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THE DISASTROUS VISIT: 1855

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THE DISASTROUS VISIT: NEW ORLEANS 1855

The troubles between the missions in New Orleans and the authorities in Indiana were a major cause of the eventual break between the Indiana Sisters and the French motherhouse, though certainly not the only cause. From the present vantage point of 140 years, it seems plain that the break had to happen sooner or later. The disastrous Visit of 1855 may have caused it to happen sooner. And, with less stress and cooler judgement on both sides, that Visit need not have been a disaster at all.

When the Sisters were withdrawn from Saint Mary's College in Kentucky in 1849, three of the four Sisters assigned there went on to New Orleans. They and the five Brothers who accompanied them applied themselves at once to bettering the condition of the children in St. Mary's Boys' Orphan Asylum. Within a month Sister Five Wounds wrote to Father Sorin that substantial improvements had been made. By the following January they were preparing for additions to the house and asking for four or five more Sisters. There were also plans for novitiates for both the Sisters and the Brothers.

Throughout the first year, Sister Mary of the Five Wounds served as superior to the Sisters and Brother Vincent as superior of the Brothers. The religious kept asking for a priest to serve as ecclesiastical superior, but as been pointed out elsewhere,¹ Holy Cross priests were scarce in any part of North America.

In the late winter of 1850, however, young Father Francis Gouesse arrived as Visitor. Poor Father Gouesse deserves a paper to himself, and this is not the place to tell his story, but he suffered from two insoluble problems: a serious personal failing, almost certainly alcoholism, and the

implacable determination of Father Sorin to prevent his holding a responsible position and if possible to get rid of him altogether. He made a good first impression on the local religious, except for Sister Mary of the Angels, whom he categorized as worthless in front of the whole community. He announced that when the Visit was over he was to stay on in New Orleans "until the motherhouse delivered to him a new obedience, which he hoped would be shortly."²

The year went on with no change, and in December 1850 Father Moreau wrote to his own council at LeMans (he was then in Rome) confirming Gouesse as superior in New Orleans, giving him a minor chapter to govern with, and making New Orleans dependent on Notre Dame for Visitation and admission to profession. There is no record of this decision reaching Indiana or New Orleans. On January 7, 1851, Father Sorin wrote to Archbishop Blanc of New Orleans denouncing Father Gouesse as incompetent and unworthy and adding that, "We no longer consider him as one of our own." A week later, on January 13, Father Moreau wrote to Father Sorin explaining how he wanted the New Orleans accounts handled. This letter did not arrive in South Bend until March 30. The Sisters grew increasingly uneasy with Gouesse, as their correspondence to Sorin shows. They were probably writing to Father Moreau in the same strain. At any rate, in June 1851, after Gouesse had been in New Orleans a year and a half, Father Francis Cointet arrived from Notre Dame to replace him and Gouesse sailed for France.

Father Cointet seems to have made an ideal superior, though he had endless difficulties against which to struggle. But in December 1852, after Cointet had also served a year and a half, Father Moreau wrote that he feared for Cointet's health. Therefore Cointet should return to Notre Dame and

Gouesse, who was back in New Orleans working on the archbishop's staff, should resume his role as local superior. The archbishop replied on January 12, 1853, that he had "rehabilitated" Gouesse as superior.

From October of 1852, another thread was running - the assignment to Bengal which Sorin declined. This pushed the New Orleans matter to one side for most of 1853. Late in the year Sorin went to France. During 1853 the Sisters in New Orleans continued to collect money for a new novitiate.

Father Sorin returned in January 1854, bringing Sister Angela (Gillespie), who had made her novitiate and profession in France, and her companion, Sister Emily (Rivard). Father Julien Gastineau also traveled that January from LeMans to Notre Dame, en route to New Orleans, and probably on the same ship. Sister Mary of the Passion (Lafoy) and Sister Mary of St. Claire (Boyssier) also came at that time, but it cannot be established whether they visited Indiana or took a direct water route to New Orleans.

Father Gastineau had been appointed the next superior in New Orleans. It was clear that he was not eager to get there. He went to Notre Dame and stayed out the winter. Father Moreau wrote three times in March, starting one letter before the previous one could possibly have arrived, urging Father Gastineau to get going. When he finally got to New Orleans in late March or early April, complete panic seized him. He stayed one week and fled, not pausing till he reached Rochester, New York. There he made a few days' retreat and wrote a letter of apology to Archbishop Blanc, then continued into Canada, joining the Holy Cross mission there. The insulted religious in New Orleans had to continue trying to cope with a situation which their new superior hadn't been able to bear the sight of.

