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A New Letter of Felix De Andreis

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

The recent publication of the correspondence and historical writings of Felix De Andreis¹ should have marked the end of the collection of his works. However, in a replay of a historian's worst nightmare, another letter turned up just as the book was going to press. Giuseppe Guerra, C.M., the postulator general of the Congregation of the Mission, responsible for the causes of beatification, brought a file to my attention that he uncovered among the papers in his office. I had already seen all of the material, except for the letter published here.

This letter is of more-than-usual interest among the eighty-plus letters that we still have, since it is the only one written during his time in Sainte Genevieve, Missouri. The chronology of the earliest visits to Missouri is complex, but in general, Felix arrived for the first time in this French town with Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget, Joseph Rosati, Brother Martin Blanka and their guide Joseph Tucker on 11 October 1817. It had taken them nine difficult days to travel from Bardstown, Kentucky, across the Ohio River and through southern Illinois.

After several days of meetings with the parishioners, the group left for Saint Louis to prepare the way for the subsequent arrival of Bishop Louis William Dubourg. They arrived after three days and were surprised to find matters less than adequate for the reception of a bishop. Flaget wrote: "How much was I astonished to find that they did not seem more concerned about his arrival, than about that of the emperor of China! Moreover, in what a state was the presbytery! No doors, no windows, no floor, no furniture; the church still worse...." Numerous meetings and discussions paved the way, however, and the missionaries then divided. Bishop Flaget, Rosati and the guide returned to Kentucky, and De Andreis and Brother Blanka went back to Saint Genevieve. The reason for their return was to allow the pastor, Henry Pratte, time to come to Saint Louis and direct the preparations for the bishop there.

¹ John E. Rybolt, C.M., Felix De Andreis, Frontier Missionary (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2005). The writer acknowledges with gratitude the help of Dr. Marco Tavanti of DePaul University in reviewing the Italian transcription and translation.
As this newly-discovered letter shows, De Andreis was far from idle. He had never been, after all, a parish priest, so he had to learn by doing. Although the parishioners were not happy at first with their substitute pastor, they came to appreciate him. John Timon noted: “Father De Andreis had to say two masses every Sunday, preach two or three times, hear confessions, visit the sick, and teach catechism. His holy example, the zeal and unction of his preaching made a profound impression. For many years the Catholics of that district remembered with veneration the holy man.”

Besides his sacramental duties, De Andreis cultivated his interest in the Native Americans. He spends about half of this letter describing them and adds the valuable note that he had already begun a grammar and dictionary, a task he would never complete.

The weather was quite harsh. Indeed, it is now recognized that the winters of 1816 and 1817 were among the coldest around the world, due in part to what has come to be called the “Little Ice

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Age.” The cause for this appears to have been the eruption of Mount Tambora, 11 April 1815, a volcano in eastern Java. Felix would not have known this, but the lack of proper heating coupled with disastrous cold weather took a toll on him.

In this letter his response to the difficulties he faced is typical of the perspective seen throughout his correspondence: redemptive suffering, personal humility against the backdrop of his fame and success in Rome, a reliance on divine providence for the future of his mission. In this letter as elsewhere, he complains about the weak religious practice of European Christians, especially when contrasted with the incipient faith of the Native Americans.

This fascinating Vincentian is not only a model of piety (a kind of piety quite foreign to modern tastes), but also a model of multicultural awareness. He regarded himself as a pioneer, sowing seeds for others to harvest.

As demonstrated, this letter may not be the last one to be uncovered. Let us hope for many more.

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39(a) TO N.

Sainte Genevieve, in upper Louisiana, on the Mississippi,
26 November 1817

Reverend and Dear Father,

Thanks be to God, here I am at the end of my long trip, arrived, I could say, at the end of the world. Ahead of me, there is nothing more than a vast region that would take seven weeks to cross,

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2) The numbering of this letter places it following his retreat resolutions of 1817, found on pp. 176–78 of Felix De Andreis, *Frontier Missionary*.
3) Letter 39 (a). Copy, Italian, four pages, in the archives of the General Curia, Rome; De Andreis collection, marked in pencil 31. “Copy of the letter of Father De Andreis.” (Location of the original is unknown.) The addressee is unknown. It is probably not Domenico Sicardi, since the writer repeats some of what was said in this letter in Letter 43 found in Felix De Andreis, *Frontier Missionary*. Hence his correspondent might be Simone Ugo or Bartolomeo Colucci.
an area inhabited only by Indians, to arrive at the shores of the great North Pacific, opposite China. I left my companions behind, ten days away in the seminary in Kentucky. There they await the bishop’s arrival, and they will come with him. It has been about a month that I have been here with Brother Blanca, replacing the pastor of this large parish of about seven thousand inhabitants. They comprise whites and blacks, French and English, Catholics and heretics, spread over an area of fifty or sixty miles. As a result, on feast days, I have to say two masses, and preach at both, first in French and then in English. Afterwards, I teach catechism, once for whites and once for blacks; I sing vespers and hear confessions.

