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## CHAPTER XXX.

### REMINISCENCES OF A PIONEER PRIEST IN THE DIOCESE OF VINCENNES.\*

WHEN Bishop Bruté visited France, in 1836, he inspired the greatest veneration in all that came in contact with him. In fact, he was looked upon as a saint. It was currently reported that he had performed many miracles, but his profound humility made him deny all such reports. He traveled through France, and experienced no difficulty in procuring laborers for his new diocese. He had secured many already when he came to the seminary of Issy, a preparatory school for the renowned seminary of St. Sulpice. The writer of this was then twenty-one years of age and was studying philosophy. He had resolved to join the Lazarists, or priests of the missions, and had been promised admission by the Superior-General, Father Nozot. But when he saw Bishop Bruté he was so strongly affected by the appearance of the saintly man that he experienced a strong desire to accompany him to America. He took the advice of his spiritual director, the learned and good Father Pinault, and, following his wise counsel,

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\* The V. Rev. Aug. Bessonies, V. G.

watched the opportunity to offer his services to Monseigneur Bruté. One fine day (1836) when the missionary Bishop was coming out of the chapel of Loretto, the young student, who was custodian, and lodged in the chapel building, approached him with a heart palpitating with conflicting emotions, and feelings that he could not express. He simply said: "Monseigneur, I wish to go with you to America. I may not suit for a missionary, but I can be your coachman." Scarcely had these words escaped his lips when he felt the hands of the saintly Bishop around his neck, and heard these words, that he shall never forget: "My child, I feel happy that there is a prospect to see a new altar raised in my dear Indiana. But I must tell you that you will have a hard life in my diocese. You may sometimes be lost and have to spend all night in the forests." "That is what I like," was the prompt answer. "Well, then," said he, "you are the man for me. But I have no seminary at Vincennes, and you must remain to study theology at St. Sulpice, and in three years (in 1839) I will send my Vicar-General, Monsieur L'abbé de la Hailandière after you and some others. In the meantime I will obtain your exeat from the Bishop of Cahors." And so it was done. The young seminarian prepared for the missions, and in due time was sent for, according to promise. He was ordained deacon at Christmas, 1838, by his grace, Hyacinthe de Quelen, Archbishop of Paris, in the chapel of the Carmelites, where many noble

priests suffered martyrdom in 1793, and where their blood can yet plainly be seen.

Early in the spring Monsieur L'abbé de la Hailandière, Vicar-General of Bishop Bruté, arrived in France, according to promise, to gather recruits for the Diocese of Vincennes. The young deacon was ready and impatient to go. He was too young to be ordained priest, but the V. G. of Vincennes offered to write to Rome for a dispensation of age, and told him to pass his examination and make his retreat with the other seminarians to be ordained at the Trinity ordinations. It was so done, and during the retreat the answer came from Rome, directed to himself. The dispensation of age was refused, but it was stated that Very Rev. Celestine G. de la Hailandière had been appointed coadjutor to Bishop Bruté. The day of departure for America had been set, and the colony was to sail from Havre on the 2d of August, 1839, on the Republican. The new coadjutor, wishing to be consecrated Bishop in France, delayed his departure and appointed Abbé Martin to have charge of the new recruits. This Abbé Martin is the same who died Bishop of Natchitoches in 1875. The deacon made a flying visit to his aged and widowed mother in the south of France. What a trial for him to announce to his dear mother the news of his departure for America. But it was done, and the reply was: "My son, why go to America to die in a short time from yellow fever? Is there not enough work for you here?" "The will of God must be done," said the son, "and I am con-

vinced I have a vocation for the missions of America."

The next night, at midnight, he was leaving the paternal roof without saying a word to any member of the family, but was overheard by his uncle, who declared to him he should not go without bidding farewell to his mother. A new and hard sacrifice had to be made. He implored God's assistance, entered his mother's room, awoke her and said: "I am going, mother; I come to bid you farewell." Her arms clasped his neck and she sobbed and cried. But the son begged for her last blessing, and whilst she raised her arm to give it, the young missionary ran away sobbing. That night can never be forgotten.

