

**"THAT DEAR FRIEND": SISTER MARY REDEMPTION
AND HER TWO BEST FRIENDS,
MOTHER LEONIE AND FATHER SORIN**

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by

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"That Dear Friend": Sister Mary of the Redemption and Her Two Best Friends,

Mother Leonie and Father Sorin

by Sister M. Georgia Costin, CSC

When the Little Sisters of the Holy Family sent me the correspondence of Mother Leonie and Father Sorin, I thought I was getting a set of letters of direction which would give me a rare look into both souls.

Unfortunately, I soon found I had no such thing. If Mother Leonie and Father Sorin exchanged letters of that kind, the letters were not saved. The extant letters, however, have several points of interest of their own.

There are 68 letters in the series -- 51 written by Mother Leonie and 17 by Father Sorin. The earliest date is March 31, 1872, on a letter of Leonie's from Saint Mary's. The latest date is August 10, 1891, on a letter of Sorin's written from Notre Dame. Thus the correspondence begins four years after Sorin became superior general of the men of Holy Cross, three years after the Sisters in Indiana had become an autonomous community, and just a month after Sorin had first mentioned his plan to start a second novitiate at Notre Dame for Sisters who would specialize in housekeeping duties. (He first put this plan in writing in a letter to Archbishop Purcell of Cincinnati dated February 10, 1872; he brought it up at a Saint Mary's council meeting four days later.) Three letters are undated. From the first dated letter to the last the time space is eight months short of being twenty years. Mother Leonie's letters vary in length from one paragraph to four pages. Sorin's are always less than a page.

Several ideas run through the letters. Some of them are the presence in the story of Sister Redemption Rajot, the founding of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, the personal relationships between Leonie and Sorin, Leonie's loneliness and fears, especially at the beginning of her work in New Brunswick, her dealings with the Holy Cross priests of the French Canadian Province, her health, and her gradual process of becoming separated from Holy Cross and more deeply concerned with the new community which she had founded almost accidentally. Of all these possible rivulets, the one we shall follow

in this paper concerns the unusual relationship between Sorin, Leonie, and Mother Mary of the Redemption.

Sister Redemption (Pauline Rajot) can only be described as different -- different in every way from the average Marianite, the average religious, the average woman. She came from a very well-to-do French family, and once described her family's day in terms of meals:

Rising was at ten o'clock; a cup of coffee was brought to us in bed by the servants. At one o'clock, lunch; very little and quite light. At eight o'clock, the great dinner; six glasses at each place, there were different kinds of things to drink. The meal lasted two hours. Bed at midnight or later.¹

It may be that she tended to frame her young memories with food because of the part it played in her vocation. Some poisoned mushrooms got into one of those dinners and everyone in the family became so ill that death was, at least in Pauline's eyes, a real possibility.

Since I loved my relatives very much, I promised the good God that, if He saved them for me, I would become a religious. Nobody died. I was young, and, with the passage of years, I gained a taste for the things of the world.²

Her conscience pushed her to keep her promise, and one day as a young woman she told her parents about it. By this time she had no desire to become a religious, but felt that the childhood pledge obliged her. "Tears flowed," she said, "regrets were exchanged ... but finally grace triumphed."³ A modern vocation director would question whether it had indeed been grace which had triumphed, and Pauline's constant restlessness in the religious life may have stemmed from this initial distaste for the whole idea. But she stayed with it, more or less, for her whole life, and found two people to love her dearly and help her through it -- those experienced readers of souls, Edward Sorin and Leonie Paradis.

The young Sister Mary of the Redemption went from Le Mans to Montreal almost as soon as she finished her novitiate. Father Victor Drouelle was being sent to make the Visit in all the North American houses in the summer of 1848, and Sister Redemption sailed in his party.

She hardly stayed in Canada long enough to make herself useful. Father Drouelle moved on to Indiana after a month, and Sister Redemption went with

him. She is listed as a council member for the first time on August 24, 1848. On September 4 the minutes declare that "Sister M. of the Redemption will fulfill the functions of superior during the vacancy at Bertrand and at N.D. du Lac." She remained in Bertrand only until April or May 1849, and then, in a developing pattern that would continue through much of her life, moved again, back to Canada to become superior at the convent of St. Martin's, a newly-opened mission in the diocese of Quebec. By then she had been two years in the habit and had made no profession.

