

**THE SHORT-LIVED  
ADVENTURE OF THE  
FIRST BROTHERS  
IN THE UNITED STATES  
(1817-1822)  
(1/2)**

**Br. Herve Danielou**

On July 3rd 1817, the frigate "La Caravane", bearing the fleur-de-lys colours, weighed anchor and set out from Bordeaux. The short journey down the Gironde soon brought it to the Atlantic, where it set a westerly course and headed for the New World.

There were about thirty passengers on board led by a certain Mgr Dubourg (1). He was the new bishop of what used to be known as Louisiana, a vast territory which Napoleon sold to the United States in 1803 for 35 million dollars. After his consecration as bishop in Rome in 1815, Mgr Dubourg had benefited by his visit to Europe to enlist volunteers to help him with the evangelisation of his vast diocese. And so it was that he now headed a group which included 5 priests, 4 sub-deacons, 9 seminarists, 3 Brothers of the Christian Schools, 4 lay helpers and 4 young students. This gallant band of missionaries had been given free passage on board a royal navy ship by Louis XVIII, King of France.

**Who were the three Brothers on board  
"La Caravane"?**

Mgr Dubourg considered that of all the pressing needs of his diocese, the most urgent was the Christian education of young people. He was aware of the reputation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in this domain, and asked the Superior General, Br. Gerbaud, if the Institute could help with the Catholic schools in his diocese. The Superior was unable to help because there was no one suitable to send, but Mgr Dubourg was not a person to be discouraged easily: in December 1815, the Superior General received a letter

from Cardinal Lita, Prefect of the Propaganda Fide Congregation (2), expressing his support for the request of the bishop. As if this was not enough, the Pope himself, Pius VII, wrote to Br. Gerbaud a few months later, pleading the cause of the Louisiana schools.

In the face of such pressure, the Superior had no choice but to acquiesce, and in a letter dated April 20th 1816, he promised Cardinal Lita "to do all he could to satisfy the wishes of Your Eminence". On October 1st of the same year, Br. Gerbaud wrote to the Brothers of the Institute (3) informing them of plans to open a house shortly in Louisiana. This possibility was sufficient to allay the disappointment of some of the Brothers who had volunteered to go to the island of Reunion, but had not been able to join the 6 pioneers who had left Rochefort the previous month for the far-distant colony in the Indian Ocean.

It was not long before three Brothers were chosen to go with Mgr Dubourg. They travelled to Bordeaux at the end of Spring 1817, and were met by Br. Guillaume de Jesus, the Assistant and future Superior General. The names of these three Brothers, the first in the Institute to step onto the soil of the American continent, are known to us from existing documents.

The one in charge of the group was Br. Aubin (Jean Francois Souchon). He was born in 1792, in Boisset (diocese of Lyon), entered the novitiate in Lyon in 1809 and made his first vows there in 1811. The eldest of the three travellers was Br. Fulgence (Victor Javaux) who was born in 1789 in Ste Colombe (Doubs). He entered the novitiate in Lyon in 1813 and made his first vows there in 1815. The youngest, Br. Antonin (Francois Thomas Murailac), was born in 1797 in Grenoble. He also made his novitiate in Lyon, arriving there in 1812.

Before leaving France, all three made their triennial vows. They were somewhat worried about how they would be able to make their final vows once they had crossed the Atlantic.

**From the banks of the Garonne  
to those of the Ohio**

Under normal circumstances, Mgr Dubourg should have gone to New Orleans, the provincial capital of his vast diocese. Learning, however, that problems caused by a certain Fr. Anthony awaited him there, he decided to go to St. Louis instead. This was a town at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, some 1,000 kilometres north of New Orleans, but still within the boundaries of the former State of Louisiana and so within the jurisdiction of the new bishop.

And so the frigate "La Caravane" headed for Annapolis (Maryland) and arrived there on September 4th 1817, two months after setting sail. Mgr Dubourg went to St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, which he had founded in 1799, while the other travellers were lodged at the home of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Catholic and the only surviving signatory of the 1776 Charter of Independence.

Towards the end of October, the group of missionaries made its way overland to Pittsburgh. From there they went by boat down the Ohio to Louisville which they reached on November 30th. They settled nearby in Bardstown where Mgr Flaget, the local bishop, lived with a small group of seminarists. While the other travellers remained in Bardstown to learn English, the two bishops went by boat to St. Louis where they arrived on January 15th 1818. At the time, there were only 4,000 inhabitants there, the majority of whom were Catholics, at least in name. Noting down his personal impressions, Mgr Dubourg could not refrain from writing: *"My cathedral which looks like a stable is falling into ruin, so much so that a new building is absolutely necessary"*.