Father Pierre Salmon, who had been steward to Father Gastineau, now

found himself in charge. When Father Moreau heard what had happened, he wrote that he was sending two Brothers who would report to Notre Dame and then go on to New Orleans. When they arrived, Father Cointet would have to join them and go back to Louisiana.

By this time the terrible summer of 1854 had arrived. At Notre Dame, the Sisters came down from Bertrand to make their annual retreat. On the first day of the retreat, June 18, Barbara Wurtz, a postulant, was stricken with violent pains and died within hours. The next night a thirteen-year-old apprentice at Notre Dame was found dead by his own father who had come to visit him. Two days later two students died, and a day after that, in a death unrelated to the epidemic, a Brother drowned in the lake. The Bertrand Sisters hastened back to Michigan at the close of the retreat, but the specter followed them. Sister Aloysius Gonzaga (Rivard), a sister of Sister Emily, died August 15. Sister Dominic (Feagan) died three days later. Sister Antonia (Tremont), a novice, died on the 29th. Father John Curley, a young Irishman ordained only one year, died September 7, and Sister Anastasia (Byrne) at Bertrand September 9. Five Brothers and three Brother postulants died, and another student, and a priest postulant.

Notre Dame was one vast hospital, in which there were few who were not patients, but those who were not so bad helped to take care of the others, whose suffering cannot be described. It was called the epidemic or plague, and seemed to be a combination of dysentery and typhus fever, though some thought it was nothing less than the cholera.³

It was feared that if the students knew about these deaths, a panic might ensue. Consequently Father Sorin tried to keep them in the dark. The dead were taken to the cemetery at night and buried without any religious solemnity. Conditions, however, could hardly be kept secret, and when professors did not appear for class, the students suspected the worst. Their fears were confirmed, when, day after day, the mounds of sandy clay increased in the cemetery.⁴

Father Sorin and the few other priests and professors who were still on

their feet worked twenty-four-hour days, replacing the missing teachers, nursing the sick, ministering to the dying, burying the dead.

A letter, written in May, before the epidemic started, arrived from Father Moreau urging that Father Force (whom he called "Father Vorms") or someone else be sent from Notre Dame to New Orleans. By the time the letter arrived, there was no one to send. Archbishop Blanc wrote in June, telling Father Sorin not to delay the two Brothers from France. But the two Brothers had not yet arrived.

Raging epidemics were nothing new to the religious in New Orleans. Cholera and yellow fever were annually recurring disasters. The sickness sometimes waned, but never entirely disappeared. Deaths of parents created new orphans, who often brought the infection with them into the orphanage. So for many weeks in the summer of 1854, both Holy Cross groups suffered the ravages of plague, neither group understanding how bad the other's situation had become. Then, within two weeks in September, three things happened. On the sixth, Father Salmon, who was doing his best to administer New Orleans, died of yellow fever. On the tenth the long-missing Brothers from LeMans appeared at Notre Dame, claiming to have got lost between the East Coast and Indiana, but ready to join Father Cointet and proceed to New Orleans. On the 19th, in a heart-breaking irony, Father Cointet, who had once been removed from Louisiana to guard his health, died of cholera at Notre Dame. Again the community in New Orleans was without a superior or a prospect of one.

Apparently the only Holy Cross priest left in New Orleans was poor Gouesse. Once more he gathered the reins of leadership in his less-than-capable hands. Under his direction, the community addressed a petition to Father Moreau asking that their house be closed. Discouragement had won.

Father Moreau did not grant the petition. After more searching of his membership lists, he announced that Father Isidore Guesdon would be sent from France to fill the position of superior, and Notre Dame should send an assistant. Before this letter arrived, Father Sorin had found someone to fill the gap temporarily. This was the Reverend Michael Rooney, an obnoxious young snob who lasted one year in Holy Cross. He wrote back negative and sardonic letters full of show-off quotations to Father Sorin, betraying a low opinion of the place and the people and a high opinion of himself, but even his sophisticated heart was moved with pity for the Sisters.

This is a much God-forsaken, Lord-abandoned place, and the sooner you wash your hands of it the better.... Among the Sisters I do not believe there is one who does not grieve the change [to a new superior] as they come to me every day in tears begging me not to go. The poor old creatures, for old they are with much care, expect another season of trouble, verily they have had enough.⁵

Father Guesdon showed no more haste to get to New Orleans than had Father Gastineau and the two Brothers. He finally arrived around May 1, 1855, having left France February 16. Father Rooney left the next day, and some of the religious went with him.