A few days more and Havre was reached. On the eve of the day of sailing, after prayers, Abbé Martin said: "We will now pray for Bishop Bruté, whose death we have just learned." Oh! what a new trial! The saintly Bishop is no more! But every one remained true to his resolution, and on the next day all bade farewell to France. It may not be amiss to give here the names of those that composed the colony. We had two priests, Rev. Aug. Martin and Rev. Ducoudray; two deacons, Hippolite Dupontavice and Aug. Bessonies; one subdeacan, Roman Weinzopfel; three in the minor orders, John Guéguen, Francis Fisher and Hamion; Ernst Audran, only sixteen years of age, and nephew to Bishop de la Hailandière; also, Alphonsus Munschina, who soon entered the seminary, was ordained first. We had also Mr. Mar-

tin Stahl, who became a priest, and did not live long. I should not forget Mademoiselle Josephine Pardeithou, afterwards a Sister of Providence under the name of Sister Josephine, and Jeanne and Angelique, the faithful servants of Bishop de la Hailandière and de St. Palais. We had also a brother of the Rev. E. Faller, under the care of his aunt, Mademoiselle Mercion, who proved herself an angel of charity by nursing the sick, but especially the writer of these lines, whose illness continued during the whole journey. He was told once by Abbé Martin to prepare for eternity, for he shouldn't see land again. He now regrets that the worthy leader of the missionary colony did not prove a prophet, for he never was nor likely ever will be as well prepared for the journey from time to eternity. The idea of being eaten by fishes did not frighten him in the least, and he kept up his courage until nearly exhausted. After a journey of forty-four days, he and his companions arrived in the Bay of New York on the 11th of September, 1839, and landed the next morning.

After spending a few days in New York the colony reached Philadelphia, where they spent two weeks, and left for Vincennes, where the advance guard arrived by stage October 21, 1839, and the others on foot from Louisville a few days afterward. They were very kindly received by that worthy missionary the Very Rev. Simon Petit Lalumière, who was administrator of the Diocese since the death of Bishop Bruté, in the absence of the newly appointed Bishop. Father Lalumière,

although administrator, was still pastor of St. Simon's Church, Washington, Daviess county, and resided in that place, where the writer spent a few weeks with him.

The pastor of the cathedral of Vincennes was then Rev. Anthony Parret, who came to the Diocese in 1836 with Bishop Bruté, and who soon afterwards left to become a Jesuit, and died after a few years in the South. The cathedral was unfinished, not being plastered, and the rain poured down in the sanctuary through a small dilapidated dome over it, and it was still so, as I knew it by experience on the 22d of February, 1842, the day of my ordination to the priesthood.

At that time the late lamented Bishop de St. Palais was pastor of St. Mary's, Daviess county, a place called to this day Box's Creek, and Rev. John Corbe, afterwards vicar-general, and, in the absence of the Bishop, administrator of the Diocese, was then pastor of St. Francisville. I well remember how the newly-arrived missionaries went one day to pay him a visit, and as the family with whom he boarded was absent, all he could give them was some persimmons, growing near the little frame church; so that on our return to Vincennes on foot we had good appetites.

About this time, in November, 1839, Bishop de la Hailandière arrived from France. He was received cordially by clergy and laity, and set to work in earnest to put things in order. The few seminarians were placed under the care of Rev. Aug. Martin, who taught theology and scripture,

and three, studying philosophy, were under the care of Rev. Aug. Bessonies. Rev. H. Dupontavice was the first ordained priest, and in December, 1839, was appointed pastor of Joliet, Ill. He left Vincennes for his new mission in a spring wagon covered with canvas, drawn by two horses, having for his companion the Rev. Maurice de St. Palais, who had been appointed pastor of Chicago, a town then of three thousand inhabitants, and a part of the Diocese of Vincennes. At that time Rev. Vincent Bacquelin, then pastor of St. Vincent's, near Shelbyville, Shelby county, and who visited from time to time Indianapolis, came to Vincennes, on horseback, of course, and I heard him say to Bishop Hailandière: "Monseigneur, it is time for us to have a foothold in the capital of the State. We must buy a lot and build a church." "Well," said his Lordship, "how much will a lot cost in Indianapolis?" "Three hundred dollars," was the reply, and the Bishop put his hand in his pocket, handed Father Bacquelin one hundred and fifty dollars, and told him to get his people there to pay the balance and buy a lot at once. So that until the end of December, 1839, or January, 1840, the Catholic Church did not possess a foot of ground in Indianapolis.

