having first communion and administering confirmation to 300 people. The village changed its appearance entirely. Catholics again began the practice of their religion and Protestants were converted and the ministers of error fled far away, taking with them the shame of their defeats without ever daring to reappear. The missionaries continued to take care of this Christian population until the bishop could send a priest to live there and to continue the good already done.

⁷John Timon, in 1826.

Other places in the same country -- Prairie du Rocher, O'Harasburg, Harrisonville, Cahokia, etc. -- were equally the theater of their evangelical works and they obtained there the same successes and the same consolation. They also went to the nomadic savages who dwelt in the forest. They were eagerly received by them and they had to bless the God of blessings who had favored their ministry. Now again two missionaries habitually undertook the apostolic visitation among those people to nourish in the faith those who had received baptism and to work for the conversion of others. Each year they would bring new sheep into the sheepfold of the savior and enrich the church with a goodly number of worshippers of the true God. It is easy to imagine all the kinds of fatigues, privations, and sacrifices to which they devote themselves in these distant visits among savage peoples. The ministry is scarcely less difficult for those who remain at the seminary. The people are dispersed at great distances and so they always have to be ready to bring everywhere and at every hour the consolations of religion to the sick. Often it happens that they are called in the middle of the night, and so they are obliged to go for six and even ten leagues on horseback, whatever the reason, to cross rivers amid darkness, and to be exposed to every kind of danger.

If one compares the beginnings of this mission with its present state and the development that it has taken afterwards, one cannot help but recognize the visible protection of divine providence which accompanies the children of Saint Vincent everywhere and which is pleased to bless their works in the New as well as in the Old World. One can see nothing human in a work undertaken without resources, without any other help than that of heaven, and which in the space of twenty years has worked an immense good amid difficulties of all kinds, furnished forty-three priests for the Church of God, spread abroad among the people a multitude of youth educated in the principles of religion, into the way of virtue a great

number of heretics of every age and condition, and has gained for Jesus Christ entire tribes of savages sitting in the shadow of death and ignorant of the good of knowing and of serving God.⁸

At the present time, besides the seminary and the college, there is in the establishment a novitiate of the Congregation which offers the most wonderful hopes. It has already furnished several excellent subjects among the native people. Father [John] Timon, visitor and superior of the house, is one of these.⁹ Because of the good spirit with which he is animated and because of the sweetness of his character, he has been able to gain the affection of all of his confreres, who cherish him like a tender father.¹⁰ God has endowed him with a rare talent for bringing persuasion to spirits and for touching hearts. He has united to this precious talent a profound knowledge of religion, an extraordinary faculty for communicating to others the sentiments which he himself experiences, and a force of logic which disconcerts Protestant ministers, who do not dare any more these days to enter into a conference with him. Many times he publicly supported the interests of the faith against them in the present of people who were gathered

⁸This account of the conversion of Indians is highly exaggerated. Fathers Odin and Timon conducted an extensive visitation of Indian tribes in 1824. Another was made by Fathers Brands and Simonin in 1837.

⁹John Timon, C.M., was born at Conewago, Pennsylvania, in 1797. He joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1823 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1826. In 1835 he was named the first visitor (provincial superior) of the newly-erected American Province. In 1840 he was appointed prefect apostolic of Texas. He was named the first bishop of Buffalo, New York in 1847. He died at Buffalo in 1867.

¹⁰This is not entirely true. Timon encountered considerable opposition from some of his confreres and there was at least one serious attempt to have him removed from office.

together, and always successfully. Each time the fruit of his victory has been a goodly number of heretics, enlightened and converted. Thus it is particularly to him that one owes not seeing the ministers of error any more in the country where the seminary is located, and he enjoys the esteem and consideration which let the missionaries accomplish much good. Since he has been at the head of the establishment, he has made unheard of efforts to bring together the means of completing the stone church already begun in order to replace the wooden church which has served up to now and which is falling into ruins. He has come to the end of this enterprise and should consecrate a new church this year.¹¹

Besides the principal establishment of Saint Mary's of the Barrens, several other missions are already organized, some are projected and on the way toward organization.