### The school in St. Genevieve

St. Genevieve, a hundred or so kilometres south of St. Louis, was the first permanent settlement to be set up by the French colonists on the right bank of the Mississippi. By 1762, it was already an "old town" and, by the beginning of the 19th century, the majority of the population was Catholic and of French origin.

In 1808, the parish priest, Fr. Maxwell, opened an "academy" (a secondary school), which unfortunately was closed on the death of its founder in 1814. This was the school Mgr Dubourg wanted the Brothers to revive. These and their other travelling companions left Bardstown on September 18th 1818 and set sail on a small, uncomfortable, flat-bottomed boat. When they reached the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi, they turned into the latter river and went upstream till, on October 1st, they reached a village called The Barrens (now Perryville). Here Mgr Dubourg had decided to have his seminary. St. Genevieve was only about 30 kilometres to the north. The new parish priest there, Fr. Pratte, was doing all he could to hasten the reopening of the academy founded by his predecessor.

The first Brother to arrive at St. Genevieve was Brother Antonin, who had made most progress in English. In a letter dated January 4th 1819, Mgr Dubourg wrote as follows: *"I am delighted that Brother Antonin is in St. Genevieve. I have received a letter from him and I am sending him the various things he needs"*.

The school reopened on January 8th 1819. It was not long before Brothers Aubin and Fulgence joined him. This was because the bishop had promised in Bordeaux that the three Brothers would remain together in order to be able to lead a normal community life.

Together, they ran the St. Genevieve Academy for more than three years (4). Unfortunately, Fr. Pratte died in Sep-

tember 1822 at the age of 34. The new parish priest was Fr. Francis Dahmen, a Lazarist. The bishop, who was delighted with the good work the Brothers had done in St. Genevieve, wanted other towns to benefit from their expertise, and so the community was broken up: one Brother remained to run the school with the help of lay teachers; one was sent to The Barrens; and the third went to New Orleans.

However, isolated now from one another and cut off from the Superior General by distance and the slowness of the post, the three Brothers soon became discouraged and abandoned their vocation. It has to be said in their favour that they were still temporarily professed and so were free in conscience to leave when their vows expired. And so, in this regrettable way, the first Lasallian foundation on the American continent came to an end (5).

This sad ending reminds us of another event which had taken place some hundred years before towards the end of the life of St. John Baptist de La Salle. At the time he was living at St. Yon, no longer Superior, and devoting his time to prayer and silence. In 1717, Mr Charon, one of the founders of the Ville Marie hospital in Montreal, asked the Superior General, Br. Barthelemy to send four Brothers to Canada to run a school. The Superior agreed, but wanted to consult the holy Founder first. At first he seemed to be in favour of the project, but after a few days of prayer and reflection, he no longer supported the idea. As a consequence, Br. Barthelemy cancelled the departure of the four Brothers at the last moment. Later on, it came to light that Mr Charon had intended to split the Brothers up between a number of widely dispersed establishments. This, no doubt, would have put the vocation of our four Brothers in great danger. And so, the spiritual catastrophe, which the Founder had avoided by his foresight in the case of the four Brothers destined for Canada, took place a hundred years later and led to the loss of the St. Genevieve group.

### NOTES

1. Louis Guillaume Dubourg was born in 1766 in Santo Domingo, a French colony at the time. He joined the seminary of St. Sulpice in 1786. During the French Revolution he left for the United States (Baltimore). He became bishop of Louisiana in 1815, resigned in 1826 and returned to France. He became bishop of Montauban and then archbishop of Bordeaux in 1833, the year of his death.
2. The Propaganda Fide Congregation was responsible for Catholic missions all over the world. The dioceses of the United States were under its jurisdiction up to 1908.
3. At the time, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools numbered some 400 Brothers.
4. The building put up by Fr. Maxwell in 1808, and which housed the Brothers and their pupils, is still standing. At various stages it has been a school, a presbytery and a history museum.
5. There was another Lasallian establishment in Martinique (French Antilles) in the 18th century. It was opened in 1777 and closed in 1792, a victim of the French Revolution.