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Notable Vincentians (5): John Mary Delcros

BY STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.

John Mary Delcros was a man whose brief life had a profound impact on a vast number of people and was marked by major accomplishments. His premature death was a tragedy for the Vincentian Community in the United States both because of the good work that was ended and the promise that was cut short.

Delcros was born on 1 May 1822 at Saint Flour, France, in the diocese of the same name.¹ According to one witness he was quite mischievous as a boy and was always ready for a fight.² He had, in fact, resolved to become a soldier but claimed that the Blessed Virgin Mary had kept him from doing so.³ When and how he came into contact with the Vincentian Community is not known. He was received into the internal seminary [novitiate] at the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris on 15 November 1842 and took his vows on 21 November 1844 at Montdidier. He came to the United States in 1845 and was ordained to the priesthood on 29 August 1846 by Bishop Peter Richard Kenrick of Saint Louis in the old cathedral in that city.

Most of Father Delcros's active ministry was spent in Louisiana. He was assigned to Ascension parish in Donaldsonville (1848-1849) and to Saint Stephen's parish in Bouligny, later called Jefferson City (1851-1855). There is evidence, however, that he was a faculty member at Saint Charles Seminary in Philadelphia, then under the direction of the Vincentian Community, and also served at the parish in Sainte Genevieve, Missouri. Father William Ryan, a near contemporary, recalled that he had known Father Delcros in Saint Louis in 1850-51 and that he

¹Biographical data on Delcros's early life was supplied by Father Edward Udovic, C.M.

²Anthony Verrina to Malachy O'Callaghan, from New Orleans, 4 August 1895, *Notice VII*, 1848-1866, Archives of the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, 662-83; 687-705. Verrina said that he had heard this from a companion of Delcros's.

³*Ibid.* Verrina says that he heard this directly from Delcros.

“spoke English so poorly that I, a youth of 19 summers, was ashamed to hear him preach in English.”

Ryan, however, had no choice but to listen: “It was then a necessity as we had then none but foreigners who never did and never will speak english [*sic*] well.” Later, according to Ryan, Delcros “had recourse to the intercession of the B. Virgin and obtained the gift of eloquence like the Apostles.”⁴ Father Anthony Verrina, who had served with Delcros at Saint Stephen’s (and perhaps at Sainte Genevieve), told a similar story.

Some time after being ordained a Priest, he was told by his superior one Saturday evening that he had to preach the next day at the main mass. The thought of preaching in language that he knew only imperfectly, and with so little preparation, frightened him greatly. But he knelt down before the altar, before his sermon, and prayed to the Holy Virgin to take his fear away. And he promised her that for the rest of his life, he would never go into the pulpit without reciting the “Memorare.” And so his fear disappeared, and he went into the pulpit with courage, and he continued this up until the end of his life.⁵

Verrina also said that Delcros was able to preach *ex tempore* on any subject. His listeners, it was said, were never bored, although his sermons lasted at least an hour.⁶ Nor was he afraid to preach on controversial subjects. Ryan recounted an incident that occurred when Delcros was at Saint Stephen’s. During a Sunday sermon he reproached “the miserable slave holding creoles” for forcing their slaves to work on Sundays and for immorality with their female slaves. The latter, averred Ryan, was so common “that we never recorded the name of the father of a negro child for in nine cases out of twelve the Master was the father of it, they openly said so before their wives and daughters even without being asked.”⁷ Some of the parishioners, however, took offense. Ryan’s account of what ensued indicates that perhaps Delcros’s youthful pugnacity had not entirely left him.

⁴Biographical sketches by Father William Ryan, DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, Saint Mary’s Seminary, Perryville, Missouri, 207.

⁵Verrina to O’Callaghan, *ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Ryan, “Sketches”, 207-08.

On that same evening or the following night two so called gentlemen (every one who has money is ipso facto a gentleman in this country) came after him to see a very sick person, as they said, in the outskirts of the parish near Carrolton. The pious client of the B. Virgin smelled a rat. He was very careful to take his revolver in his breast pocket instead of the pyxes. When the villainous [*sic*] cowards conducted the dauntless priest near a brick yard which belonged to one of them, they told him he must there and then kneel down and beg his pardon for insulting them or they would tar and feather him. The fearless and holy priest pulled out his bull dog, cocked it and told them to stand back. They *did* stand back and ran back too as every man who is a bully will.⁸

Delcros was also highly regarded as a spiritual director, a ministry he carried out not only for the Daughters of Charity in the New Orleans area but also for many laypersons.