About one month before the arrival of the colony entrusted to Rev. Father Martin another colony had arrived, about which a word may not be out of place and without interest. I mean the Eudist colony, composed of such men as the Rev. Fathers Vabret, Bellier, Chassé and others, who were to



take charge of St. Gabriel's College, of Vincennes. Under the presidency of Rev. Father Bellier the college flourished for some time, but, through some misunderstanding between the Eudists and the ordinary—which, from what I heard from both parties, might be chiefly attributed to the Superior-General of the Eudists—St. Gabriel's College ceased to exist, and was bought afterwards for a Catholic orphan asylum.

In the year 1840 the Rt. Rev. Bishop de la Hailandière laid the foundation of the convent of St. Mary's of the Woods, by obtaining Sisters of Providence from France. The work so nobly begun by Mother Theodore is still going on gloriously. Had Bishop de la Hailandière no other claim to the gratitude of the Diocese of Vincennes, the debt could not well be paid.

But just now, as I am writing these lines, comes a telegram announcing the death of the good Bishop de la Hailandière, on the 1st inst., at the age of 84, and I must stop to say a *de profundis* for the rest of his soul. Poor dear Bishop! He used to call me his second son, and since the death of Very Rev. H. Dupontavice I was his first son living. In a letter written to me less than a year ago he was telling me: You are my oldest son out of over 800 ordained by me. May all of those 800 in hearing of his death offer up the holy sacrifice in his behalf. But let us now resume the reminiscences.

Ordained priest on the 22d day of February, 1840, I was asked by the Bishop, who is now no more, where I wished to go. "Wherever you wish

to send me, Monseigneur," was my answer. "But," says he, "have you no choice?" "Yes," was my answer, "I would like to go with Rev. Father Francois, among the Indians near Logansport." "Oh!" said he, "all of you want to go among the Indians; I can not send you there. You will go to Rome; not to Rome, Italy, but to Rome, Perry county, Indiana. You will take the place of Rev. J. Benoit, whom I am going to send to Fort Wayne. You will find him somewhere in the forests of Perry county, some 15 miles from Rome. I can not tell you the name of the place, for it has no name, but his postoffice is Safford. Go first to Jasper, and there Rev. Joseph Kundeck will give you further directions." The kind Bishop presented me with an Indian pony, and off I went; but, unfortunately, the pony was very devout, and went frequently on his knees, exposing me often to be thrown over his head. The great trouble with me was, that I could scarcely speak a word of English. Before parting with Bishop de la Hailandière I asked him, "What shall I say in English to inquire about my route?" "You may say, how far to such a place; or, how many miles to such a place?" I thought then I was all right, but I forgot my lesson, and my inquiry was, "How miles to such a place?" People laughed at me, and said something I did not understand. I kept on my way, trusting to Providence, and at last arrived at Jasper, to learn there that Father Benoit had left that morning for Vincennes. What was I to do? await the return of Father Benoit? He may not return at all. I got Father

Kundeck to make me a little map or itinerary from Jasper to the little frame chapel built by Father Benoit in the woods of Perry county ; and, map in hand, I left Dubois for Perry. The thirty-mile ride seemed to me a hundred, and I arrived towards evening at a place where I inquired, "How far to the chapel?" I received for answer, so far as I could understand, "Five miles." But I rode some distance and inquired again, and the answer was, seven miles. I knew then that I had gone astray. I happened to think of a Catholic settlement some six miles from the chapel. I then inquired, "How far to Cassidy's, and, the answer being, two miles, I felt relieved of the strong fear of having to pass the night, as we say in French, *a la belle étoile*—under a beautiful star. The direction being pointed out to me, I soon arrived at Cassidy's Settlement.