Another hot summer came, but Father Guesdon grasped the nettle firmly. Twice in June he wrote politely but very unyieldingly to Father Sorin that he could not spare any more religious to return to Notre Dame. During the summer the Sisters wrote about how happy they were that regularity had been restored and the institution was at last running smoothly. On August 28, Guesdon wrote to Sorin about some policies he was pursuing, "And it will be the same in future." On the day he wrote the letter he had a future of three weeks. On September 18 he died of yellow fever.

In France, Father Moreau had come to the end of his resources. He wrote to Archbishop Blanc on November 15, 1855, that Father Sorin would have to take

full responsibility for New Orleans, for France had no one left to send. With the death of Father Cointet, Indiana had no one either. The religious who had come north with Father Rooney gave contradictory reports on the situation; and the mere fact that they had left caused Father Sorin and his two councils (men and women) to view them as malcontents and their accounts as suspect. An understanding of the situation had become imperative. Father Sorin decided to send a reliable group of observers to get a clear view of the matter and report to him.

It turned out to be one of the worst decisions he ever made, yet it appears at this remove to have been backed by logic, good sense, and at least a movement in the direction of being helpful. The three Sisters who were to go were carefully chosen. Mother Mary of the Ascension (Salou), superior at Notre Dame, had come to America in 1846 and fitted in immediately. Permission had been secured for her perpetual profession before the usual canonical age. Sister Mary of the Immaculate Conception (Prevert), had been sent by Father Moreau to visit the American houses in 1854. When the cholera epidemic left the Sisters short-handed, she had remained to fill in as needed, but was still considered Father Moreau's delegate on loan from the Motherhouse. She would probably have visited New Orleans anyhow before returning to France. Sister Mary of St. Liguori (Chretien) had come to America in 1853 and had recently been serving, with Sister Augusta (Anderson) at the manual labor school in Mishawaka. She had made her final profession only a few months before. All three of these Sisters had known most of the sisters at New Orleans, either in France or in Indiana, or both. All were French and French-speaking themselves. It also clarifies our picture of them to remember that at this time Mother Ascension was 29 years old, Sister Liguori was 25, and Sister

Immaculate Conception, who had been serving as Visitor in America for two years, was 24.

Two Brothers also made the journey. Brother Stephen, described as "a good administrator," was the official delegate to the Brothers. He had a shadowy companion about whom no information has survived, not even his name.

The Visitors rang the doorbell of the orphan asylum at eight p.m. on November 27, 1855, and were met with shock and dismay.

The religious in New Orleans had been fully expecting another priest to be sent them from what they must have seen as an inexhaustible supply at the Lake. They did not expect three Sisters and two Brothers, and made it clear that they were anything but glad to see them. The travelers, who were hungry and tired, and who had come with at least some expectation of being helpful, were thrown on the defensive by the hostile reception. By the time the Visitors got across the threshold, the Visit was doomed.

The accounts of what happened do not agree in all particulars. There are four main voices reporting the event to Father Moreau: Mother Ascension and Sister Immaculate Conception from the Visitors, and Father Raymond and Sister Mary of the Passion from New Orleans.

In spite of the lateness of their arrival and the length of time they seem to have been kept up, Mother Ascension and Sister Immaculate Conception both wrote to Father Moreau that very night. Sister Immaculate Conception wrote again the next day, and Mother Ascension submitted a full report through Saint Mary's council after she returned home.

The question of validity of authority on both sides was the first problem that arose. Since the death of Father Guesdon, the New Orleans establishment had been getting along as best it could, apparently with the

most authoritative people taking the most responsibility. Sister Immaculate Conception wrote, "We are still amazed to see Sister Mary of the Passion display the full authority of a superior, when she is only in charge of the postulants. Well, blessed be God, she believes she has the duty to act that way in the face of all those who know perfectly well she has no authority."⁶ Father Raymond, the diocesan priest who had been representing the archbishop's authority at the orphanage, considered someone else the Sisters' superior. He wrote to the archbishop before he had seen any of the Visitors that he hoped they would not take away a certain Sister whose absence would be "a mortal blow to the house.... I am not speaking," he added, "of the Sister Superior, Mother Mary of the Desert, for I am sure no one would dare touch her."⁷

Among the men, Father Raymond himself was more or less regarded as the superior, though he was not a member of the congregation. Father Moreau had known him in France and had apparently asked him to look after the religious in New Orleans, and the archbishop had sanctioned his functioning as orphanage chaplain and a sort of superior pro tem. He seems to have feared from the beginning that the Holy Cross religious were going to be removed from the New Orleans area altogether. Since he had just secured some Sisters for his own parish in Opelousas, that would have been a personal blow to him. He panicked when he first heard of the Visitors and wrote to the archbishop that "three young Sisters, one professed, coming from France, and two Irish novices" had arrived "to replace the Sisters who are supposed to make their vows in New Orleans."⁸

