

# Father De Seille

We like to think of Notre Dame University as one of the greatest Catholic educational institutions of the United States. Indeed it is. But I wonder how many think of Notre Dame's added glory in the fact that it was one of the pioneer mission posts of the Catholic Church in northern Indiana? Notre Dame stands on consecrated ground. From the first day on which Father Sorin and his little group set foot on this soil, and earlier still, from the days of those pioneer missionaries. Father Allouez, Marquette, and Hennepin, this spot has been an outpost of the faith, a sanctuary wherein Christ is pleased to dwell.<sup>1</sup> It was to this locality that the zealous missionary Father Louis De Seille was sent to collaborate with Father Badin in the apostolic work of christianizing the Indians of northern Indiana and southern Michigan. Before proceeding to the narration of the life and work of this apostle, it were well to survey briefly the history of the territory prior to his coming.

<sup>1</sup> Alerding, *Diocese of Fort Wayne*, p. 34.

## PIONEER NORTHERN INDIANA

European conflicts in which France and England were on opposing sides from 1688 to 1748 found colonial echoes in strifes which lasted until the fall of Quebec in 1758. Such struggles, of necessity, deprived Indian settlements of permanent pastors. As a result, much that had been accomplished was lost. Moreover, increasing immigration and the gradual encroachments of pioneers upon the Indian hunting grounds forced a series of clashes and raids, which finally ended in the expulsion of the Indians to the west of the Mississippi. It was not until 1830 that a resident missionary was again given to the Indians of northern Indiana. To satisfy the urgent request of the Pottawatomis, a conference was called in Detroit. As a result of this meeting, Father Stephen Badin, the "Protopriest" of the United States, was sent.<sup>2</sup> For two years this solitary priest achieved wonderful success. The precise date when Father De Seille came to Indiana is unknown, but most historians agree in placing it between September of 1832 and February of 1833.

## EARLY LIFE OF FATHER DE SEILLE

Our missionary was a native of Belgium, a descendant of one of the oldest and wealthiest families of that country. Born in the year 1795, at Sleidinge, in the diocese of Ghent, we find his name recorded in the baptismal register as Louis Hyazinth. Preparing in his youth, as it seems, for the later life of sacrifice he was to lead, he was wont to spend hours each day in the little chapel in his neighborhood, communing with his God. In August 1832, he came to America from Holland in company with two Dominican friars, Fathers Theodore Van den Broek and Adrian Van den Weyer. He is thought to have been a novice under Father Van den Broek, but upon arriving in America he joined the secular clergy.<sup>3</sup> What follows is based upon the scant information historians have been able to gather. That these early missionaries were zealous we have no doubt. But they were likewise humble. They made no effort to perpetuate their memory by the writing of diaries wherein they might leave to posterity the history of their lives and their labors. The only information that can be gathered is drawn from the letters written to relatives

and superiors and from the entries made in the baptismal registers.

<sup>2</sup> McNamara, *Catholic Church on the Northern Indiana. Frontier*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## THE MISSIONARY

Some time then, after August 1832, Father De Seille entered upon his missionary work among the Indians. His mission embraced a portion of three states, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois. From his arrival until December 1, 1833, he was alone in his work. Then Father Badin joined him, but only for a short period, for we find the latter called to missionary work in Ohio, at the beginning of 1834. We know of some of the work accomplished by this zealous man in 1834, by a letter written by Father Badin in September of that year. It reads in part as follows:

As to the Indians, the greater number of them being Christians, are on the borders of Michigan, under the direction of the excellent priest, Mon. De Seille. He made this summer two excursions among the Pottawatomis of the Tippecanoe river and baptized seventy-six of them the first Sunday of May, and sixty more the first Sunday of this month, (September). The Pottawatomis of Michigan have sold all their land, and must emigrate within two years, but those of the Tippecanoe have retained their reserves of land, and may form a Catholic Mission in the diocese of Vincennes. The Indians are our best congregations.<sup>4</sup>

It was during this year that Father Simon Brute de Remur became the first bishop of Vincennes.