The hardest bone for me to gnaw is the French Bonapartists, Freemasons, unbelievers, so-called *philosophes* recently arrived from Europe. I have already had to come to blows with them concerning religion. But the Lord has helped me, I believe, since they have no more will to attack me. However, I do not cease instructing them and unmasking them in my preaching, and they, along with the rest of the people, claim to be satisfied with it. To God alone be the glory; to me, confusion.

The day before yesterday, I received the abjuration of a young English woman. I baptized her and she received her first communion with the greatest possible solemnity. The young woman was beside herself with happiness, and many heretics attended the ceremony. We have to await the time of mercy.

As to the Indians, I feel myself drawn to see them, and I do see them nearly every day. They come on horseback to sell their game and buy supplies. These poor folk go about half-naked, but they wear large silver earrings and nose rings. Their faces are painted sometimes red, sometimes blue or green or black, depending on how they feel, and this inspires fear in others. They are always at war with each other, and one nation slaughters another. Here, there are more than sixty nations, each one with its own language. During the first days after I arrived here, a young Indian arrived with his three wives

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6 In fact, the bishop came sooner, partly because lodgings at the Barrens were far from complete.

7 His baptismal records there begin on 9 November.

8 She was Marie Adams, age seventeen. Her sponsors were important members of the Sainte Genevieve parish, Vital St. Gemme and Marie Louise Seguin. The transcribed records give the date as 24 October, clearly an error for 24 November. (“Sainte Genevieve Church Records. Book C. Baptisms,” Transcribed by Ida M. Schaaf (Saint Louis, 1922). Copy in the Missouri Historical Society, Saint Louis.)
to pay me a visit. I invited him to make the sign of the cross. He did so, but with the left hand. I wanted to teach him how to make it with the right hand, but he insisted on making it with the left, since it was closer to his heart. They still have these informal traces of Christianity handed through the instructions received from the former Jesuits, who sowed the first seeds among them. Indian life makes them wild and intractable. However, they have a certain natural honesty, and a great attraction to priests, whom they call in their language, **Mecateo Correti**, “Blackrobes.” They worship only one true God, whom they title **Chissemenetu**, that is, the lord of life. With the help of interpreters who lived among them for many years, I began to draw up a grammar and dictionary of their languages, but I found great difficulty in this because of their odd syntax, which cannot be reduced to certain and uniform rules. However, the greatest difficulty in converting them has been their changeable humor, as well as the usage introduced among them of a certain very familiar liquor here in America, called in English **Wischi**. This is simply distilled corn, and it is very intoxicating.

Despite all this, I do not doubt at all that the Lord keeps these poor creatures in mind and has shown signs of his mercy upon them. One single nation has upwards of thirty thousand people, but we have to wait for the proper time and even pray for it.

A merchant just arrived who has followed the course of the Missouri toward its source, and he found many Indian nations that had never previously even seen or dealt with whites. He assured me that he found that these people had a knowledge of the one true God. They regularly offer him the first cloud of smoke from their pipes, and the first mouthful of their meal. They eat only raw meat and even spend whole days without eating when they find nothing to hunt. Trade in animal skins of wild buffalo, bears, tigers, beavers and deer and similar animals brings them into contact [with whites] and is the source of all their income. In certain places they have begun to sow and cultivate maize. Normally, their life is extremely hard. They have kings, but they do not recognize either authority or commands. The king has to make himself credible as a man who has contact with the deity through fasting and vigils. He is visited in his cabin, and then they reward him by following him into war. Some of them are baptized, but it is impossible to instruct them, since they wander here

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9. **Mecateo-coiojatte**, according to the more accurate spelling in the writer’s own hand (see Letter 43, Felix De Andreis, Frontier Missionary).
and there without any permanent home, in search of wild game to
hunt. Oh, how many beautiful souls to gain, should it please the Lord
to level out the road a bit better to arrive there.

I received into our Congregation an excellent priest, Father
Andrew Ferrari, from a distinguished family in Porto Maurizio,
along with two wonderful clerics, who should soon be ordained
priests, Messrs. Tichitoli, from Como in the territory of Milan, and
Francis Xavier Dahmen, a German from Düren near Cologne. As
soon as possible, they will begin their novitiate, that is, as soon as the
establishment of our house has been arranged.

The climate in this country during the winter is extremely
cold. Last year on the feast of the Epiphany, I fainted at the altar
during the last Gospel, since the cold had little by little reached into
my heart. It seemed to have quenched the last spark of life, and so
they had to remove my vestments and lay me out on a stove, where,
after a long period in which I suffered sharp pains, they barely brought
me back. I fear worse weather this year, since I spent ten days north
of here, where there is a wooden church without any glass in the
windows. The wind plays as it wishes. But the sacrifice has been laid,
and whether I die of heat or die of cold, or in irons, or in fire, hunger
or fatigue, it is all the same to me. I am far from having merited the
grace of vocation to this mission, in which I daily uncover new hidden
treasures. Do me the favor of praying, and have others pray that I will
yet obtain the grace of corresponding faithfully to it; uses ceciderunt
mihi in praeclaris, etenim [*the measuring lines have fallen for me on
pleasant sites, for...*], etc. In terra deserta et invia, et invia et inaquosa,
or, in summary, etc., ut viderem virtutem tuam, et gloriam tuam. [*Like
the earth, parched, lifeless and without water, ...to see your power
and your glory.*] I am ready to suffer much in this career, but I
see to my surprised confusion that pleasures and ease accompany me
wherever I am, without my looking for them, and so I am bound to
restrain them continually. Oh, how far I am from the hard life of truly
apostolic men. God spares my weakness in making me see crosses
far off, but when they are close, they change into roses. It is truly
humiliating for a sinner like myself. And so God is all, in all, and I am
nothing, in nothing.