Mother Ascension wrote:

[W]e learned that the community would finish the annual retreat the next day, and ... that this retreat had been given by Mr. Raymond, according to an invitation from Your Reverence, which established him as superior of the institution; and he was, in fact, presented as such to

Brother Stephen, when, according to the Rule, he asked who the superior was in order to present his obedience.⁹

When Mother Ascension declined to present her own obedience to Father Raymond, on the grounds that he was not a member of the congregation, but said she would show it to the Sisters,

they would have Brother Elias come in, and see with him what could be done (I still didn't know at that time that he had been acting as superior since the death of Father Guesdon).¹⁰

A meeting of the Brothers' Council, however, which took place during the Visit (but which does not mention the Visit) lists Brother Ignatius as the presiding officer; he subsequently refused to sign the minutes, and they were signed by Brother Elias and Brother Valentine.

If the authority in New Orleans was diffused to the point of evaporation, the authority from Notre Dame was simply unacceptable. The New Orleans religious, especially the Sisters, had found that in spite of heat, yellow fever, and lesser inconveniences, the atmosphere of New Orleans was congenial because it was French. Most of them had experienced the northern climate and the strongly Americanized environment of Indiana, and wanted no more of either one. They feared being re-inserted into both if they submitted to the authority of the Lake.

They cited special arrangements with Father Moreau and the canonical technicality of Visitors having to be appointed by either the superior general or the general council (which, as a matter of fact, Sister Mary of the Immaculate Conception had been, for all the houses in America). The Visitors presented a letter from Father Moreau himself, explaining that he was asking Father Sorin to take over responsibility for them, and enjoining upon them obedience to him or to whomever he would send. The local group insisted that this would mean only the sending of a superior, not Visitors.

As Mother Ascension's lines quoted above had noted, the community was finishing a retreat and preparing for the reception of six postulants and the profession of four novices. This coming ceremony constituted the next problem. During the superiorship of Father Gouesse, Father Moreau had given Father Sorin the right to approve professions in New Orleans.¹¹ The power had been ignored rather than rescinded; New Orleans had continued to apply to Ste. Croix for permission to grant professions, and Father Moreau had continued to send the permissions. It is possible that the Visitors registered a technical protest since Father Sorin had not been consulted, but there is not much evidence one way or another. The Cattas claim that the Visitors "changed the obediences [and] stopped the religious professions scheduled for the following day."¹² Both these charges are negated by every contemporary source. Mother Ascension, having noted that the retreat would end with reception and profession, says no more about either. Sister Immaculate Conception objects not to the ceremony but to one of the participants. In a short list of people the mission would be better off without, drawn up the first night before she slept, she mentions, "Sister Mary of Ste. Claire, who has the unfortunate fault of drinking -- she is nevertheless going to make her profession tomorrow morning."¹³ Sister Mary of the Passion, writing on December 5, merely says, "I have the consolation of seeing six new novices and four professed going along in good spirit."

Father Raymond couched his comment in a convoluted French double negative which the Cattas seem to have read too quickly. "Ils n'avaient dit qu'absolument ils ne s'opposeraient pas a la profession et a la prise d'habit de ce matin." "They only said that they were not absolutely opposed to the profession and the taking of the habit of this morning." In other words, they

had some reservations, but would not pursue the issue.

What did the Visitors do the next day?

Father Raymond: "[They] did not attend the ceremony; they went out in the morning without speaking to anyone and are not back yet. It is now four-thirty in the afternoon." In a midnight postscript he adds,

The Visitors went out and stayed out until seven in the evening. They ate in the city; they went to see the administrators, and dined with one of them. One could call it an electoral campaign. Besides, they have sulked all day long with all the Sisters, they have not attended one exercise with them.¹⁴

This is overkill; it is hard to see how people who were out from early morning until seven p.m. could be accused of "sulking all day long with all the Sisters," or expected to attend religious exercises.

Sister Ascension says that she "went next day, with Brother Stephen and one Sister," to the residence of the Vicar General, Father Rousselon. They were coldly received, and told that the members of Holy Cross were constantly bickering and quarreling and that he wanted nothing to do with them. They withdrew in confusion. She does not say who else, if anyone, they visited. It would have been logical for them to have called upon the lay administrators to get their views of the local situation.

The return of Archbishop Blanc to his city brought some order into the situation. He settled the authority question by deciding that the Visitors could remain as observers but could not make an official Visitation. Mother Ascension had been told to send a report to Father Sorin after ten days, but to remain in New Orleans until the report had been forwarded to Father Moreau and a reply received from him, which would have been several weeks. Instead Archbishop Blanc told her to take the ten days for observation but then to return with Sister Liguori to Notre Dame.

