

## DEAR FATHER . . . 1866

*The following letter was written almost a hundred years ago by a French Dominican priest to an unnamed correspondent in France (most likely Père Minjard, his provincial superior). Its author is Père Bernard Chocarne, O.P., a close friend and biographer of Lacordaire. Père Chocarne came to America in 1866 on loan from the Province of France to teach theology in the American Dominican Province of St. Joseph. In this letter, which was published in L'Annee Dominicaine in 1867, the French priest gives his impressions of the character of the Church and the Order of Preachers in America. The translation was made from the French by Father Reginald Coffey, O.P., archivist and historian of the Dominican Order, Province of St. Joseph.*

November 6, 1866

Very Reverend and dear Father:

The Council of Baltimore closed on October 21st<sup>1</sup> to the great joy and edification of the Catholics, and it left a profound and effective impression with Protestants as well. I won't mention the Council in this letter except to tell you that among the means adopted to foster the religious and moral education of the American Negroes, the Fathers of the Council decided to name as their principal patron saint the Jesuit, Blessed Peter Claver,<sup>2</sup> and as a secondary patron Blessed Martin de Porres of Lima, whose tender charity, as you well know, prompted him to work to better the conditions of the poor slaves in thousands of ways.

The next day, the 22nd, in the company of Father Provincial, I left Baltimore for St. Rose, planning to stop at every Dominican house on the way. The first stop was our priory in Washington, an hour and a half out of Baltimore. Several years ago our Fathers settled themselves in this capital city of the great republic. Washington, although seat of the Congress and home of the president, has not yet attained the degree of development fitting to its title of "capital" or to its admirable topographical setting. It doesn't have today more than one hundred thousand residents. Its growth has been retarded by multiple circumstances, but since the end of the war,<sup>3</sup> it has made rapid progress and should continue. Surrounded on east and west by a belt of tree-covered hills which give it the appearance of a huge amphitheater, it is washed on the south by the waters of the Potomac, the

largest of the rivers of the Union,<sup>4</sup> the Tiber of this new Rome. On a knoll in the center of the city the Capitol rises upward—a gigantic and grandiose monument in white marble—which takes one's thoughts back to the Capitoline hill of ancient Rome; although I hope that by suggesting this parallel I am not straining your Gallic scepticism.

The parish served by our Fathers covers a very large section of the city between the Capitol and the Potomac. And a new church is just being built which will be, so they tell me, not the biggest but the most beautiful in the United States. Right now work on it has progressed to the raising of the arches. It has three naves of pure Gothic and it will have a 200 foot bell tower of stone. I would like to tell you about the generous donation of skilled labor made to our religious—and to priests in general—which makes these building projects possible; but if I go into detail or into the history of our operations, I'd never get to Saint Rose. This time I'll just hastily skim over these things. Later, I'll go more deeply into the history of this interesting province.

Our second stop was at our convent in Zanesville in the State of Ohio, 600 miles from New York. This city located at the confluence of two great rivers is principally an industrial center. To give you just an idea of its rich future, just let me say that between these two great waterways,<sup>5</sup> there are deposits of iron and copper, and seemingly inexhaustible coal mines as well as oil wells. And the soil of this land, so rich in mineral wealth, produces grains of all kinds as well as timber for building. The city is linked to the other great centers by railroads and canals. Our Fathers have one of the two Catholic parishes of Zanesville. They have a charming gothic church, very well kept. Since our arrival, a choir made up mostly of Protestants is rehearsing the music for Christmas. It goes without saying that I was really intrigued at this readiness of Protestants to join in the performance of the Catholic ceremony. It's unique, and it springs from the great veneration given the Catholic Church in this vicinity.

From Zanesville we went on to Louisville, where we arrived by train after midnight. Louisville is in the State of Kentucky and on the Ohio River, one of the greatest rivers of America, originally called by the French *la Belle Rivière*. Louisville is the seat of a Catholic bishop. The cathedral, built after the fashion of the Protestant churches, is a huge structure of mixed up design [*style bâtard*], painted a glaring white from roof to foundations.