The old gentleman, John Cassidy, and his family received me very kindly, and promised to see me safe next morning to the chapel, where a son and daughter of the old man were residing with Father Benoit. To give a specimen of my English I will state that, at supper, which consisted of corn bread and fat bacon, after I got through with the first piece of corn bread I wanted another, and called for it by saying, "More corn, plase." They smiled, but my want was supplied at once. Next morning Mr. Cassidy started with me for the chapel, 6 miles distant, and did not cease to talk all the way ; but I did not understand a single sentence, although I would once in a while say, Yes. At last we arrived at the chapel. It was a frame building, 20

by 30 feet, two stories high, the first story divided into two rooms—one for the priest, the other for the cook and her brother—and the upper story, not ceiled, but only roughly weatherboarded, was the church or chapel, with a stair outside to climb into it. The stairs was so steep that it was almost an impossibility during the winter for women to reach the chapel. Many rolled down the stairs before they reached the top. Near this building was a kitchen about 12 by 10 feet, and at about 50 yards a stable for the horse. Although a few large trees had been cut around the house, not a foot of ground had been cultivated. A rail fence had been put up about the house, but no gate to it; and as this was my first experience in fence jumping, I fared badly, for the first thing I knew I was flat on the ground on the opposite side. My appearance at the chapel denoted a change of pastor, and the tears of the housekeeper and her brother gave me to understand that I was not welcome.

The Rev. Father Benoit arrived next Sunday to pack up before starting to Fort Wayne, and my tongue was loose again, for I had occasion to speak French. He had compassion on me, and told me: "I will get the Bishop to buy my horse for you, so that when you have sick calls, he can, by giving him free bridle, take you back home." This was done; but before I could go to Vincennes for his horse, I got lost one evening as I was returning from a visit from Jackson's Settlement, and I had to stay all night in the woods. It was in the middle of March, and a cold rain commenced falling. It

was as dark as Egypt, and my Canadian pony refused to go any further. I tied the horse to a little bush, took off the saddle and laid it at the foot of a tree, sat on it, and spread my saddle bags over my shoulders to serve the purpose of an umbrella, and then I said my prayers as devoutly as possible, for I expected the unwelcome visit of some panther, which had lately been seen in that neighborhood. During the night, the puffing of a steamboat on the Ohio revealed to me the fact that I was five or six miles from the chapel, my new home. By day-break, I heard geese saluting the return of day, got up, and started in that direction. I soon arrived at the log cabin of Jack Alvey, woke up the family by hard raps at the door, and inquired for the Catholic chapel. The old gentleman pointed out the direction to take, and told me the distance was six miles. It was then about 6 o'clock. I rode through the woods, up and down the hills, unable to find any house until 9 o'clock, and I was seriously thinking that I might have to pass another night in the woods, when, to my great delight, I arrived at the log cabin of Thomas Alvey. My first inquiry was for the chapel, and I learned that I was six miles from it. I then inquired for Jack Alvey's place, and was informed that it was not half a mile. "What!" says I, "have I been riding three hours and a half since I left here this morning, and have I only made half a mile?" But such was the fact. Thomas Alvey, was a Catholic, and a gentleman, gave me my breakfast, fed my horse, and sent his boy to take me home.

I began then to realize that Bishop Bruté had told me the truth when I offered to him my services near the chapel of Loretto, at Issy.

A few days afterwards, duty called me to Ferdinand, seventeen miles from the chapel, and I had to cross Little Blue river. I arrived there safely; but, returning home, I found that the backwater of the Ohio had swollen the Little Blue river prodigiously. Go, I must. So I made my Canadian pony plunge into the river. The first thing I knew I was off my horse's back, and the pony was getting ashore, while I tried to reach some logs and save my life. I succeeded, but I was minus my cloak and my hat, and my horse was gone. I was as wet as a rat, and cold, and took my journey on foot. Fortunately, about a mile off was a farm, and there my horse had been caught and I got my dinner. I felt all right once more, and tied a red handkerchief around my head, instead of my lost hat, and although I caused some merriment to those I passed by on my way home, I was thankful for my safe but narrow escape.