On 28 February 1855 Assumption Seminary in Lafourche, which was under the direction of the Vincentian Community, burned to the ground. The faculty and students were evacuated to New Orleans, where the archbishop, Anthony Blanc, and Father John Masnou, the acting provincial, made plans to build a new seminary. They decided that it would be located at Saint Stephen's and that the cost of construction would be borne by the Vincentians. The archbishop agreed to let them take up a collection in the diocese. Father Delcros was named superior of the parish and the new seminary and was also charged with the fund raising for its construction.⁹ Ultimately his efforts were successful. The seminary opened in the fall of 1858 but Father Delcros did not live to see it.

It seems clear from contemporary testimony that Delcros had a premonition both of the shortness of his life and of his coming death. At one point, according to an anonymous account, he told Verrina that "he had had to wage war against the demon for ten years, and that as a result his mission would be finished."¹⁰ Verrina himself stated "he was going to tell me something else, but he stopped and did not tell me anything else. He struggled with so much force against the demon that Free Masons had twice made an attempt on his life, once by night and another time in broad daylight. None the less, many were converted,

⁸Ibid.

⁹An anonymous notice on Delcros, probably written by a Sister Therese of Saint Simeon's school (according to Verrina to O'Callaghan), says that Delcros was named pastor of Saint Stephen's in 1851 when he was first stationed there. Vincentian records, as researched by Father Edward Udovic, C.M., indicate his being named superior in 1855. The latter, however, may refer to his superiority of the seminary.

¹⁰[Sister Therese], *Notice*, 1.

and they became his penitents."¹¹ According to one witness: "One day in the month of April in 1858, one of the parishoners [*sic*] went to see him; and finding him deep in thought, she asked him what was the cause. He responded 'I believed that I had only ten years to live and I'm still here.'"¹²

The premonition of approaching death seems to have been even stronger. In June 1858 Delcros made plans to go from New Orleans to Saint Louis and from there to Saint Mary's Seminary in Perryville, Missouri, where he intended to make his annual retreat. After that he was scheduled to give a retreat to the Daughters of Charity at Saint Joseph's in Emmitsburg, Maryland.¹³ Despite a suggestion from one of his traveling companions, Sister Marie Ellen, D.C., that he travel by train, Delcros insisted on taking a Mississippi steamboat called the *Pennsylvania*, described by Mark Twain as "the swift and popular New Orleans and St. Louis packet."¹⁴ Before departing he went to see Verrina and left his last will and testament. He also gave Verrina instructions on where he was to be buried and the kind of tomb he would have.¹⁵ On another occasion, when speaking of his departure, he told a parishioner, "If I do not come back during this life, my body will return."¹⁶ On leaving the house he was pale and showed signs of being troubled.¹⁷ On 9 June Delcros boarded the *Pennsylvania* with Sister Mary Ellen, who was going to Emmitsburg for the retreat, and a young girl who was going to enter the boarding school there.¹⁸

Riverboat travel on the Mississippi in the nineteenth century had its share of perils. The two principal ones were sinking, often caused by snags in the dangerous and treacherous waters of the river, and boiler explosions. It was the latter that destroyed the *Pennsylvania*. Mark Twain has left a vivid account of the tragedy both in his correspondence and

¹¹Verrina to O'Callaghan, *ibid.*.

¹²[Sister Therese] *Notice*, 1.

¹³Ryan, 207, says that this was in order to visit Father Hyppolite Gandolfo, who had worked with Delcros at the parish in Sainte Genevieve, Missouri. Gandolfo had gone from Sainte Genevieve to Louisiana in 1849 to found Saint Stephen's parish. See *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States 1815-1987* (New York: 1988), 242. Ryan, however, is not always exact on details, for example, giving 1851 as the year of the journey. Delcros may have served with Gandolfo in both locales.

¹⁴*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Charles Neider, ed. (New York: 1959), 98. A packet was a passenger boat that also carried mail and cargo on a regular schedule.

¹⁵Verrina to O'Callaghan [Sister Therese] *Notice*, 1.

¹⁶[Sister Therese] *Notice*, 2.