Had the Visitors really come to be helpful?

There seems to have been some tact exercised in the selection of Sisters. All were capable missionaries, and all were French. Sister Mary of the Passion was attempting to take care of the orphanage, the novitiate, and the workroom. One or two of the Sisters may have been intended to replace her in one or two of those tasks. But instead of feeling relieved, she felt threatened, and the mission, if there was one, failed. The idea, however, that the Indiana contingent simply stomped in and took over the house is not well borne out. They arrived at eight in the evening after traveling several days, were kept up till midnight attempting to account for themselves, and were offered rather precarious hospitality.

Mother Ascension relates that after their arrival, Father Raymond was sent for, and she was interviewed by him. When she declined to present her obedience, the Sisters' local council was called together, and she gave them her obedience, Father Moreau's letter, and an explanation of the purpose of the Visit. Brother Elias was then called in, though she protested that the Brothers and Sisters had no authority over each other. They told her they did things differently in New Orleans, "So," she says, "I kept quiet and asked if we could have some supper, which we greatly needed."¹⁵

After the meal, there was another meeting with Father Raymond, then with Brother Elias, then with the Sisters' council. Then, "As the night was getting on," she says, "I begged them to at least accord us ordinary hospitality, so we would not have to make our affairs public by going to look for it elsewhere."

Father Raymond, on the other hand, tells quite a different story.

What was surprising from the first was the manner in which they announced themselves. It was their excessively offensive and imperious

tone. One would have thought it was a place taken by assault, to which the conqueror had come to impose his laws.¹⁶

He gives no examples or details of this imperious conduct. Mother Ascension's long account, paragraph by paragraph, of each of the inquisitions to which she was submitted on the first evening is the more convincing. On the other hand, it is likely that she was being selective when she accounted for the second day, mentioning only the visit to the Vicar General and saying nothing about seeing any lay administrators.

Within a few days, Sister Mary of the Passion had picked up Father Raymond's language, and writes to Father Moreau, "Father Sorin ... does not treat us like a father, but came to take us as one takes a place by storm. I don't need to tell you more; Mr. Raymond was here; he has written to you."¹⁷ The coupling of Raymond's name with the imagery is significant.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, this is the language the Cattas adopted, so that the impression given is that the Visitors went about like roaring lions seeking someone to devour. The Cattas either did not know that there was a possible alternative view or chose to ignore it in pursuance of one of their chief aims--always to make Father Sorin look as bad as possible.

The Cattas seem to have depended heavily, if not entirely, on Father Raymond's account, and the matter of Father Raymond's dependability has never been questioned. But it may be noted first that a small group of Sisters had just begun work at his parish in Opelousas, so that he had a personal stake in whatever happened to the New Orleans religious. Second, there is some inconsistency between his view of the matter when reporting to Father Moreau, and of the same matter when writing to his own archbishop. Writing to Father Moreau, he paints an extremely rosy picture. Having described the reception and profession ceremony, and the "twenty-one Sisters or aspirants who make up

a magnificent house," he goes on to the Brothers, naming each and his occupation. Of Brother Valentine he merely says, "Brother Valentine is in charge of the shoemaker's workshop." Writing to his own ordinary, he says what he would not say to Father Moreau,

... I was obliged to go a little more often this week to the orphan asylum, to try to calm down Brother Valentine a little. He is standing on his head, and such a poor head it is! The devil makes use of him like a Pirouette; this time it is purely pride which is the cause of it.¹⁸

To Father Moreau he writes,

Brother Elias whom you know, very hot, very ardent, but an excellent heart, takes care of the discipline of the children, and has them in hand amazingly well. He also takes charge of more or less everything; for you know he is very enthusiastic and full of good will.¹⁹

But to Archbishop Blanc, "Brother Elias, for his part, is always meddling, but I won't worry about it too much. I think it will finally be necessary to get rid of Brother Elias."²⁰

The very hot Brother Elias supervising the children's discipline is probably the source of Mother Ascension's report that the Brothers struck the children, even in church.²¹

Another central problem is the question of whether there was a real need to send anyone, superior or Visitor, whether Father Moreau had been in any way misinformed, or whether he had misunderstood the reports from New Orleans. Certainly the mission had had a most unfortunate history in its superiors. Gouesse had been sent away after a long squabble, Cointet had been sent back to Indiana for the sake of his health, Gouesse had returned and been sent away a second time, Gastineau had fled after one week, Salmon had died of yellow fever after five months, Cointet had been re-appointed and died at Notre Dame before he could come, Gouesse had once more filled in for about two months, Rooney had served under protest for three months, and Guesdon had died of

yellow fever after five months. From Father Gouesse's first arrival in February 1850 to Father Guesdon's death in September 1855, six different men had served as superior at New Orleans, and Father Gouesse had served three times - eight changes of superior in five and a half years. That alone would have been enough to put any mission off balance, even without the ravages of yellow fever and other problems. But the religious in New Orleans had kept asking for priest-superiors, through Father Raymond had noticed that the line was getting thin when it reached Father Rooney.²²

