REVERSING TIME: FR. EDWARD SORIN'S 1857 JOURNEY TO ST. LOUIS, A PORTRAIT IN A SINGLE COLOR

1997-3

by

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Presented at the

1997 Conference on the

History of the Congregations of Holy Cross

June 12-14, 1997

Notre Dame College

Manchester, NH

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"Petit's books, Petit's chair, Petit's prie-dieu were, to Fr. Sorin, so many relics constantly reminding him of the man of whom he wrote: 'I must make him my model.'"

Arthur Hope, C.S.C.

In memory of the Holy Cross Religious Assassinated in Rwanda, 1994: Brothers Eulade Gasasira, C.S.C.; Janvier Murenzi, C.S.C.; Jean-Baptiste Mundeli, C.S.C.; Leonard Karemamgingo, C.S.C.; Venant Kayitana, C.S.C.; and Father Claude Simard, C.S.C.

In his book, ON JOB, the Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, notes that "Only if we know how to be silent and involve ourselves in the suffering of the poor will we be able to speak out of their hope. Only if we take seriously the suffering of the innocent and live the mystery of the cross amid that suffering...can we prevent our theology from being 'windy arguments' (Job 16:3)." Thus, Gutierrez notes, that in the course of Job's debate with his friends, Job inserted his inner eye and discovered that "to go out of himself and help other sufferers" (without waiting until his own problems were first resolved) was a way to find God.

In a similar vein, William Safire's reading of THE BOOK OF JOB taught Safire to ask, "Where would we be without the Jobs, those people whose tenacity to their principles, right or wrong, stakes out firm postions that later compromisers can take as constants?"

At the heart of this paper is a desire to find a language, a verbal landscape, as it were, reflecting the importance of two different Jobs and their two distinct journeys: Fr. Benjamin Marie Petit and his journey (in 1837) with the Potawatamis to Indian Territory; and Fr. Edward Sorin and his subsequent journey to St. Louis (in 1857) to bring back the remains of Fr Petit to Notre Dame. I want to highlight, however, Fr. Sorin's journey, because I believe, among other things, it deepened the admiration

Fr.Sorin already had for Fr. Petit and heightened his own missiological consciousness during the late 1850's.

Unlike so many American clerics in the 1850's, Fr. Sorin could never minimize or explain away Fr. Petit's sacrifice-- different in kind rather than degree-- from other missionaries whose service to indigenous populations was equally important. The enlightened abolistionists and social prophets of a new 19th century social order knew all about the savagery of slavery, child labor, and the profit motive. However, how much were they also aware of the mad acceleration of the power motive to dominate every part of the continent and obliterate the self-possession of every indigenous person on it?

There will always be a gulf created between extreme injustice and its perpetrators. Nevertheless, Fr. Petit's belief in human solidarity with God's people-- that is, with the indigenous people whom he served-- released in him a moral energy to journey with them and confront the triumphal passion and excessiveness of American racism at its center-- in the U.S. Government's genocidal policies against Native American people.

Did Fr. Petit's sacrifice shed light in Fr. Sorin's mind with regard to how well some religious behaved in the midst of enormous injustice? Or was it as if what Fr. Sorin needed to conclude in his own life was what he sought to find in Fr. Petit's life? Who knows! We are not of Fr. Sorin's time. We weren't around then. Who knew Fr. Sorin, outlined in his cassock, at age thirty, or forty, or fifty? Another question: Did the forced march of 1837, a hundred times repeated by indigenous communities in American history, provide Fr. Sorin with a broad or a limited image of an American injustice not beyond his understanding or beyond the scrutiny of his own American Catholic mission? Again, who knows! These are all rhetorical questions cast like shadows on the darkened ground of American history. However, we do know this, that it was as if from the time Fr. Sorin first learned about Fr. Petit and his work, he wanted to keep the memory of Fr. Petit and Petit's westward journey alive in his own life, since, possibly, it allowed him to see things that he had never been able to see before: a mission against the suffering of the innocent that only promised to a missionary a future of calamity and death.