¹⁷Verrina to O'Callaghan, *ibid.*

¹⁸Ryan, *ibid.*, seems to be mistaken when he says that Delcros was accompanied by two Daughters of Charity.

his classic work *Life on the Mississippi*.¹⁹ His younger brother, Henry, also boarded the *Pennsylvania* at New Orleans, and Twain, a cub pilot, followed two days later on the *A.T. Lacey*. Twain recounted that at Greenville, Mississippi, someone shouted from the shore, "The *Pennsylvania* is blown up at Ship Island, and a hundred and fifty lives lost!" Twain was later able to piece together the events of what was a major river tragedy. It happened at about six o'clock on the morning of 13 June, after the crew had finished loading wood at Ship Island and the pilot gave word for full steam ahead.

Four of the eight boilers exploded with a thunderous crash, and the whole forward third of the boat was hoisted toward the sky! The main part of the mast, with the chimneys, dropped upon the boat again, a mountain of riddled and chaotic rubbish -- and then, after a little, fire broke out.

Many people were flung considerable distances and fell in the river; among these were ... my brother and the carpenter. The carpenter was still stretched upon his mattress when he struck the water seventy-five feet from the boat.²⁰

Delcros met the same fate as the carpenter. The priest's cabin was directly above the boilers and he was one of the first victims. Sister Mary Ellen ran to help him but could find nothing but debris where the cabin had been. At about eight o'clock in the morning the captain saw a man's body on a mattress floating on the river.²¹ It was Father Delcros, who was horribly scalded both externally and internally, the latter as a result of inhaling steam. "All of the many who breathed that steam died," observed Twain, "none escaped."²² He added that "the explosion had driven an iron crowbar through one man's body -- I think they said he was a priest," a description that does not fit the accounts of Delcros's death.²³ The injured were taken to Ship Island, where Delcros was tended by a local family. At about two in the afternoon a passing riverboat, the *Kate Frisbee*, took them to Memphis, where they arrived about fifteen hours after the explosion. Delcros asked to receive communion but Sister Ellen, realizing that he would not live until their arrival at Memphis, replied, "Father, the good God is not able to give

¹⁹Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: 1981), chapter XX, 105-09.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 106. There is also a briefer description of the tragedy in a letter from Twain to Mollie Clemens, from Memphis, 18 June 1858, *The Selected Letters of Mark Twain*, Charles Neider, ed. (New York: 1982), 23-24. In the latter he says that some three hundred persons perished in the accident.

²¹Ryan says that it was the captain of another steamer, but this does not fit with Twain's statement that a second riverboat did not come until the afternoon.

²²*Ibid.*

²³There was a second priest on board, Father Anthony Urbanek of Milwaukee.

Himself to you in Holy Communion, but you will soon go to him."²⁴ He then asked sister if there were any Catholics among the injured and being told that there were about fifty, he asked that they say an act of contrition while he gave absolution. This he could do only by having someone hold and move his arm. At eleven o'clock that evening he died, but whether this was on the riverboat or in the hastily prepared accommodations in Memphis is not clear.²⁵

According to one account, Delcros was not the only one who had a premonition.

Toward 9:00 that same morning, a good old servant²⁶ from St. Stephen's parish was coming to work as usual. She was so troubled by sadness and anxiety that she stopped her ordinary work and, coming to her senses, told her mistress that, "We have to go hear some news, some very sad news, which is going to come from up river." Her mistress asked her who had told her this; her answer was, "My guardian angel." And, in fact, about 2:00, a message from the priest at Memphis told us of the death of our devoted pastor.²⁷

Delcros's body arrived on the 23rd and a requiem mass was celebrated at Saint Patrick's church, whose paster, Father Delacroix, had waited for and met the body. It was then taken in procession to Saint Stephen's, where the Office of the Dead and another requiem mass were celebrated. He was buried in the church in the place he had indicated to Father Verrina. In 1868 the body was removed to Saint Vincent's cemetery because of construction of a new church. There a Father Duffy, a Redemptorist who had studied philosophy under Delcros in Philadelphia, delivered a eulogy to some 3,000 assembled persons.

Father Delcros was long remembered in Boulogny as a devout and saintly man. He was thirty-six years old at the time of his death.

²⁴[Sister Therese] *Notice*, 6.

²⁵According to Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 107-08, about forty of the injured were placed on the floor in a large public hall in Memphis where physicians, medical students, and the people of the city cared for them.

²⁶Probably a euphemism for slave.

²⁷[Sister Therese], *Notice*, 7-8.