## BISHOP BRUTE MAKES A VISITATION

In the following year Father De Seille accompanied the new Bishop on his visitation of the Indian Missions on the Tippecanoe river and the village of Chikakos, all of which were under the guidance of our missionary. The Indians, hearing of their coming, formed an escort under the direction of their Chief and met them at one of the small Indian villages. Having lunched together, they crossed the river and began the procession to Chikakos Village. Father De Seille had baptized about one hundred and twenty persons in this village. They arrived on a Saturday and, after a brief introduction of the Bishop and an acknowledgement by the Chief, the Indians withdrew until the next day. That Sunday was a busy one for the visitors as we shall see from the following description: Early in the morning the Indians convened at the chapel. The missionary and the Bishop sat down with twelve of the leading men of the tribe. The Chief addressed the Bishop in words expressing their confidence in him and Father De Seille, their readiness to accept him as their Spiritual Head, and their desire of proving it by the presentation of 320 acres of land to him. Then followed the ceremonies in which the Bishop baptized six children, gave an instruction, said Mass, and confirmed sixteen. After Vespers had been recited, the Bishop blessed the people and prepared to depart. The Missionary, however, remained. That the Bishop was deeply impressed by his visit is evident from a letter written to the Leopoldine Association upon his return to his residence at Vincennes. He commended the Indians very highly for their deep sense of prayer. "I saw unequivocal evidence of it in their behaviour in the Chapel, and the effecting, earnest way in which they listened to the instructions, repeated their prayers, and sang their hymns, and I was very much edified."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Alerding, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> McNamara, *op. dt.*, p. 66 ff.

The result of this visit and the indefatigable work of Father De Seille may be gleaned from the letter written to the Bishop a few weeks later. It reads:

I have come again, thanks be to God, from the Indian Missions on the Tippecanoe and Yellow rivers, where I had the good fortune to accompany you; I now take the first opportunity to inform your Lordship of the result of the visit. Your wholly unexpected presence among these inhabitants of the primeval forests has aroused their natural laziness to such an extent that, at the first knowledge of your arrival,—which spread with the quickness of the wind from one village to the other, all, men, women, and children donned their spring attire, mounted horse, and came through heather and swamps to see the great blackrobe, whom they knew to be the chief of the other blackrobes, of whom their fathers had told them, many of whom take your memory to the grave, urging their children to righteousness, to receive you and listen to you with all reverence, in case the great Lord of life should send you to them again. Already on the day after your departure there appeared with their tribes two new chieftains, whom I had never seen before, asking for instruction and admission to the Catholic Church. All the Indians, one after the other, renounced drunkenness and their heathenish superstitions. I could only speak to them some words in order to exhort them to approach their Catholic brethren, to be instructed and to learn their prayers. They promised to do this as soon as their corn would be planted. In the same way I had to proceed with all the rest,—crowds upon crowds, who came to me from morning till night throughout the whole week. The number of those who came to prepare for the sacrament of baptism or for Holy Communion was, also very great, and they hastened with such a ready step that they did not think of supplying themselves with provisions. Thus it happened in the circle of Catholics and newly converted, that famine began already to encroach. Therefore all those who live on the Yellow river had to be sent back again before the end of the week, with the promise that I would visit them in their own home the next week. I remained ten days at this place of Tippecanoe; in this short time I baptized forty-three adults; thirty adults who had already been baptized during the previous summer received Holy Communion for the first time. From there I went to the Yellow river. The number of converts compelled me to stay for six days also at this place. I baptized thirty-seven Indians; they had built a chapel near the cross that I had erected last autumn. It resembles the one at Tippecanoe. The chiefs of this district, which comprises twenty-two sections of land, offered me half a section, approximately three hundred and twenty-acres, on which to build a church, and a second piece of the same size for the erection of a schoolhouse for the instruction of their children in reading and working. They will come here to sign the document of this grant, which I shall draw up in the same way as the one at Tippecanoe. The good people made every possible excuse to prevent me from leaving them. I would actually consider it a crime to leave the people who are so desirous of knowing and accomplishing the will of God. The day before yesterday, there came to Pokegan a group from the village, where I remained some time last summer, to have instruction given as far as possible to an old woman with three little girls from two to three years old, who, according to all appearances, was near a hundred years old. One of these children was very sick when these Indians left their hut and came here; notwithstanding this they took the child with them; but it was necessary to make a halt on the way, because, apparently, the child was near death. She no longer gave signs of life, whereupon the anxious father said to the other small girls (besides them there were no Christians in the group): "My children, you are baptized, and the Lord of life loved you; pray to Him, that He might give me back my child, perhaps He will hear you." Immediately the two children knelt down by the side of the little corpse, folded their small hands, raised their eyes to heaven, and prayed so fervently a prayer which nobody had taught them, that in a few moments the little dead girl began to move and she opened her eyes to the great astonishment of all the Indians, who stood in a circle and witnessed the spectacle. The first act of this Indian upon his arrival was to present his child, which was, in fact, in full health. The father hereupon told me what had urged him to call upon the two small children to pray; a similar incident had happened sometime previously; last spring these two same girls had