In order to focus on Fr. Sorin's 1857 journey, however, we must first focus on Fr. Benjamin Marie Petit, the French missionary priest from Brittany, who was one of Fr. Sorin's predecessors. To that end, let us first go back in history to Brittany, France, and to the Bay of Biscay, the starting places for the great French voyagers who began to explore North America in the 16th

century. The people of this region, the Bretons, were Celts, Gallic Celts, who still acknowledged their racial ties with Ireland and Scotland. Jacques Cartier, the discoverer of the St. Lawrence River and founder of Montreal (which he first named Mont Royal) was from Brittany. So was the Catholic bishop of Vincennes, Indiana, Simon Guillaume Gabriel Brute, who, in 1835, appealed to the people of Rennes, the capitol of Brittany, to donate money for his mission among the Potawatomi Indians of Indiana. One of the hearers of Bishop Brute's talk was a young lawyer who had recently graduated from the University of Rennes and was preparing to embark on a career in law. His name was Benjamin Marie Petit.

The people from this region of France (Brittany) who made up much of French Canada and French speaking Indiana and Ohio Valley acquired a distinct personality, as did, for that matter, all the French of the New World (New France). They had, in the words of W.L. Morton, "a sense of freedom, a quickness to resist authority, a blithe and cocky headstrongness. Frank, and quick to give his trust, the Canadian could be persuaded to attempt almost anything by those he loved but could not be compelled to do anything by those he disliked. This independence of spirit was encouraged both by the subsistence economy in which he was cradled-- no one need go hungry in the parishes of the St. Lawrence-- and by the high wages his labour commanded in industry, trade, or the canoe flotillas. The Canadian was an Americanized Frenchman...a man assertively independent and'natually undocile.'"

Is it not surprising, then, that a Fr. Benjamin Petit of Celtic Brittany would arise, however briefly, in the midst of this new Catholic culture and that Fr. Edward Sorin would admire him and emulate his courage? As missionaries they both claimed a unity born of shared faith, culture, and language. As kinsmen, they also shared the same sense of mission to America and cultivated the same Gallic-Celtic independence of action.

How did Fr. Petit become involved in the Indiana Catholic mission? In 1836, a year after he had put aside his law career and entered St Sulpice (Paris) to study for the priesthood, Bishop Brute invited Fr. Petit to come to Indiana where he would later serve as a missionary. Then on Sept., 1837, at the age of 26, Bishop Brute ordained Fr. Petit to the diaconate and afterwards to the priesthood. Finally, on Nov. 1837, he was sent to Yellow River Indian Reservation in Nothern Indiana (later called Notre Dame du Lac). There Fr. Petit ministered to the Potawatomis who christened him "Little Duck." In no time, however, Fr. Petit, the lawyer/priest, would become an advocate

of the defenseless Potawatamis of his mission, writing to Bishop Brute about the Americans' mistreatment of the Indians:

> The Indians, Monseigneur, are preparing to leave for Washington to protest against the unworthy manner with which they are treated. The Treaty is indeed a thing as illegal as possible.... It seems to me that if the government has not decided to be completely unjust, they will be listened to....

What Fr. Petit didn't say in his letter to the bishop, however, was that he had used the money his mother had sent him earlier (for personal luxuries) to finance a trip to Washington so that the Potawatami leaders of his mission could negotiate a fairer treaty. Indeed, though a newcomer himself, Fr. Petit felt he had to face Washington (through intermediaries) over local Native American boundaries.

