**St. Madeleine Sophie Barat and St. Philippine Duchesne:**

**Traveling Companions on the Journey of the Heart**

*Jane Shannon Cannon*

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces the gospel of peace!” These words from Isaiah, chosen by Holy Mother the Church for the first reading of the feast day Mass of St. Philippine Duchesne, recall the unforgettable scene that took place in the December chill of the stone-paved entry of Ste. Marie d’en Haut when the twenty-five-year-old Madeleine Sophie Barat met, for the first time, the zealous Philippine Duchesne. Two women of amazing destiny whose paths had crossed at last: the *Journey of the Heart* was about to begin with a headlong run down that sheer precipice overlooking Grenoble and the subsequent missionary march that would overtake the world, seeking to accomplish what that very reading from Isaiah promises: “and all the ends of the earth shall see the saving power of God.”

What did the overjoyed Philippine, ten years her elder, see in her newly embraced superior? “As if the gifts of God were limited to a certain age, as if the Holy Spirit depended on natural talent . . . For myself, when I see our Mother acting always under the guidance of God, when I compare the sweetness and unction of her words with the sharp language of those who attack her, I have no difficulty in distinguishing between virtue and passion, and I laugh at the agitation which may check God’s work for a time,
but will never destroy it.” This glowing appraisal, written in the house journal just months after their meeting, points to the transformation that was taking place in the woman whose quest for the religious life had floundered repeatedly in the past.

Two women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds had converged on a common wavelength: the love of the Heart of Jesus. To each, education had been a vital ingredient of her youth – Philippine, stealing tutorial hours among the Perier boys’ lessons and reveling in the subject matter deemed inappropriate for a young girl. Sophie, being led by Louis, the unrelenting taskmaster who saw, in his little sister, a sublime potential for learning and spared no scrap of energy – his own or hers – in realizing it to its fullest. What these two visionaries had experienced in their unique childhoods they now burned to impart to others – and, most of all, to imbue that love of learning with their sure knowledge of the love of God.

But the “beautiful feet” did not stay for long at Ste. Marie. There were new foundations to establish elsewhere, other novices to be gathered into the fledgling Society. In her absence, the beloved superior’s charism was relayed to the little community through letters that told of her progress and especially proffered the spiritual guidance that her “dear daughter” Philippine had sought for a lifetime and that she now thrived on – the spiritual sustenance of a craving heart. At last, she was on her way. But this was only the beginning!
As she became acquainted with Father Louis Barat and as she grew more and more familiar with his sister, Mother Duchesne realized that the three of them shared a common dream: a burning desire to spread the Word of God in some distant mission field. But when Mother Barat was named Superior General of the young order by Father Varin in 1806, her future was irrevocably tied to France. If the Sacred Heart was to have a missionary, it would have to be someone else. That hope she held out to her daughter Philippine with these thrilling words: “How happy should I be if Our Lord, having so much reason to disdain my service, should receive yours.” And, from that day on, the older daughter seized upon the possibility. (“So I am allowed to indulge in my longings!”)

Twelve years of longing can temper a soul. To one whose raison d’etre is prayer there was no petition so keenly felt (or so frequently articulated) as this desire to work among the savages on foreign soil. Yet the activities that occupied Philippine at Ste. Marie were varied and strenuous. Certainly, this indefatigable factotum of the house did not languish idly while awaiting her destiny. Energetically she applied herself to every area of work that the convent offered.

These were the years when Napoleon’s vanity made life precarious for religious houses; and prudent patience was needed in matters even closer to home than distant mission fields. Finally, after his banishment, the time seemed right to draw up the Constitutions, which had been prepared in virtual hiding. Superiors of the other houses were summoned to Paris; and Philippine accompanied Mother Bigeu, bidding a
premonitory final farewell to her childhood home of Grenoble and to her beloved Ste. Marie.

Events following the Council were precipitous. The Constitution and Rules of the Society gained pontifical approval; and Philippine, buoyed up by renewed hope of missionary appointment, was chagrined to be named Secretary General of the Society. And so the frustrated Mother Duchesne, who had proved her skills through years of letter writing and faithfully kept journals, was now to become the hand and the memory of her Superior instead of the happily dispatched envoy of the order. A great consolation, though, was the fact that the two dear friends were again much more frequently in each other’s presence. Little wonder that the letters written by her Secretary carried the very spirit of the Superior, so close were they in mind and heart.