10 That is, 1817, in Saint Thomas, Kentucky.
11 Saint Louis.
12 Ps 15:6.
13 Ps 63:3.
This country has an incredible size and beauty, but it lacks cultivation because of its small population. But you can see it grow before your very eyes, and the migration of families from Europe, especially Germans and English is constant. In a few years it will become the most flourishing country in the world. Religion enjoys a complete liberty. A priest is more respected here than in Italy, even by heretics, who willingly rush to hear him preach. The extent of the country and its poor roads oblige each missionary to have his horse and its tack. He must be ready day and night to run hither and yon through woods, across rivers and deserted places, for ten, twenty, thirty, forty and up to sixty miles in a single day. The other evening, as I was about to go to bed, I had instead to mount my horse, carrying the holy oils and the Blessed Sacrament. I grew accustomed to this life last year in Kentucky.

Thanks be to God, I find myself in good health, as does Brother Blanka. As far as I know, the others are in excellent condition. Father Rosati gets fatter by the day and looks like Atlas. Father Acquaroni has health to spare. In fact, we are all very happy. Indeed, it is only for the glory of God and for the good of souls that we work in this ministry, since God is the same here and souls no less dear than in Europe, but with this difference – there is a lot more to suffer and to merit here. This field is less difficult since here there is less abuse of graces, and I can assure you that I find in the ministry here ten times fewer difficulties than over there. These poor people! They are docile but lack instruction. Sometimes they have a priest, sometimes not. Priests have arrived from Europe who were its refuse and whom everyone recognized as not fulfilling the office of a good shepherd. They imparted no instruction but rather destroyed with their bad example what they should have built up through their ministry. The heretics should have been checkmated but are emboldened through toleration and indifference. Two weeks ago, I gave a long talk in English to a large gathering, composed especially of heretics and unbelievers. I tried to show with all possible proofs that there is only one true religion capable of leading to salvation, and that this religion can be none other than the Christian, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion. Although I had used all possible care, this preaching aroused a vocal persecution, even more on the part of so-called Catholics than of heretics, among whom the better balanced, including the school

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14 In Sainte Genevieve.
teacher, showed their satisfaction. I praise God for such an event, since it gives me the opportunity to enter into the smallest details of conversions and complete the work without fanfare. On the other hand, I am so accustomed to the cackling of tongues that it has become a delight for me. In the end, there is great need of prayer and masses celebrated in union with the intention willed by Jesus Christ for the redemption of all humankind. The enemy of souls is well entrenched and fortified, and unless we begin to bring this [conversion] to a happy resolution and be very useful to the religion of the whites, it is humanly impossible to hope for any result concerning the Indians.

Yesterday, I read in a newspaper from Philadelphia a curious article containing an address given by the spokesman of Indians living around Boston. It concerned a missionary who had come to preach to them the Christian faith. His talk was quite long, and I am giving only a summary translated from English. After a long series of preambles in the Indian manner, referring to the sun, the seasons, the eyes, and thanking the Great Spirit (God) for blessings received, he continued: I say that our ancestors alone owned this continent from the rising of the sun to its setting, and that the Great Spirit had given them some animals to feed them, and others to clothe them, and taught them how to hunt. They lived in peace and if there ever was any competition over hunting, they resolved it without great bloodshed. Your ancestors landed here and said that they had fled from their native land across the great waters to save themselves from the persecution of uncivilized men, and to enjoy their religion in peace. They found friends here not enemies. Our ancestors granted them part of this continent, gave them bread and meat, and they, in exchange, gave them their things (strong drinks), which caused them great massacres. Little by little their numbers grew and they armed Indian against Indian. You have already taken over our continent and, not content with that, you want to uproot our religion. You tell us that your religion is the only true one, the only one capable of making us happy. If so, why did the Great Spirit not show it to our ancestors? Apparently, God gave us a different physical constitution than yours, with different inclinations, and abilities, and wanted us, again, to have a different religion. For the rest, since only yours can be the one true religion, why do you white people not all convert together to profess the same faith? You people should convert first, and then we will listen to you. We are waiting a little to see if your preaching among the white people will have a good effect. When I see that the whites have become honest
and kind, and love each other because of your words, and no longer deceive poor Indians, then we will come and take into consideration what you preach to us.

This is all that I can now tell of this gathering. May the Great Spirit grant us a good advantage and proper arguments. I am, with all active and passive greetings in the love of J[esus]. C[hrist], with all respect and veneration,

Your very humble servant,
Felix De Andreis
I. P. D. C. D. M.