1. At Cape Girardeau, on the Mississippi, there was already a considerable population. There was, however, only one Catholic family there, a very poor one. Father [John Mary] Odin was sent there to try to establish a mission.¹² It did not take him long to see that there was a great good to be done there. Conversions took place. Soon the number of Catholics increased to 120. They built a small

¹¹Though this report was published in 1838, it was clearly written prior to the consecration of the seminary church in Perry County, Missouri, October 29, 1837.

¹²John Mary Odin was born at Ambierle, France, in 1801. He came to the United States as the result of one of Bishop Dubourg's recruiting tours. He entered the novitiate of the Congregation of the Mission in 1822, was ordained to the priesthood in 1823, and made his vows in 1825. In 1841 he was appointed vicar apostolic of Texas and in 1847 the first bishop of Galveston. He was promoted to the archbishop of New Orleans in 1861. He died at Hauteville, France, in 1870, while returning from the First Vatican Council.

- chapel which is now frequented by Protestants as often as by Catholics. Today two missionaries live in this residence, which gives them abundant consolations. They have opened schools for children of both sexes.¹³
2. Thirty-seven leagues from the seminary there is a village called Sainte Genevieve, inhabited principally by French people who desired heartily to have priests in their midst. A missionary was sent there; they received him eagerly.¹⁴ They got together and succeeded in constructing a stone church and a rectory. Today there are two missionaries and one brother there.¹⁵
 3. Six leagues from Sainte Genevieve there is another French village called Old Mines, which also sought the help of religion. A missionary was sent there.¹⁶ Out of his own resources and those of the inhabitants, he was able to build a brick church there, also a house and school. There are at this moment two missionaries and one brother.¹⁷
 4. Eight leagues from Sainte Genevieve to the northeast is another French village called Little Canada, which was also anxious for missionaries. The inhabitants, hoping to obtain one, soon set out with great devotion at that time to build a church, for which they have raised all the funds.

¹³It is difficult to specify which priests the author had in mind, since the Vincentian personnel in Cape Girardeau underwent a number of changes in 1837-1838. Odin left 3 November 1836, to be replaced by John Boullier and John Rosati, with Bro. Daniel Harrington. John Brands, in turn, replaced Boullier in 1838. The Vincentians opened Saint Vincent's Male Academy on October 22, 1838.

¹⁴Francis X. Dahmen, 1822.

¹⁵Francis X. Dahmen, Hippolytus Gandolfo, the identity of the brother is unknown.

¹⁶John Boullier.

¹⁷Peter Doutreluingne, Hector Figari; the identity of the brother is unknown.

Finally, at ten leagues distance there is a groups of people composed of both French and English in a place called Richwoods, where they have constructed a wooden church and where they are considering founding another mission in a short time.

From these different dwellings the missionaries fan out through all the country to bring the help of religion. Success has already been obtained by those missions already formed, or there is a guarantee of an immense good which the missionaries will be able to do, in the measure that they grow and are able to multiply the establishments.

The personnel of the American mission is composed today as follows:

Priests	26
Seminarians	8
Brothers	6
Total	40

Such wonderful beginnings promise a wonderful future for the Congregation in the United States. At present, because of initial difficulties, because many establishments have been organized, because the novitiate is established and nourished by native subjects, because the missionaries everywhere enjoy the esteem and consideration of the people, and because all this is the work of providence, we can foresee a rich harvest which the sons of Saint Vincent are called to gather in this vast field of the father of the family.

Several bishops have already asked for the formation of seminaries and missions in their dioceses. Engagements have been taken with the diocese of New Orleans. During this year [1838] several missionaries will leave Saint Mary's of the Barrens to go and begin the establishment of a seminary for this diocese. The Community will respond to the desires of other prelates in turn, according as they find the means of satisfying them.

If we can do nothing of ourselves, we can do all things with God.

Saint Vincent de Paul



Be very simple, all of you, and speak in the presence of God.
Saint Louise



Always look out for the needs of the poor and give them the best you have, for it belongs to them.

Saint Louise