At last the tides were turned. Little need be told of the events that took place at the convent in the Rue des Postes in 1817. Every child of the Sacred Heart has heard the story of the visit of Bishop Du Bourg from Louisiana, of his request for religious in his mission territory, of Mother Barat’s reticence and – most memorable of all – of Philippine’s spontaneous outburst that ultimately won her nunc dimitis. No one knew better than Madeleine Sophie Barat the desire that consumed this kindred spirit. And so, although it would stretch the resources and the personnel of the Society in France, the friendship of two valiant women was about to cross the breadth of an ocean and extend deep into a New World, where untold numbers awaited the message of God’s love.
Nearly a year of preparation for the adventure of her lifetime had brought Philippine Duchesne to a window overlooking the port of Bordeaux, where she waited, along with the four carefully chosen religious who would accompany her, for weather to allow their embarkation. Surely a little sadness was mingled with her impatient longing as she wrote to her dear children in the school at Grenoble: “I am leaving things as completely as though I were about to die, since it is almost certain that I shall not return to France nor see you, dear children, and my many loved ones again in this life.” Around the same time, she mused in a letter to Mother Barat about her good fortune to be the one to be called to America: “You desired this privilege for yourself. God makes use of you where you are, but, since I could do nothing, He will try me out elsewhere, like those nuns who are changed from house to house so that different trials may bring to light the good that is in them.”

Two months of travel brought the beleaguered Rebecca to a dock some distance from New Orleans. It was the 29th of May and, most fittingly, the Feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated by Abbé Martial with a Mass before the nuns set foot (and joyful kisses) on the ground beneath them. Just days before that, Philippine had written her first letter on the ship in which she described to her Superior the terrors, the discomforts and the frustrations that had beset the five neophyte travelers. It was the 16th of May, a year – to the day – from the date when Mother Barat had granted her consent for this voyage; and Philippine predicted that Sophie would not receive this verification of their safe
arrival until the following October. In it she also confided the hope that there would be a letter waiting for them when the five actually arrived in New Orleans (there was not). She had reasoned that a ship had left Bordeaux at nearly the same time as the *Rebecca* and, perhaps, may have carried a letter and arrived sooner.

This would be the beginning of a lifetime of longing for word from her dear friend, her mentor, her Mother. In an age when we are spoiled by the glib conversations that e-mail, faxes, and telephones allow us, we are able to confer with associates around the world in a matter of moments. And it is hard to imagine the utter solitude that deprivation of communication inflicts – to ask a question and then wait more than a year for the much-needed response.

A glimpse of this hunger comes in the opening lines of the letter that Philippine wrote to Mother Barat on June 24 after a letter finally did arrive at the Ursuline Convent, where the five nuns were awaiting passage up the Mississippi. “I took your letter to the chapel before I read it, so that we might all thank God for this blessing.”

Finally, on July 12, the five travellers set out on the last leg of their journey. Many of the misconceptions they had as to the ease of travel on the Mississippi (compared to the Atlantic) were quickly put to rest by the perils of sand bars and log-jam snags; but the intense interest in what would be their new home led them to drink in every sight that confronted them along the forty-day trip. Names of birds, crops, and even insects were being learned with keen fascination.
By the time she reached St. Louis, Mother Duchesne should have been prepared for the disappointment that awaited her. The three streets that the city boasted (with the rather grand names of Rue Royale, Rue de l’Eglise and Rue des Granges) were unpaved quagmires with not a single cabin or shack suitable for the nuns’ use. They had been told in New Orleans that the Bishop would probably dispatch them to a location farther out; and that, indeed, was the case.

The day after they arrived there, Philippine wrote to Mother Barat: “We are now nearly four thousand miles apart, but the farther I go the nearer I feel to you in my longing to carry out your intentions and to accomplish your desires.” And now, as she faced settling elsewhere, she remembered the warm invitation they had had as they passed by Ste. Genevieve, some distance south of St. Louis. This option Bishop DuBourg promptly dismissed, assuring them that his choice of St. Charles was far better suited to their mission, since its location on the Missouri River assured its growth because of the constant stream of traffic to the West. Even the ferry that took them to their new home on September 7 was shared with prairie schooners en route to the Rockies.

The first mail that came to their new address in the “Duquette Mansion” (a primitive log cabin, but the biggest house in the frontier town of St. Charles) gave great cause for joy. When Mrs. Pratte, the mother of two of the boarders who had started school earlier in October, came to visit her daughters, she brought letters from France including one from the Mother General, who forwarded the longed-for blessing of the
Holy Father on the American Mission. This blessing was extended by Pius VII to all who would join Mother Philippine Duchesne in the years to come – an encouraging mandate to one who was so plagued by self-doubts and a pervading sense of unworthiness. Her abhorrence of her position as Superior was compounded by the fact that she served so far away from any ability to confer with the Motherhouse in France. “By this time you know that Divine Providence has brought us to the most distant village of the United States,” she wrote. And a month later: “So remote are we in this corner of the world that we do not yet know if you have received a single one of our letters, but I have had the inexpressible consolation of getting several from you.”