But the short stay in Bertrand had been enough to give her a chance to become acquainted with Father Sorin. He seems to have been greatly impressed with her from the first.

She stayed only three months at St. Martin's, and went back to France in August 1849. But she was unable to remain there either. In 1851 the Reverend Louis Baroux was returning from France to his Indian mission at Pokagon, Michigan; Sister Redemption and another Sister came with him. By July 1852 she was back in Canada receiving an obedience as mistress of work in the boarding school at St. Laurent.

She was allowed to make her profession at St. Laurent on March 25, 1855. It may have been in the months prior to this that she first met Sister Leonie, who had entered the novitiate at St. Laurent on February 21, 1854, at the age of thirteen. At the time of Redemption's profession, Redemption was 31; Leonie was going on fifteen.

In September 1855 the house in New York was opened, apparently with Sisters from New Orleans, Notre Dame, St. Laurent, and Le Mans. (There are two versions of this story; one includes Sisters from Le Mans, and the other does not.) Most of the Sisters have not been identified, but Sister Redemption was definitely present. This time she lasted two months, and left or was recalled. The house closed after one year as a result of a jurisdictional dispute. It was reopened by the Marianites in 1860.

Sister Redemption spent most of the time between 1855 and 1860 in various occupations in and around Le Mans, including local superior at the

motherhouse. The chapter of 1860 named her first assistant to the superior general and provincial superior for France. Both of these were major responsibilities, but neither sufficed to hold her down. Father Moreau's letter announcing her election is dated September 1, 1860; by the end of October 1861 she was back in New York, assuming the duties of superior of the orphanage.

This was the obedience into which she settled. For nearly ten years she worked with the French population of New York, caring for orphans and neglected children. In 1862 Sister Leonie came to be her assistant. They had eight years to live and work together, share successes and set-backs, and become fast friends. During this time Redemption renewed her acquaintance with Sorin by attending the chapter of 1865, held at Saint Mary's. The Canadian records say that Leonie went with her, but if so she did not participate in the chapter.

The work at St. Vincent's Orphanage was a great success, and it went to Redemption's head. She was the darling of the French colony, and enjoyed every minute of it. She was disregarding all community directives by the end of 1869. The council in France ordered her to leave New York, to go to Canada, then to come to France. She declined all orders. Mother Seven Dolors was making the Visit in Canada in December 1869, and she grew increasingly alarmed about Sister Redemption. The Sisters in Indiana had been granted autonomy the previous July, and here was another example of American independence.

The documents become unclear and even contradictory at this point. Sister Redemption's apostolic service sheet⁴ says she left New York and went to Canada to become Visitor of the Marianites' American houses (not, of course, including the Indiana-based group). Father Nadeau, Mother Leonie's chief biographer, agrees with this and quotes the minutes of one of the Visits, but does not give the place or the date.⁵ If she did become Visitor, she held the position for a very short time. The Canadian necrology says she left New York July 21, 1870, and sailed for France September 3,⁶ but does not

say where she was in between those times. Nadeau agrees that she sailed for France September 3 to become a nurse in the Franco-Prussian War.⁷ Then we may wonder why the following notation appears in the Indiana council minutes for November 21, almost three months later:

Sister M. Redemption having made application to stay here for a while until she can go to a cloistered community in which she has been received, [it was] decided she can go to Fort Wayne to await the opportunity.

Whatever this is about, Sister Redemption never appeared at Sacred Heart Academy, Fort Wayne, nor did she ever join a cloistered community.