I spent about a month at the chapel, when I started for Vincennes to get Father Benoit's horse, and I surprised everybody by the progress I had made in the English language. I spoke it badly, as I do now, but fluently. Whilst at Vincennes, I packed my baggage and sent it to the chapel by the way of Evansville. After waiting three months for it, I had to go to Evansville by water to get it. Here I wish to say, that at that time, June, 1840, there was no church at Evansville, but Rev. Father Dey-

dier was superintending the making of brick to commence one. Meanwhile mass was said in a garret. I then obtained four bottles of wine from Bishop de la Hailandière, enough to do me four months, for as we had no one to attend mass we were allowed to say it only twice a week alone, and some stipends for mass at twenty cents, and in good spirits returned to Perry county. I dispensed, for want of means, with the housekeeper and her brother, and boarded at the house nearest to the chapel, one mile and a quarter, at the moderate rate of \$1.50 per week; and that was enough for fat bacon and half-baked corn bread. No coffee could be got. I learned to do without it, and have not drank any since. I cleared some ground, planted some corn, and found it very useful; for when Bishop de la Hailandière, accompanied by Father Shawe, came in the fall for confirmation, they felt too tired to go to the boarding-house, and we put the kettle on the fire and boiled ears of corn for our supper. Father Shawe did not eat less than half a dozen. The Bishop never forgot that supper, and often spoke about it.

This state of things could not last. It was too hard for the priest to go so far for his meals, and too lonesome to be always alone in the woods. As Father Kundeck had laid out the town of Ferdinand in the woods of Dubois, and made the wilderness flourish, I thought I might do the same in Perry. Bishop de la Hailandière had bought one hundred and sixty acres of congress land around the chapel, and I got him to give me forty acres

for a town. As a few Belgians had commenced settling around the chapel, I called the town Leopold, for three reasons: 1st, after King Leopold; of Belgium; 2d, after the Leopoldine Association of Germany; 3d, after my brother Leopold. I sold some lots, built a large log church, a log school-house, and soon I had a store, blacksmith shop and postoffice, being myself appointed first postmaster of Leopold by James K. Polk, through the recommendation of Robert Dale, then a member of Congress from that district. This was already a great change for the better, for since Safford postoffice had been discontinued I had to go to Fredonia, 17 miles distant, for my mail. I did not make money from the office; quite the contrary; for I thought I would put on some style and ordered a carpenter to make pigeon holes for the postoffice, and when I sent the bill of fourteen dollars to Washington City, the answer was, "Your postoffice is too small for such a luxury; pay the bill yourself." I had one advantage, however, the franking privilege. Another benefit was, that I could board in town and save a distance of seven or eight miles that I had to walk or ride every day to get my meals. Besides, I was the first man of the town, and Cæsar used to say, that he would rather be the first man in a village than the second in Rome. Before that I was neither first nor second, because I was alone.

Leopold was not the only church I had to attend. I had also a little log church at Derby, at the mouth of Oil creek, on the Ohio river, about six miles from Leopold. This little church was



built there by Father Durbin in 1824, and was, likely, the second church built in the Diocese of Vincennes. In 1825, the year of the Universal Jubilee, Fathers Abel and Durbin preached there the Jubilee with wonderful success, and greatly astonished the natives. At the time of the high waters, 1847, that church, about to go into the river, was sold out and a new stone church built on the top of the hill. It commands a beautiful view of the Ohio river for miles up and down, and there is not the least danger of its being disturbed by the high water. This stone church reflects great credit on the few families who helped to build it; especially so on the family of Arnold Elder, the chief contributor. The stone was got on the spot, and I doubt if ever a cheaper stone church was built in Indiana. I often said the first mass at Leopold and the second at St. Mary's, and vice versa. Although the distance was called only six miles, the road was so bad that often in the winter it took me two hours or two and a half to ride it. It is now a pleasant souvenir for me that I never disappointed my people during thirteen years of pastorship.

I built another log church on Anderson Creek at Cassidy's Settlement, and called it St. John Baptist's; and yet another on Little Oil, and called it St. Francis'. About the same time, the 16th of August, 1848, I said mass for the first time at the house of Judge Huntington, two miles below Cannelton, where Tell City is now located. I had at that time only five Catholics to attend mass. They were the Judge's wife, Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, both

converts to the church, and Mr. and Mrs. Lyons. There must be now between two and three thousand. Cannelton began to grow, and I built there a stone church, visiting that place once a month. Troy was also provided with a brick church, built by Father Kundeck, and I had then six Catholic churches in Perry county.