The letters that crossed the Atlantic between these two giants of the Society in the ensuing thirty-four years comprise the history of a friendship built on a common thread: the love of the Heart of Jesus and the desire to spread His message to a world so much in need of it. The fact that they never saw each other again seemed to intensify the bond forged by these missives. When Mother Barat wrote to Philippine, “As for you, my dear Mother, receive the assurance of the tender and inviolable attachment with which I am your Mother, “ she was providing text that would be read and reread on the cold, lonely nights in that “most distant village of the United States.” And when Philippine declared, “When I meditate on the fact that I belong to our Society, my soul expands with joy, tears of gratitude flow, and I see only happiness in privations,” she was not only
reminding herself of her greatest consolation but reassuring her Superior of her ability to cope with whatever trials befell her.

So many letters to France included recollections of feasts and other happy occasions celebrated in the past – often with accounts of how they were then being marked in the New World. And so many letters to America – often too late to matter – were lovingly chiding and cajoling: “Now a word regarding your request to be relieved of the office of superior. If you will just reflect a little, you will realize that this is impossible, for I have no one to put in your place, and if you make a third foundation how can you hope to be relieved of superiority? Besides, my dear daughter, would someone else do better than you? I think not!”

How it must have broken Mother Barat’s heart to read between the lines of Philippine’s self-deprecating remarks: “Do name Mother de Kersaint superior. I shall keep so quiet in my corner as never to be in her way. I should add that I am ready to go anywhere you may send me, though I realize that wherever I go I may be in the way because of my age. And, too, I can never deal easily with the parents of our children. The Americans do not understand me. The Creoles want good looks and attractive manners. The best thing for me to do is to disappear, either teaching a class or caring for the sick.” And later on: “I feel that I am a worn-out instrument, a useless walking stick that is fit only to be hidden in a dark corner.”
Although she could not see her friend, Sophie knew that age was changing both of them. If only her old friend could once again tap the courage (almost brashness!) that had characterized her youth when she defied her father to stay up at Ste. Marie – when she picked her way through young womanhood, making choices that shocked her family and friends. If only Philippine could find in herself the confidence that others now lavished on her. When she was considering removing her from her office as superior, Mother Barat received a letter from Bishop Joseph Rosati: “In the first place, I believe there is no one among your religious who can gain as much confidence as Mother Duchesne justly receives here. All who know her respect and venerate her because of her virtues, which, joined to age and the experience she has acquired during her long sojourn in this country, make her esteemed by all. There are few persons whom I venerate more than this holy religious. She has the true spirit of her vocation and on many occasions, known only to me, has given most striking proofs of this.”

In the last year of Philippine’s life, Mother Barat entrusted a letter to Mother Maria Cutts to be delivered to St. Charles. In it she sent good news of the Society’s flourishing activity along with a new assignment for her aging daughter: “My dear Philippine, confidence in the Society is increasing; the order is spreading in almost all parts of the world; and from all sides we receive requests which we must refuse. Ah, if we only had Mothers as zealous and selfless as those who first went into the land where you now live, we would not need so many religious for each house, and foundations could be
made more easily. Pray then, dear and loving Mother, pray earnestly that our sweet Master may have mercy on the souls who call for us and may send us apostles according to His own Heart. He will listen to you, I am sure, dear old daughter of mine, for you have always understood so clearly the value of souls and have never recoiled before an obstacle when Jesus summoned you to their aid.”

In her swift reply (much of which was devoted to an outline of how the Society would go about establishing a novitiate in St. Mary’s, Kansas) Philippine closed with another allusion to her age: “My letter is very badly written, but I cannot see to rewrite it. I have strength, however, to kneel in spirit at your feet to receive your blessing with all possible love and respect in the Heart of Jesus.”

Since news in the nineteenth century was so slowly passed over the thousands of miles that separated St. Madeleine Sophie Barat from St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, it was a long time before the Superior in France learned of the death on November 18, 1852, of the daughter whose only legacy to her was a lifetime of letters, lovingly penned. Of these, no doubt the opening lines of her first letter from Sugar Creek must have stirred in her memory – the letter that was jubilantly headed: “From the Tribe and Village of the Potawatomi.”

“My dearly loved Mother,” she began, “At last we have reached the country of our desires!”

Jane Shannon Cannon attended Maryville and has served in numerous roles at St. Charles.