obtained health in a like manner for their little brother whom a snake had bitten on the head and arm. But on this occasion they had, and without being told, knelt down and had prayed for him to their loving God.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Annalen*, XII, pp. 154 ff.

Missionary work was indeed difficult in those pioneer days. Sick calls sixty to eighty miles distant were of common occurrence. But the untiring Father De Seille was always ready. A man filled with apostolic zeal as this good priest was, considered the hardship a pleasure if, in undergoing it, he could save a soul. But the physical hardships, together with other trying circumstances which we must mention, soon led to the death of our heroic missionary.

### ACCUSATIONS

The trying circumstances just mentioned had their origin in accusations brought against the good priest. Whether or not the accusations were well founded has never been satisfactorily proved. At any rate Father De Seille arrived at his headquarters at Pokegan in the early part of November 1835, after an absence of two months. On his arrival he found a letter from the Indian Agent, Colonel A. C. Pepper. Apparently the letter was occasioned by a "kind of opposition of some of the Catholic Indians to go to receive the payment of their annuities." In his answer the troubled man completely exonerated himself.<sup>7</sup> But he was not to be exonerated for long. On December 19 of the same year he received a letter from the Commissary General of Subsistence at Washington D. C., in which he was accused of mingling in treaties and affairs of the government, of persuading the Indians to remain on their reservations in spite of the immigration of the whites, and of urging them to build a Church. These accusations were certainly serious. Father De Seille made a strong defense in his answering letter, the pertinent parts of which follow:

I never mingled myself in any concerns about their lands or other affairs with the government, and my endeavors were only directed towards their mental and moral improvement, and this has been in so far a constant line of conduct for me that I never went out to any treaty or payment, nor was I ever present in any of their Councils.

What now belongs to the accusation of exhorting the Indians to build a Churchhouse is a mistake too. The real fact is this. Those Indians being at a distance of between 40 and 60 miles from my home, I could not reach them oftener than twice or three times a year, and finding myself obliged to travel that way for coming sometimes to Church, they often expressed to me their wish to have a Churchhouse at their village. I could not but approve it, but I deemed it useless, being convinced that it was not possible for them to stay much longer in that country etc....

I hope Sir this will be enough to convince you that it is a great mistake to say that I have ever exhorted the Indians to oppose themselves against the intention of the government or, what is worse, to comply with the engagements or stipulations towards the same. This I cannot qualify otherwise than a very bad calumny.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Correspondence with Government Indian Office.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

In January of the following year, Father De Seille was notified by the Commissary General of Subsistence that the Indians of the reservations of Menomina and Muchkahtahmoway had obtained permission to remain on their reservations as long as they wished. Here was some good news. Hence, in March of 1836, he wrote to Colonel Pepper requesting authorization to build a school for the instruction of the Indian children of these reservations and an appropriation of funds for this purpose. The answer he received contained anything but encouragement.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The Indian Agent had received no advisement of this news from the government. He therefore demanded a copy of the letter and a rescript from the government.<sup>9</sup> Just another disappointment.