It should also be remembered that the fall of 1855 was the time of Father Moreau's great spiritual trial. It had been coming on for some time through the spring and summer, but the trial itself began during October. It ended when Father Moreau was reading a letter from his benefactress, the Countess de Jurien, which contained a particularly felicitous sentence comparing Father Moreau to St. Peter walking on the water. The letter is dated October 30²³ but we do not know just when Father Moreau read it.

While he was still in the grip of the trial, Father Moreau may have been inclined to view things more pessimistically than usual or necessary. We do not know in what terms the requests were made, or how the situation had been described, but Father Raymond at least regretted that the picture had been painted so darkly.

First, you believed them [the members at New Orleans] to be in great distress, lacking subjects, incapable of proceeding, perhaps obliged to suspend operations.... You therefore asked Father Sorin to come to the aid of a house in distress.²⁴

One wonders where Father Moreau would have received this impression if not from the New Orleans members themselves. But under threat of a return to Father Sorin, the rhetoric changes. Father Raymond now writes, "It is inconceivable how good God is to His children! The whole house gets along as

well as it possibly could since the death of Father Guesdon, and finds itself as steady as ever."²⁵ He then assures Father Moreau that a Jesuit priest comes every week for confessions, a diocesan priest offers Mass for the community several times a week, the archbishop is always ready to lend a fatherly ear, and he himself is more than willing to get involved in the details of administration as needed. What need have they of help from Indiana? Sister Mary of the Passion

... may have her little faults, but at bottom she is a good Sister.... Sister Nativity could ... direct the Asylum, and Sister Mary of the Desert the workshop, both without her. You will have to tell her to have great charity for these two Sisters, as well as for Sister Holy Angels; to have great kindness, and to be very united with them; to work things out together, when that needs to be done; to instruct the novices well, and to give them an example of everything that she tells them. That's the right way.²⁶

The fact that Father Raymond found these suggestions necessary makes its own statement.

Mother Mary of the Passion herself strongly seconded the idea that if help could come only from Father Sorin, then no help was wanted. She wrote to Father Moreau that the New Orleans religious were not only surprised to learn that they had been placed under Father Sorin, but "we felt it was the worst thing that could happen to these establishments, which could develop under the Motherhouse, and under Father Sorin would certainly be finished."²⁷ She agreed that Father Raymond was sufficient superior for the present. She also felt that if the Visitors were any example, the Rule was not properly kept in Indiana.

I am pained to see here the Superior from the Lake with her assistant live as if she had no Rule at all. If one judges them according to what they are doing here, one would believe that at the Lake they observe the Rules very loosely, and if one of them stays here as superior, very soon everything we have done to establish the spirit and practice of the rule will be destroyed.²⁸

She may have been aware that the Visitors had made the first complaint. Sister Immaculate Conception had written the first night, "... the religious spirit does not seem to reign here, and the manner in which your orders have been received gives me ... very little hope."²⁹ Mother Ascension wrote, "All resistance was useless with people of so little religious spirit ..."³⁰ Is this mere name-calling? Or have we reached a fundamental disagreement? Father Raymond seems to have found the answer without knowing that he had found it.

All the time, the Sisters were thinking that, if you had known the actual state of the house, you would never have written to Father Sorin, especially if you had known the ardent desire of all the Brothers ... and ... Sisters to remain dependent on the Motherhouse ... particularly considering the innumerable inconveniences for a house in a hot, feverish climate inhabited by people of a special kind of character to be mixed with a house of an entirely different style.³¹

This is very revelatory. What has happened here? Back in their native France the New Orleans religious had not been accustomed to a hot, feverish climate; nor had those of Indiana been accustomed to a vista of hundreds of miles of lakes and woodlands, where the Indians for whom the state was named were drifting away as the pioneers rolled in. But each group had now become "people of a special kind of character." The New Orleans group had seen just enough of Indiana to have felt its strangeness, and to have been grateful to be received back into the French atmosphere of Louisiana, heat, disease, and all. The Notre Dame group, following Sorin's lead at every step, had begun to meet the problems of their post-frontier society with an independence which both France and Louisiana found shocking and sometimes offensive. The two groups lived "an entirely different style," and for that century and decade, the styles would not mix. To a degree they were reflecting the North-South problem agitating the whole nation, but only to a degree, because even in the

South, New Orleans has always been more special than typical.

