**THE MISSION TO AMERICA**

Early on the morning of September 3, 1840, the large doors of the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur closed quietly behind eight Sisters of Notre Dame. Final farewells to Sisters, parents, family members, and friends were over for all but one of them. Boarding the waiting coaches that would carry them from Namur to the great port city of Antwerp, the Sisters travelled to the house from which all Belgian Sisters of Notre Dame would leave for other countries. Six days later, two Sisters from this house, Sisters Vincent and Angelina, waved a final good- bye as the ship *Eliza Thornton* set sail from the harbor.

Questions about these first Sisters arise quite naturally.

1. **How had the eight Sisters learned of the need in America? Why go on a mission that had upset the whole city of Namur at "the very thought of the dangers into which these ardent souls were running?"**

Undoubtedly, the *Annales de le Propagation de la Foi* (Annals of the Propagation of the Faith) was the source of the Sisters’ knowledge about America. In 1823, Pope Leo XII had been informed that Cincinnati was "the most destitute of all spiritual and temporal resources in the whole Christian world." Fifteen years later the Bishop of Cincinnati, John Baptiste Purcell, called on Mère Ignace Goethals. She was Superior General of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. On February 24 of 1838 Mère Ignace had vowed to consecrate her life to make God's name known and glorified in America. During their conversation Mère Ignace and Bishop Purcell realized they shared a desire to serve the people of Cincinnati. Bishop Purcell's formal request for Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to be missioned to his diocese was answered by Mère Ignace with a heartfelt "yes".

**2. How had the eight Sisters who set sail on the *Eliza Thornton* been chosen?**

Mère Ignace wrote to all houses requesting names of Sisters who felt a particular attraction towards distant mission-fields. Many Sisters responded to the four questions in her letter. The questions were:

1. For how many years have you felt this desire, and what effects has it produced in you?

2. What first gave you this desire? What motives have made you persevere in it up to the present?

3. Have you weighed before God all the difficulties of this undertaking? Do they shake or diminished your desire?

4. Do you believe sincerely that your health is sufficiently robust to be able to bear, over and above the fatigue of the journey, the necessarily hard life which will be yours in so distant a country, where there is less to help you than in Europe?

From the responses and with dialogue and prayer, Mère Ignace selected eight Sisters. One year later on August 24, 1840, Bishop Purcell received a letter introducing him to the first Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who would work in his diocese for the instruction of young girls.

**3. What were they like - these first missionaries in Notre Dame history?**

First, the Sisters had courage even to step onto the ship. "Of all the great oceans, the North Atlantic is probably the most punishing, the hardest on ships; nowhere else are busy shipping lanes so beset by gales, fog and floating ice." They also had courage to go to a place Europeans thought of as a rough outpost of civilization. They certainly had courage to go to a country where people spoke a different language and harbored a strong prejudice against Catholics.

Secondly, the Sisters had Saint Julie's preference for the poor. When Bishop Purcell offered the Sisters a choice piece of real estate outside of Cincinnati, Sister Louis de Gonzague, their superior, had to clarify the reason why the Sisters had come to America. Outside the city, they would not find the poor: they would remain in Cincinnati where they could serve the poor, or they would return to Belgium.

Lastly, the Sisters brought the individual gifts God had given each of them. Together they had the knowledge and skills needed to establish Notre Dame's educational work in America and to promote its rapid growth. By 1850, the first band of eight Sisters had welcomed seven colonies of thirty more Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to Sixth Street, the original Notre Dame home and Academy in America. They had staffed nine parish schools, opened secondary houses in Toledo, Chillicothe and Dayton, Ohio, and established St. Mary Parish School in Boston. Their interest in the far West of America supported a foundation of Sisters sent directly from Namur to Oregon.

**4. Who are the original eight Sisters? Let's let them speak for themselves.**

I am **SISTER LOUIS DE GONZAGUE.** I wasborn Hortense Antoinette Monseu. I was named superior of this first band of Sisters to journey to Cincinnati. By nature I am timid and retiring. Although learning English is difficult, I served in leadership positions for 12 years in America. I went to Toledo in 1844, and in 1849, became superior of the first house in Boston. I was a prolific letter writer, sending details of life in America back to Namur and constantly asking that more Sisters be sent to join us. I returned to Namur in 1852. Until my death in 1866, I always spoke fondly of my dear Sisters in America and worked tirelessly to encourage more Sisters in Belgium to volunteer for the American missions.

I am **SISTER XAVIER.** I wasborn Francoise Houba. I am the first American portress-that’s what we called the job of answering the door. I wanted desperately to go west to the Indian missions but managed to get only as far as Toledo. I told many a funny story about my struggle with English as I welcomed visitors. I died in Toledo on October 19, 1846 - exactly six years to the day from our landing in New York Harbor. My death is the first of a Sister of Notre Dame in the United States.

I am **SISTER MELANIE.** I wasborn Charlotte Hamoir. The sea voyage was filled with adventures. My bonnet caught the wind and flew into the Atlantic Ocean. One day, I lost my footing on deck and rocking of the ship rolled me right into a stranger’s cabin. Once in the United States, I refused to use the new fangled mosquito net while sleeping and ended up with a face that had all the marking of chicken pox-but they were really mosquito bites. Oh! How they itched! I lived until 1854 and died in the United States.

I am **SISTER IGNATIA.** I wasborn Julie Antoinette Walle. My most vivid remembrance of the voyage is that awful rolling sea. My command of English was good so I gave instructions to the first converts who came to the door of Sixth Street. I helped start both the Dayton and Columbus foundations before I returned to Namur in 1870. In 1882 I wrote a first hand account of the entire American undertaking from the very beginning, concluding with my version of the vision of Saint Julie in America.

I am **SISTER MARIE PAULINE.** I wasborn Pauline Herreboudt. Slight in build, I am the musician of the group and one of the two good sailors during the sea voyage. I became a skilled catechist in the United States. My death from cholera came nine years after our arrival in Cincinnati.

I am **SISTER HUMBELINA.** I wasborn Anne Marie de Montal. I am the one novice chosen for the American mission. I pronounced vows on August 30, 1840, just 10 days before we set sail. Once we opened the school at Sixth Street, in Cincinnati, my art studio became a magnet. I offered courses in "Drawing with Crayon", “Drawing with Indian Ink", and "Painting in the Oriental Style." After I returned to Belgium, I left the Institute and died in 1872.

I am **SISTER ROSINE.** I wasborn Heloise Matagne. I am the first cook in America. Others record that I am noted for my gentleness, joy and simplicity. My good health and strength made me untiring. My favorite response was "It is all for my sweet Jesus." Besides serving at Sixth Street, I was part of the founding community at Mt. Notre Dame in Reading, Ohio. I was the last of the original eight Sisters to die. In 1896, I was buried at Mt Notre Dame in Cincinnati.

I am **SISTER LOUISE.** I wasborn Josephine Vanderschriek. A resident of Antwerp since the age of three, I was the last Sisters to bid farewell to family. Leave taking was difficult because my mother and father were sixty-four years of age and I knew my goodbye was a final farewell. My fluency in German helped us gain friends in Cincinnati. I was the first Novice Mistress in America. It was my job to train women who joined us. Sister Louis de Gonzague asked that I replace her as superior in 1845. I oversaw the growth of our work in Ohio and along the East Coast until my death in 1886.