The greater portion of my life was spent on horseback, and one time during the absence of Father Kundeck, I said mass on Sunday at Derby, Perry county; on Monday at Leavenworth, Floyd county; on Tuesday at Corydon, Harrison county; on Wednesday at Newton Stewart, Orange county; on Thursday at Jasper, Dubois county; on Friday at Taylorsville, Warrick county; on Saturday at Rockport, Spencer county, and at home again at Leopold, the following Sunday. This was pretty hard on the priest, and worse still on the horse, for the roads were very bad. But this hard work was not without its consolation, for the number of converts to our holy religion was great, and for me there was no place like Leopold.

When Bishop de la Hailandière resigned in 1847, and Bishop Bazin succeeded him, I received a letter from the new Bishop to pack up and report at Vincennes. I did not pack up, but went to Vincennes, and Bishop Bazin told me: "The Very Rev. H. Dupontavice has positively declined to be Superior of the seminary any longer, and being a stranger here I did not know whom to appoint in his place, but upon the advice of two of the oldest priests of the Diocese, the Reverend Fathers

Deydier and Kunderck, I have come to the conclusion to appoint you." I commenced shedding tears, and told the good Bishop that I could not possibly accept. He then told me I should be Vicar-General and his confessor. I simply told him I was not the man for such a position. "But," said he, "what shall I do; I will go on my knees if you will consent." I told him I could not allow that. But by accepting I would do an injustice to the people who had bought lots in Leopold, believing I would stay there, and the town would grow and become a county seat, and I was convinced the village would go down if I were removed. "But what can I do?" he repeated. "I will tell you, Bishop," said I; "send for Rev. Father M. de St. Palais, pastor of Madison; he is the very man who will suit you." "But whom shall I send to Madison?" "Send Rev. Father Dupontavice, who has a very small parish at Washington." "But whom can I send to Washington?" "Send Father Chassé, from Highland." The programme was accepted, provided Father de St. Palais would consent. I was kept at Vincennes, until upon a telegraphic summons, Father de St. Palais arrived, and reluctantly agreed to accept the position. I went home to my people as happy as a king, believing that I had rendered a great service to the Diocese by suggesting that arrangement.

Although Rt. Rev. Bishop de la Hailandière had resigned of his own accord, when the time came to leave the diocese for which he had worked so hard, and which he loved so much, his courage

failed, and he was very anxious to remain at Highland, and form there a house of missionary priests, to give missions in the Diocese and elsewhere. But, Bishop Bazin fearing some misunderstanding in the future, refused to accede to that request, and Bishop de la Hailandière's feelings were severely hurt by that refusal. He was offered such a place in another Diocese, but did not accept. Six months elapsed, and Bishop Bazin died, having already endeared himself to his clergy and people. The Rt. Rev. Richard Kenrick, then Bishop of St. Louis, performed the last rites, and, by the choice of Bishop Bazin, the Very Rev. M. de St. Palais, his Vicar-General and Superior of the seminary, became Administrator of the diocese. After the funeral service a meeting of the clergy took place, and the newly-appointed Administrator appeared, by almost the unanimous viva voce vote of the priests, to be the desired successor to Bishop Bazin. The writer of this article voted for the present Archbishop of New Orleans, Most Rev. Napoleon Perché; but, objection being made to bringing here another Southerner, who would die in a few months, the vote of the clergy was made unanimous for the Administrator to be appointed Bishop, and a committee was appointed to confer with Bishop Kenrick on the subject. The committee was very kindly received by his Lordship, who promised to do what he could to second their choice; and Very Rev. M. de St. Palais was nominated fourth Bishop of Vincennes, to the great satisfaction of the clergy.

I will now conclude these memoirs by saying that, after remaining at Leopold until 1852, I took a trip to France and Italy, and on my return was sent to Fort Wayne, where I was pastor of St. Augustine's for about one year, succeeding, as I did, at the chapel in Perry county, the Rev. J. Benoit, who had left for New Orleans, and by whom I was succeeded at his return from the South. Although my stay at Fort Wayne was brief, I made many friends, and left it with deep regret. I was then sent to Jeffersonville and the Knobs, March, 1854, and remained there until November the 25th, 1857, when I was appointed pastor of St. John's, Indianapolis. All I desire written on my tomb is: "Aug. Bessonies, Pastor of St. John's from 1857 till——."