At the time, remember, Native American land boundaries were being being eliminated in the minds of the moneyed class and politicians of America. Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act in 1830 had initiated that change. As a result, and under the ubiquitous wheels of greed and excess, Indian land had become a product wanted. "Land fever," wrote Robert Leckie of the time, "was the consuming disease" of America: first there was Kentucky Fever and then Ohio Fever, which was followed by illinois Fever and Missouri Fever. It was big business on a large scale and Andrew Jackson was its moth-ringed champion. Herman Melville had once said that Jackson could be "hurled higher than a throne." Indeed, in regard to seizing Indian land, Jackson felt that -- like God-- he was quite innocent. The boundless footstep of fate was on his side. Providence had conferred nothing on Indian America to reproach him with. Indeed, God hadn't taken away the whole earth from the Indians, only that part of it which the Americans wanted. For that reason there was no justification in Jackson's mind for having a white American family blocked by an Indian fense. At a depth where power counts, Jackson's words would stop that, even if he had to bypass the Supreme Court with a revolver or a pitiless militia. And a few years later, when Martin Van Buren succeeded Jackson, Van Buren followed through on Jackson's wall of words and resonant policies with as much vigor. Of course, this fiery attitude of domination contrasted sharply with the moral and legal sensitivity of people like Fr. Petit. Consequently, Petit, with his back to an uncertain legal wall and seemingly against all the scattered flags of the United States, felt he had to confront the determined policies of these distant politicians.

In addition to "land fever" there was also the Anglo-Saxon's deep-seated faith in the superiority of the fair-skinned races. Fr. Petit, and later Fr. Sorin, both had to deal with this Anglo-Saxon bias. Francis Parkman, the great American historian and contemporary of Fr. Sorin, highlighted this ethnic and racial superiority in his history, PONTIAC, when he wrote, among other things, about the "savage" French:

> From the beginning, The French showed a tendency to amalgamate with the forest tribes. 'The manners of the savages,' writes Baron La Hontan, ' are perfectly agreeable to my palate;' and many a restless adventurer, of high or low degree, might have echoed the words of the erratic soldier. At first, great hopes were entertained that, by mingling of French and Indians, the latter would be won over to civilization and the church; but the effect was precisely the reverse; for, as Charlevoix observes, the savages did not become French, but the French became savages. Hundreds betook themselves to the forest, never more to return (49-50).

Thus, not only did the French break free of social restraints, Parkman noted, but they also engaged in miscegenation, permanently "diluting" the purity of their blood with the "mongrel offspring of intermarriages." In any case, Fr. Petit had three stripes against him as a new American : he was French, a Catholic in a Protestant country, and an advocate of local Native American causes roaring in Anglo-American ears.

What about Fr. Petit's flock, the Potawatamis, at this time? Ultimately, we now realize that the Potawatamis learned their defeat from one another as well as from the encroaching Americans. They ultimately became the much smaller community within the larger American community. That is, they became the silent one enclosed by the dominant, powerful one, with very little passing between them. For a brief moment in history, however, Fr. Petit became a go-between, a culture broker, as it were, a vindicator for their ransacked rights. Indeed, during this short period, the Potawatamis' legal inadequacy challenged Fr. Petit. That is, as a lawyer, he could not seem to let go of it. It was as if Petit needed to undermine customary legal and criminological assumptions about Indians -- particularly the assumption that the Constitution did not protect Indians from crooked politicians -- in order to be at peace with himself. He also felt compelled to question the moral incoherence of the expulsion both as a policy and a practice. Thus as an French immigrant lawyer and committed missionary to the Potawatomis, Petit felt he could not evade the ambiguities of his time. Without illusions or false patriotism, he had to confront the

legality of the Americanist policy against the Indians. Washington, however, was never afraid that Fr. Petit would become a publicist of moral seriousness. That is, as a foreign missionary, he could never wreak havoc on the rules of procedure against Indian land ownership. The American government would never tolerate that. Indeed, as a French immigrant Catholic missionary, Fr. Petit didn't stand a chance. He would escape Washington's political scythe, but his legal word would be an empty one, a muffled cry, silence.

Out of this shattered era (seculum) of injustice, Fr. Petit, like one trying to recall the veiled silence of a dream and make sense of it, distilled one essential truth for which all his spiritual training had prepared him-- sacrifice. And on his journey westward this bold choice coalesced with the expelled Potawatamis, during which journey he eventually fell sick and died.