In the meantime, things were happening to Sister Leonie as well, outwardly and inwardly, some of them as mysterious as Sister Redemption's adventures. After eight years as assistant at St. Vincent's, she suffered a physical breakdown in the fall of 1869, and returned to St. Laurent to recuperate. In Le Mans they understood that she was dying. Mother Seven Dolours wrote to the Canadian Provincial:

I should be pleased to see Mary of St. Leonie die in Canada where she was received, and in that province and that house which she never left except through obedience... Oh, how I wish that she may have the consolation, before dying, of thinking, and above all, hoping that the Sisters of Canada love her like a Sister....She has suffered so much at the thought of the contrary!⁸

What the Sisters of Canada had against Leonie has not been discovered, though her closeness to Redemption may have caused her superior's rather worldly reputation to rub off on her. She herself worried greatly about Redemption's very salvation, so that Leonie had come to the point of being unhappy when she was with Redemption and even more unhappy, because more worried, when she was away from her. At any rate, Leonie recovered from her illness and returned to New York only a month after she had left it. But her health broke again the following spring, and this time she went home to her family.

From her home she went to St. Laurent in July 1870 and announced that she would accompany the Provincial and her companion on their trip to see Mother Seven Dolours, then making the Visit in New York. She had a meeting with Mother Seven Dolours on July 22 about which no reports were ever written,

but Nadeau says that the register of names in Le Mans gives this date for Leonie's transfer from the Marianites to the Indiana community.⁹ She returned to her family, then went back to New York, apparently to see Redemption, possibly to persuade her to come along to Indiana. In August Madame Paradis, Leonie's mother, wrote to the Provincial Superior at St. Laurent that Leonie was planning to "organize her religious life some other way" and would not be coming to the annual retreat.

Following the decree of autonomy for the Indiana community, general permission had been issued both from Le Mans and from Saint Mary's for any Sister who was not happy where she was to transfer to the other group, provided she could get the permission of the other general council. There was no big dash across the borders. Five Sisters went from Indiana to Canada, four of whom returned. One Sister came from Canada, kept on going until she got to Texas, and was never heard from again. The only other transfers were Leonie, Redemption, and a Sister Philomene, also from the New York house, who later accompanied Leonie to New Brunswick.

Father Charles Villandre, then Provincial of the Holy Cross men in Canada, wrote to Leonie October 17, 1870, to say he was glad she was going to Indiana, where she would "be able to preserve a vocation to which God seems to have called you in a particular way."

We do not know whether Father Sorin and Sister Leonie had ever met before she asked to come to Indiana. She may have come to the chapter of 1865 as Redemption's companion. He, in his capacity of superior general, may have met her in New York or at St. Laurent. In the four years that Leonie spent in Indiana they discovered that they had much in common, not least of which was a boundless concern for Redemption.

Redemption's first attempt to come to Indiana met with a total rebuff. The council minutes for August 3, 1870, report that "Mother Superior asked the opinion of the council as to whether they were willing to receive Sister Redemption, and all replied in the negative."

Perhaps Sorin wanted to override this negative. There is an undated letter, obviously written before Redemption arrived, in which Leonie pleads with him not to push things.

I beg you, Father, in the name of the affection that you have always shown me, don't submit her to this new humiliation. St. Mary's is all right but I know a good way to prevent her from ever coming here....what shall I say, she would only have the humiliation of a refusal, I don't doubt it at all, and it is you, Father, who have exposed her to this humiliation!....Please, respect her misfortunes, you have loved her in the past, and the future will prove the gratitude and the respectful attachment of Your very humble daughter, Sister Marie Leonie.

There are omissions in the extant version of the letter, but what Leonie is suggesting is that Redemption not come "here" -- that is, Saint Mary's -- but to the newly-formed second novitiate at Notre Dame, for which only Sorin's personal approval was needed. Nadeau says that Redemption wrote from Paris in January 1873 about re-entering the community "at the Lake," but that she preferred Notre Dame to Saint Mary's because she felt she could get along better with Mother Ascension at Notre Dame than with Mother Angela at Saint Mary's.¹⁰ This dickering apparently went on for a year. Sorin could see that this highly educated woman did not belong with his housekeeping community, but hesitated to let her live at Saint Mary's, where, as Leonie pointed out, she would encounter -- or engender -- further hostility.