There is another account, taken from the Marianite Chronicles, which differs in several particulars from the letters written at the time. It gives the impression of having been written some time after the fact, or by someone who was not there and who gained information at second hand and after the stories had had a chance to grow in the telling. It needs to be examined, as it has till now served as the only account retained in either Louisiana or Indiana of what happened on the Visit.

The chronicler does not seem to be aware that the Visitors arrived at eight o'clock at night. She relates that Mother Ascension presented the letter from Father Moreau, and does not mention that any objection was raised to it at first.

The matter of the next day's professions came up. Mother Ascension registered her objection, it was duly noted, but the plans were not changed. There was a further discussion with the Sisters' chapter about the legitimacy of the Visitors' authority. No mention is made of Brother Elias or Father Raymond, or of the Visitors having to ask for something to eat. In fact, in this version they have arrived before dinner, which leads to further complications.

In setting aside the power of her obedience, she [Mother Ascension] did not seem to be willing to take second place. Her companion (who had no official status) and another Sister of the house who was too attached to the Lake, led her to the superior's place in the refectory. When the two superiors entered the refectory, the local superior, knowing nothing of all this, went to her usual place, which she found occupied. She was ready to yield it when a Sister, as usually happens in these disagreements, said, "No, you must not yield as superior of the house; you must keep your place!"

Another contest followed this first: a Sister, the same one mentioned above, with the same Sister from the Lake, found it would be necessary to give the local superior's bedroom to the superior from the Lake. Then the same Sister who had stood up for her superior, so that

the superior from the Lake should not replace her without legitimate authority, refused her the use of the room and the local superior took the key of it.³²

While this has a certain ring of authenticity, it is hard to place it within the known chronology. It could not have happened the first night. Dinner in New Orleans would have been over by eight p.m.; and whether the travelers were welcome or not, the only sensible explanation for their not being offered a meal is the probability that the New Orleans group assumed that the travelers had eaten too. The Visitors requested and were given some food around ten p.m., by which time all the New Orleans religious who were not members of the council would have been in bed.³³

Nor could it have happened the second day, as all the accounts agree that the Visitors were out of the house all day; also the question of who slept where would already have been dealt with. From the second evening on, the Visitors had become mere observers and were neither expecting nor receiving the honors of the Visit. The story provides an interesting human view, but simply does not fit into any contemporary account.

The Chronicle goes on:

Mother Mary of the Ascension showed a purported document from the Superior General, but Mother Mary of the Passion had a real one from him. She showed it and said, "Yours is false; this one contradicts it." Mother Mary of the Ascension and her companion did not dare argue any further nor show their forged document.³⁴

There is no suggestion in the on-the-spot documents that any letter was forged or false. It was the kind of a case which arose quite regularly from Father Moreau's efforts to keep peace among his children. Each group was told what it wanted to hear, and though the versions may not actually have been contradictory, they often sounded that way, and no attempt was made to explain how they worked together. The complaint made at the time was not that the

letter from Father Moreau which the Indiana group presented was false, but that it should have been sent on sooner to New Orleans, and that anyway they had special arrangements with Father Moreau which it did not abrogate.

The document also claims that during the Visit Father Sorin was in St. Louis, waiting for a telegram which would tell him to come and take possession of New Orleans. This seems to be part of the "take by storm" idea, but is the least likely point of all. There is nothing in Father Sorin's correspondence to indicate that he was anywhere but at Notre Dame at this time. Nor does St. Louis form a good lurking place for jumping out at New Orleans. Even by today's superhighways, St. Louis is 695 miles from New Orleans.³⁵

There are positive elements in the document, however. It accounts for Sister Liguori on the second day, when Mother Ascension says she took her "assistant," Sister Immaculate Conception, and went to see the Vicar General, and the other documents indicate that they also visited the administrators. Sister Liguori attended the professions. "The young professed Sister kept in the background and gave no trouble."³⁶ It gives the names of two administrators, Mr. De Armas and Mr. Layton.³⁷ It explains how Sister Mary of the Passion's duties would have been reassigned if she had been willing, with Sister Immaculate Conception serving as superior of the orphanage and Sister Liguori in the workroom. And it begins to account for Sister Presentation.