In Fr. Sorin's mind, then, Fr. Petit became a man undone by goodness and justice, a force of ashes. The crucifixion in Petit's life was not the surrendered limbs on a Sunday cross beam, but the exhausted body run out of eloquence on the trail to Indian Territory.

In 1857, twenty years after Fr. Petit's death, Fr. Edward Sorin left Notre Dame, Indiana, to travel to St. Louis to, among other things, retrieve Fr. Petit's remains, which at the time were buried in the Jesuit cemetery at St. Louis University. Fr. Sorin went on this journey when America was approaching a new political event: the Civil War. He also went on this journey when backwardness and ignorance of other races was flourishing and when the cultural gap between the races was all too obvious. Indeed, there must have been moments when Fr. Sorin felt dazzled and immobilized by the competing and contradictory social and religious currents in America at the time. Just 19 years earlier, for example, the governor of Missouri had issued an order calling for the "extermination" of Mormans in that state. And in 1844, just three years after his own arrival to Indiana, an angry mob in Illinois had killed Morman prophet, Joseph Smith. Catholics had fared a little better -- true, but still in states like New Hampshire, Catholics could not hold office. And in most states, many people, as if fighting fist to fist with their better selves, still tended to focus their animosity on the Catholic church, both as an institution and as an idea. And now Fr. Sorin's place of destination-- Missouri-- had just become a slave state with slaves amounting to 10% of the population. (St. Louis alone had 2,000 slaves!) On his journey, then, I believe Fr. Sorin became conscious of reverted time, deep time, the time that surprises one in the light and turns one back to moral and

historical beginnings; a time which for him evolved more and more into the illumined depth and profundity of Fr. Benjamin Marie Petit's life and what that morally motivated short life -- like a much-touched signpost -- meant to him and to Holy Cross, his growing Congregation.

Thus from the standpoint of moral imagination and symbolic history, Fr. Petit's life meant a lot to Fr. Sorin. Fr. Petit's life was a life short-lived -- often by his own arranging-- for the sake of destitute Native Americans. Nevertheless, Fr. Petit saw positive qualities in these deprived people, nudged from their lands and given up to the winds of radical change. Consequently, and as a result of his concern for them, Fr. Petit became a counterbalance to America's maligant injustice toward them. That is, having caught the storm in their eyes, as it were, he took responsiblity for them. Thus he not only affirmed them who had been denied a voice, but he walked the malice done to them, exposing the full malice of their plight to others. Thus by 1857, and certainly before, Fr. Sorin saw in retrospective depth that America had its unique offset in the person of Fr. Petit, and in men and women like Petit. Indeed, I believe Fr. Petit's urgent and provisional journey had inscribed upon Fr. Sorin the historical memory of one profoundly undone by goodness. As a result, Fr. Sorin's journey to St. Louis enabled him to underline anew America's blind prejudice while at the same time deepen and broaden his own internal logic for growth in the midst of sectarian and racial antagonism.

If the U.S. Government had now dominated over the old Franco-Amercian Northwest where Fr. Sorin and his Congregation reached God's harvest, then Fr. Sorin had to continue to accomodate himself and Holy Cross to this racial and religious cauldron in order to survive, evangelize and grow. This led him to an inclusive missiological consciousness, one that would be both practical and Catholic for his expectant Congregation. Such a consciousness would prevent him from evading the ambiguities and antagonisms of his times. It would also enable him to celebrate his faith and master the intricacies of the Anglo-American world. Indeed, like a shrewd pragmatist, Fr. Sorin had already tested the reality of this new Anglo world in his dealings with oath-enforced commissioners, incurious selectmen, choleric (sometimes kindly) Congressmen, stiff-legged governments officials and cantankerous land owners like Mr. Rush of South Bend. He also had learned to address officials as self-important and committed as he.