She comes up again in Saint Mary's council minutes for November 4, 1873. " Sister Mary of the Redemption has applied to be received into the community. Reverend Father General advises she be tried, to which the council assented provided she live under rule." They clearly had their doubts about her ability to do that. We do not know where she was in April, 1874, when Leonie wrote from Saint Mary's to Sorin, who was away from Notre Dame:

I have just now learned of the terrible accident which has befallen Sister Mary of the Redemption, and that she is asking for my services; I am writing to her today to tell her you are absent and will probably be gone another week or two at the most....It is an enormous sacrifice for me to know that she is confined to bed by such cruel suffering and left to the care of a servant, and...it is only duty which keeps me far from her at this time; if, however, my presence is indispensable...I beg her to send me a telegram at once and I will telegraph to you to get the permission.
...I hope you will return soon, for I am impatient to get to her and dying of anxiety that the doctor's orders will be improperly

filled and that she may be badly cared for. I have no doubt that you will allow me to go care for her; the superiors here cannot oppose it...."¹¹

Apparently she did not go, for a month later she wrote Sorin a note which said in its entirety:

Do I dare beg you to give this letter to Sister Redemption when you see her? I remain in peace, relying on your promise to have me sent for if she wants to see me.¹²

So Sorin was going to visit Redemption -- "when you see her," not "if." We do not know where this "terrible accident" occurred, nor what injury it caused, nor whether perhaps Leonie's anxiety caused her to exaggerate the whole thing. She was never sent for to do any nursing. By July Redemption was writing to Sorin from New York about, of all things, Leonie's spirituality. Nadeau says, "She wanted [Leonie] to be faithful to an ideal of total self-abnegation that she herself had difficulty in sustaining."¹³

Between July and September 1874, Redemption must have visited Leonie at Saint Mary's. As we piece it together from the correspondence, Leonie, Sorin, and Redemption were all in the same place for at least a short time. During this time Redemption's peculiarities drove Sorin to tell her that she ought to take off the habit and return to secular life. Angry at this, or for some other reason, Redemption left Indiana and went to Montreal, where she moved in with a secular woman with whom she had formed a friendship in earlier days. From this refuge she wrote to Sorin:

I did not find you to be particularly kind in having me bluntly told that I should abandon the habit....I should be quite unable to return a religious habit....I had a good number of them made when I went to Saint Mary's, and I gave them to Sister Leonie on leaving her.¹⁴

By this time Leonie had received her obedience to Memramcook (September 22, 1874) and was settling in there. Redemption pouted that the place would surely kill Leonie, but indicated that she might be willing to go to Memramcook herself. Sorin, writing to Leonie, cheerfully sent his regards "to dear Mother Redemption, who, I hope, will soon learn to be happy with you, and to find her pleasure in your dear, beautiful solitude of Memramcook."¹⁵ She did not actually go at that time, however. The cold weather set in and aggravated her injury before she could leave Montreal. Leonie wrote to Sorin

thanking him for his "kind remembrance of Sister Redemption. That dear friend! The cold has so swollen her leg that she has recently become unable to walk except with the greatest pain."¹⁶ The cold climate, changeable temperatures, and severe winds were all bad for "such a bad fracture," and the doctor could not offer a prognosis for a year. Leonie had advised Redemption to stay in Montreal as long as she could, partly because of the good sermons in French, and when she could no longer remain in Montreal, to go to Boston, not New York. As she wrote to Sorin, "I cannot bear to see her in New York....If she asks for money I beg you to inform me of it and to give her only a little bit." She says she has plans for Redemption which she will confide to Sorin when she sees him, not knowing how long that will be.

There follows a silence of nearly two years. Then Redemption re-surfaces as a regular member of the Indiana community. Since 1867 the Sisters had staffed a large boys' orphanage in Rensselaer, Indiana. This establishment was moved to a new home in Lafayette, Indiana, in 1876, and Sister Redemption became the first superior of the new place. It was only five years since her unanimous rejection by the general council; it must have been her record as the successful head of an orphanage that won this superiorship for her.