But worse was to follow. In May 1837, Lewis Sands, assistant Indian Agent, made a tour of the reservations. His report contained the information that prospects for the removal of the Indians were good. All of them, with one exception, were willing to move to their new homes. That exception was a tribe residing near the Yellow river and forming a part of Father De Seille's mission. Sands had called on the priest to explain their opposition. The priest had produced a copy of the treaty made by the government with these Indians and had "contended that this band of Indians had been defrauded, that none of the chiefs had signed the treaty and, among all the signatures to it, there were but two young men that belonged to the band, and he admitted that he had so explained it to the Indians." Moreover, Sands implied that Father De Seille's action amounted to an infringement and violation of the laws of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

#### EDIFYING DEATH OF A SAINTLY MAN

Whether the worry caused by such accusations was the sole cause of his death we do not know. They certainly contributed to it. Shortly after Sands visit, Father De Seille left Pokegan. When he was leaving, he told the Indians that they would likely never see him again. Though to all appearances he was in good health, he seemed to have a premonition of his approaching death, for when asked what he had meant by his words he answered;

"I have a great journey to perform; pray for me, and do not forget to say your beads for me." Then he started out on foot for his post at Notre Dame, 35 miles distant. The day after his arrival he felt quite well, and it was with difficulty that he succeeded in celebrating his Mass. The next day he was much worse and dispatched two messengers, one to Logansport, the other to Chicago, to procure a priest for him. But again he was to be disappointed. Both priests were absent. He, who had undergone great fatigues to bring



to dying penitents the inestimable benefits of the last sacraments, must himself be deprived of them. But the saintly man had a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and his boundless confidence in her fortified and consoled him. Nor did she forsake him. His last moments have been well described by one writer in the following words:

The progress of the disease had now reached a point wherein death could not be far distant. Suddenly the pious priest makes an effort to rise to a sitting position in his bed, and entreats his two faithful attendants to help him into the next room to his altar. He summons his remaining strength, and with the aid of his two friends, manages to accomplish his purpose. There he kneels down for a while, then directs their attention to his surplice and stole; they understand, and hasten to put them on him; he raises himself, and with a trembling and burning hand, opens the tabernacle, fixes his eyes steadily and lovingly on the adorable body of his Divine Redeemer; then, most humbly bending over the Ciborium, administers to himself Holy Viaticum. He kneels again on the platform between his two assistants, whose hearts seemed now ready to break with emotion at such a sight. There he remains for a long time in deep and profound adoration, both say for half and hour, until, fearing he should die of exhaustion, they finally obtained his consent to convey him to his room, and lay him on his bed. He thanked them again and again, and in less than an hour after, invoking most fervently and continuously the sweet names of Jesus and Mary, he expired without a struggle, and with a most placid smile on his countenance.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ave Maria, I, p. 474.

Thus the missionary died after a brief career of less than seven years activity. God alone knows how much good was wrought by him in the short span of time allotted to him. All of the Indians believed that Father De Seille possessed the gift of prophecy. He foretold his death. He predicted that a cross erected by him in a certain spot would never be consumed by fire. Fire destroyed everything around it upon two occasions, but the cross remained uninjured. He had foretold that two of the wealthiest and most important men of that section of the country, both founders of towns, would die penniless. Subsequent events showed this to be true.

#### EPITAPH

Father Benjamin Petit, his successor, followed him in death two years later in St. Louis, after accompanying the last band of Pottawatomi Indians on their long and dreary journey to their new homes in the west.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps no better epitaph has been written for our missionary than those words written by Father Petit:

Father De Seille had to die all alone; oh, Mary doubtless assisted him. This is one of the poor missionaries' severest trials; but as they expose themselves to it only for the love of God, He, Who is so good cannot forsake them in their last hour. If, in their final struggle, he deprives them of the assistance of a priest, it must be beyond all doubt to enrich their crown with the merits of this culminating sacrifice. I firmly believe that He grants this favor but to His dearest friends.<sup>13</sup>

It must be a delight to those at Notre Dame to know that they have buried in their Church one of God's "dearest friends."

<sup>12</sup> Godecker, Simon Brute de Remur, p. 386 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Ave Maria, 1, p. 475.

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