In addition, Fr. Sorin saw to it that his mission and that of his Congregation had largely been incorporated into the proper national, state and federal policies, without infringing on the

sacramental life and moral goals of the church. All the while, however, Fr. Sorin's image of Fr. Petit, the image of one undone by goodness (or the life of that moral culture broker undone in a deeply divided racist country), became the consequence of some radical need to continue to be a missionary, some decisive refusal against settling into personal security. This image of Fr. Petit's whole short life, which culminated in his journey westward, and Fr. Sorin's own personal struggle to take over from another language a new cultural voice while simultaneously remaining faithful to Fr. Moreau's inspiration, enabled Fr. Sorin to reach back to a communal memory, to an older consciousness to where he belonged. That is, it enabled him to face up to his own early ideals and to be tightened inwardly by them. Thus Fr. Sorin's image of Fr. Petit remained morally heroic, on the side of forgotten light, shedding that light over his own desperate and butting goal to build and sustain Catholic foundations, especially Notre Dame. Ultimately, Fr. Petit's westward way of the cross, as if to continue some connection mediated by Christ's own life and death, helped shape Fr. Sorin and the Congregation of Holy Cross in the American traditon of willed tranformation, in the Catholic tradition of faith, and in the Franco-Celtic tradition of tolerance. It also helped Holy Cross to create an indigenous American spirituality around a local center (Notre Dame) that allowed its members to take risks for the sufferers of racial injustice, bigotry, and narrow cultural nationalism since its own missionary pioneers were victims of the very same American injustices and scandals. It is not shocking then that in the face of catastrophic suffering during the Civil War, Fr. Sorin sent Holy Cross Sisters to the battlefields to nurse and minister to Union troops. Nor should it startle anyone that he likewise sent priest chaplains like Fr. Corby to serve in the Union Army. Such actions in the midst of the rawness and carnage of American violence can never suggest Holy Cross religious provided a privatized or aesthetic resolution to conflict. If anything, their underprized actions of service historically rendered to their lives moments of prodigious grace, expressive of an underlying continuity of identity that goes back to the Congregation's earliest missionaries and to their predecessors; indeed, back to Fr. Sorin and the Holy Cross Brothers who accompanied him to Indiana; and ultimately, back to their predecessors, especially Fr. Benjamin Marie Petit, whose faith and tenacity to his principles underscored the quiet terror of his westward journey.

It is not surprising then that in 1857 Fr. Sorin went on a journey to St. Louis to unearth the bones of Fr. Benjamin Marie Petit in order to lift them into everyone's consciousness at Notre Dame. Through the ritual disposition of Fr. Petit's remains at Notre Dame, Fr. Sorin would use a tragedy in American history

to compel prophetic inspection and to certify anew Fr. Petit's worth to the country, to Notre Dame, and to the Congregation. If Fr. Petit had lost sight of himself in the fate of the Potawatamis, then Fr. Sorin would make sure that at Notre Dame no one would lose sight of his heroic death and his courage to confront forces capable of destroying him. Indeed, Notre Dame would not become an imaginary recipient of Fr. Petit's short life and heroic sacrifice. Rather, his sacrifice, his heroism of defeat, would like a latent flame retain its ache and feel its way into the lives of others at the university and in the potency of the Congregation of Holy Cross-at-large as it globally came to know the power of voices beyond its own self-interest and inclusiveness. Thus Fr. Sorin's journey (as an act of solidarity) juts back in time to preserve the memory of someone who like a felled rider was in danger of being extinguished from memory, nationally forgotten. As a result, the journey became one of many spiritually geographic sources upon which Fr. Sorin would never be at odds with and upon which his Congregation would have a common sense of itself. Fr. Sorin's journey, then, and his subsequent ritual disposition of Fr. Petit's remains at Notre Dame will always speak on behalf of us all as an act of the Congregation's depth and committment to those who, with their backs grounded to the cross of Jesus, suffer for justice's sake and for the greater kindgom of God.

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cover: INDOMITABLE SORIN, C.S.C.

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pastel, graphite on paper