Leonie and Sorin still kept a surprisingly affectionate eye on her. "My very dear daughter," wrote Sorin from Paris in May 1878,

you have not written me a line and I still think of you all the time. Our Lord made it abundantly clear that a mother could never forget her child: but don't imagine that He even remotely insinuated that a father could....I am my own proper proof of my Gospel-based argument....Whoever has had my affection has entered my heart and remains there as a part of myself.¹⁷

Redemption spent, at the most, twenty months in Lafayette, and then turned up in Leonie's care in Memramcook. Leonie wrote to thank Sorin for sending her, though it had grown increasingly clear that no one, not even Sorin, could "send" Redemption anywhere she didn't want to go. The great Notre Dame fire of April, 1879, had recently occurred, and Leonie said that she would show her gratitude by doing her best to collect money for the rebuilding.

By the end of 1879, however, Leonie must have written Sorin that Redemption was again unwell. The letter is not extant, but Leonie must have expressed her always quick-to-arise fears that Redemption might die. Sorin's reply from Paris, dated January 30, 1880, deserves to be quoted almost entirely for what it shows of the love and personal concern in his character, a side of him too much neglected by earlier accounts of his life.

I also thank you for having made me aware of the state of suffering of our dear Redemption, whom I have no need to recommend to your pious and loving attention but to whom I beg you to present my assurances of sympathy, especially since I was the cause (although certainly quite involuntarily) of the cold and of the sickness which she suffered as a result.

I especially hope that with the strength which remains to her she will quickly recover, and that she will soon be able to go back to Notre Dame, where Mother Ascension will make her well immediately, taking ten years off her age. She succeeded in doing as much for me, ten years ago.

As soon as you get this little note please tell me what progress she has made; for I would not for anything in the world want to be the cause of the death of this dear soul. I will be thinking seriously of her the whole time, until you write me again. My affections, you see, become all the more lively and tenacious as they get older. We have known each other 32 years. She has always been so devoted to me that I cannot be indifferent in her regard, much as I might wish to be. I have never known what it is to love someone only for a time.

Give her my very best regards and be sure to tell her that I will be praying hard for her. All this, my dear daughter, you [can] put nicely, with some little thing of your own, pleasant to hear.¹⁸

This is the loving, loyal, fully committed friend who shows up in so many of Sorin's letters to the Sisters. He had said the same thing in the letter of May 1878 to Redemption, "Whoever has had my affection has entered my heart and remains there as a part of myself." And he had shown the same solicitude for Leonie's health that she had shown for Redemption's, when in 1875 she had admitted to him that she had not been well.

My poor dear little invalid, I wish you were here so I could see you twice a day!...Certainly I do not wish to have either on my mind or on my heart the reproach of having sent you to die at Memramcook.¹⁹

In May of 1881 he wrote from Notre Dame to Redemption in Memramcook:

My dear little spinster, what are you doing in New Brunswick that has not left you one minute since Shrove Tuesday at least to tell me that you are still alive? During these ninety days I have waited three times every day for a letter from you: 270 disappointments! You must certainly be sick...

and he ends with a dig in Leonie's direction:

and I fear that your sickness is more or less contagious; it has already paralyzed many hands around you.²⁰

In September 1881, four months after this letter, there is a letter from Leonie to Sorin that seems to say that Redemption has been in Memramcook only a month. Perhaps she had gone away and come back. Leonie makes an audacious suggestion. She begins,

Yesterday morning our good Mother Redemption asked that I come to her room, and I was greatly surprised to find her in such a state of misery that she would have drawn pity from a heart of marble. I [suggested that she write] to Father General...that her life was being endangered by a climate so unhealthful for her, where she is.

But Leonie immediately contradicts her own idea.

You know Mother Redemption as I do....To make her leave after a month of living at Memramcook, and to make her leave by force, would kill her....But she will be unhappy...if she doesn't have some work of the kind she likes and assigned by you.

They both know what kind of work Redemption likes. Leonie writes,

...far from having an objection on my part to her being directress, I would welcome it. [She then makes out a hypothetical set of local obediences, and when she gets to "Sister Margaret, clotheskeeper," she adds] she wants me for her assistant. The obediences given this way would establish [Mother Redemption], I think, in a position she would like.