Poor Sister Presentation, whose mental capacities apparently began to deteriorate soon after she made her profession, was an unwelcome troublemaker wherever she went. Sister Mary of the Five Wounds wrote to Father Sorin from New Orleans in January 1852 about two fine postulants she had sent to Bertrand, adding, "And I admit I was not expecting Sister Mary of the Presentation in return." She characterized her as having "a ruinous capacity

for colossal pretensions, a fantastic and bizarre character, capricious and very officious, all in short exactly fitted to raise a tower of Babel."³⁸

According to the Chronicle, when Sister Immaculate Conception left New Orleans, Sister Presentation decided to go with her. Sister Mary of the Passion forbade her to go, and told her that if she went anyway, she would never be received in New Orleans again. Sister Presentation left anyway. In Indiana her condition continued to become worse and she eventually was committed to a mental institution in St. Louis, where she died.

Finally, the document mentions the bill which Father Sorin asked the New Orleans house to pay for the Visitors' travel. This was and is standard practice in religious houses. The New Orleans religious might have been willing to pay for these five Visitors, even without recognizing their authority. But they were also being billed for the journeys of Father Gastineau and Father Rooney. Sister Mary of the Passion had told Mother Ascension, "The establishment of New Orleans is not obliged to pay what members who have been expelled or those who have seen fit to run away have taken with them."³⁹ The matter was referred to Father Moreau, who eventually told Mary of the Passion to pay the whole bill.

The major points of the problem thus present themselves.

Father Moreau told Father Sorin to send "someone" to New Orleans. He told the religious in New Orleans that a priest superior was coming. New Orleans got a nasty shock when the "someone" turned out to be a team of observers, at least three of whom were prepared to remain in New Orleans and assume some authority. The Visitors were shocked not to be received in a more friendly fashion. The Visitors did not attempt to change obediences or stop the reception and profession ceremonies; they may have voiced some objection.

Both sides had recently been through difficult experiences, and the New Orleans religious were much more off balance than Father Raymond admitted to Father Moreau. Father Raymond had, among other things, the future of his own school and parish to protect, so he was not entirely disinterested. He saw to the heart of the matter in his comment that the lifestyles would not mix.

Each group had developed its own way, in response to its own mission situation. The situations were totally different, and so were the responses. We will never arrive at the full truth of what happened on this Visitation, but it makes no difference. Whether it was a rescue mission or a takeover, whether the Visitors were subjected to an inquisition or took the house by storm, whether one side or both or neither sent an accurate report to Father Moreau, the Visit from the start had no chance at all of success. Indiana and Louisiana had grown too far apart. A question now as we face the Sesquicentennial year might be--to what extent are we now growing back toward each other again?

All materials cited here are in the Congregational Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Saint Mary's, Notre Dame, Indiana.

1. See James T. Connelly, csc, "Charism: Origins and History," in Fruits of the Tree, I (Notre Dame: Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1988), 110-111.
2. Letter of Sister Mary of the Angels to Father Sorin, Apr. 21, 1850.
3. Sister M. Emerentiana (Nowland), csc, Chronicles I:126.
4. Arthur J. Hope, csc. Notre Dame: One Hundred Years. (Notre Dame: University Press, 1943), 83.
5. Rooney to Sorin, Apr. 8, 1855.
6. Sister Mary of the Immaculate Conception to Moreau, Nov. 28, 1855. All documents in this series translated by Sister M. Georgia (Costin).
7. Father Raymond to Archbishop Blanc, Nov. 27, 1855.
8. Ibid.
9. Report of Saint Mary's Council to Moreau, Dec. 29, 1855.
10. Ibid.
11. Dec. 4, 1850.
12. Etienne Catta and Tony Catta, Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors and the Early Origins of the Marianites of Holy Cross (1818-1900), translation by Edward L. Heston, csc. (Milwaukee: Bruce Press, 1959), 161.
13. Nov. 27, 1855.
14. Nov. 28.
15. Council Report.
16. Nov. 28.
17. Dec. 5.
18. Feb. 2, 1856.
19. Nov. 28.
20. Feb. 2, 1856.
21. Council Report.
22. Raymond to Moreau, Nov. 28.

23. Cattas, II, 112.
24. Nov. 28.
25. Ibid.
26. Dec. 13.
27. Dec. 5.
28. Ibid.
29. Nov. 27.
30. Council Report.
31. Nov. 28.
32. Chronicles of the Sisters Marianites of Holy Cross, New Orleans, 1855, 1. Translated by Sister M. Georgia Costin, csc. Hereafter Document X.
33. The Rule of 1854 would have been in force in New Orleans in 1855. It provided for supper at 7, night prayer at 8:30, and adds, "Ten minutes after prayers, all the Sisters should be in bed and all the lights extinguished." (Rule XX, No. 172-74)
34. Document X, 3.
35. Rand McNally Road Atlas, 47th Annual Edition, 1971.
36. Document X, 2.
37. Ibid.
38. Jan. 13, 1852.
39. Council Report.