Sister Leonie was not yet established as foundress of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, but things were moving in that direction. One wonders about Sister Margaret, who wanted the foundress for her assistant in the clothesroom, and one admires the humility of Mother Leonie. Not surprisingly, Sorin did not approve this set of obediences.

As Sister Redemption grew older, she became more and more eccentric.

One of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family reported in later years:

Mother Redemption, as everyone called her, was a woman of order; everything she had for her use was always arranged with care. She made no exceptions on this point, except in her own person....Her appearance was greatly neglected; her headdress not even neat, with a veil that rarely had an iron passed over it; a cape which had been in use for a long time and which had never received any attention; her habit patched and always taken up. Her underskirt too short, an apron of doubtful color, her boots half laced and two or three sizes bigger than she ought to have worn....She only made an exception for the days when she went to Confession; on that day, the good Mother ate nothing and put on a habit which was a little more suitable and a little newer.²¹

Eating nothing was not a far step from her usual eating habits, as related by the same Sister.

Her nourishment consisted of a few things; a cup of chocolate for breakfast. For her dinner, always around eleven o'clock, the dear Mother went to the kitchen and prepared her own meal, of which the menu never varied; a cup of chocolate and a potato in its skin, which she wrapped in a corner of her apron. Then she returned to her room and served herself as if in the refectory. Very simply, she covered her little table with a sheet of newspaper, put her chocolate and her potato on it, took out of her cupboard some butter and a piece of bread, and, supplied with a large pocket knife and a battered tin spoon, she ate her poor meal. In the evening she made herself a similar supper on the infirmary stove.²²

Sister Redemption spent the last ten years of her life at Memramcook, as the Little Sisters grew up around her. They accepted her as a sort of elderly resident, not quite a member of their community. As long as she could, she paid an annual visit to the ladies of the French colony in New York City, bringing back "whole trunkloads of silks, lacework, flowers, etc.,"²³ which the Sisters turned into items for lotteries and bazaars.

"She never spoke of her family," said a Sister, "but we certainly felt that she was of a different social station from the rest of us."²⁴

After 1881, there is no further mention of her in the existing Sorin-Leonie correspondence. She lived another ten years, with Mother Leonie and her community surrounding her with care and affection until the end. When she died on September 24, 1891, Leonie must have written to Sorin about it, but if so the account has not survived. Sorin himself died two years later, on October 31, 1893, while Leonie lived on until May 3, 1912.

There is nothing particularly unusual in the friendship between Mother Leonie and Father Sorin. It is harder to understand the attraction for either of them exercised by the very eccentric Sister Redemption. Not only did they both work hard to save her vocation, they both felt a strong emotional attachment for her. But we must see her as more than a quirky footnote to community history; while we cannot quite assess what it was that she contributed to each of them, we must acknowledge that these two community giants would not have been quite what they were without her.

NOTES

1. Necrology "Pauline Rajot - Sister Mary of the Redemption - 1823-1891," 1. Document supplied to the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana, by the Archives of the Sisters of Holy Cross, St. Laurent. English translation by Sister M. Georgia Costin, C.S.C. Page numbers refer to the translation. Hereafter Necrology.
2. Necrology 1.
3. Ibid.
4. An Indiana document, in box marked "Mother Leonie."
5. Eugene Nadeau, O.M.I. Your Ways Make Known to Me: the Unforeseen Paths of Mother Leonie, Foundress of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family (1840-1912). Trans. Emmet O'Grady and Alfred M. Burman. Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Mont-Sainte-Famille, 47.
6. 4.
7. 60.
8. Nadeau 48.
9. 62 footnote 1.
10. 80.
11. April 14, 1874.
12. May 14, 1874.
13. 82.
14. Nadeau 82.
15. October 29, 1874.
16. December 6, 1874.
17. Nadeau 83.
18. January 30, 1880.
19. February 8, 1875.
20. Nadeau 83.
21. Necrology 7.
22. Ibid.

23. Necrology 8.

24. Ibid.