The churches of the United States in general are not well designed. They are pale and cold copies of our beautiful gothic cathedrals and without

any feeling for Christian art. I would like to see some French architect join up with a talented artist like M. Berdieu, for example, and come over to this country to work together on the churches going up all over the place. It would be profitable for them and a good thing for art's sake.

Msgr. Lavielle, bishop of Louisville (and of French descent) is as kind as he can be to our Fathers. He brought them into his episcopal city where they have been established since the spring of this year. There for the price of five thousand dollars they have purchased in a very lovely part of the city a piece of land three or four times larger than the property of Jean de Beauvais in Paris. On August 9th the bishop solemnly laid the cornerstone of the priory. It is now finished and will hold more than forty religious. You see, everything goes quickly in America. A house goes up in a month. It's true that fire destroys it even faster and fires are much too frequent. It's also true that the houses built today will be old-fashioned twenty years from now. But America doesn't care. They build here not for the future, but for the present hour. They know that their sons will not inherit the family home. They camp; they don't settle. You could easily count the few houses in America which saw both the birth of the father and the death of the son. Onwards! ever onwards! That is the slogan of this people devoted to a fury of movement as compared to other countries where they are devoted to sleepy lethargy. This pace will perhaps slow down some day; but right now, and especially since the war's end, it is at its zenith. Wasn't it old Aristotle who said, "*Vita in motu*"?<sup>6</sup>

The Priory of Saint Rose is four hours by railroad from Louisville in the same state of Kentucky. The train stopped at a station called Lebanon and there a carriage from the priory was waiting for us. It was midday. The road brought us through rolling country with gentle sloping hills. While I was admiring these endless forests where fallen trees one on top of another indicate the course of water, the sight vividly reminding me of the forest of Sainte Baume, suddenly we came to the top of a hill and Father Provincial pointed out the priory in the distance: "Voilà Sainte Rose!" I could not suppress an exclamation of surprise and delight. It was the living picture of a monastery of the middle ages. On the projecting point of the hill in front of us the priory church with its gothic windows soared upwards, with the tower crenellated and ornamented all around the top with small spires which, seen from afar resemble a crown placed on the brow of the sacred building.

Behind the church are the priory's buildings with their spacious barns. In the shade of the chapel on a hillside lies the cemetery for this whole

countryside: a place of well kept graves with monuments in white marble surrounded by green trees. Right at the foot of the hill in a little valley there is a stream which turns the priory mill. On the slopes across the valley there are cultivated fields and meadows where horses, cows and sheep are fenced in to pasture, while forests tinged with the colors of autumn circle the horizon lighted with the glorious fire of the setting sun. It was a ravishing sight which my hungry eyes feasted upon and yet remained unsated.

At Compline in the evening I saw the choir of the church filled with about fifty religious of all ages: some almost babies, other white with the snow of years and bent with fatigue. When I saw them at the singing of the *Salve Regina* marching down the center aisle and filling it to its entire length, I almost thought I was back in those happy bygone days at Saint Maximin. Father Provincial hadn't told me anything about this; he told me afterwards he was saving it as a surprise. It was a complete surprise and a very sweet one. The days following only increased my pious delight. Life here is very regular and edifying. Except for the sick Fathers, everyone keeps the constitutional fast.

The priory farm is a large one and all the vegetables for the table come from it while about forty cows keep us supplied with milk and butter. The air is healthy for walks in the woods, and gaiety of heart and serenity of soul season everything and provide the young novices much food for happiness. What a joy it is, Father, to see Dominican vitality reviving everywhere and expanding with new energy. What encouragement it gives us to cultivate and cherish forever the grace of our great vocation so we can appreciate and measure up to the great things we're destined for. What a tremendous crown for the head of a friar preacher to love the solitude of the cloister and to steep his soul in study and prayer so that he can carry into his apostolic ministry a white habit unspotted by malice. It is time to cut off this letter, Father; more details later. Pray for me and believe always in my fraternal affection, etc.

#### B. CHOCARNE

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<sup>1</sup> Père Chocarne attended this Council as theologian for Archbishop Thomas L. Grace of Saint Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Now canonized Saint Peter Claver, and Bl. Martin is to be canonized on May 6.

<sup>3</sup> The Civil War.

<sup>4</sup> Père Chocarne was weak in geography evidently.

<sup>5</sup> These would be the Muskingum and the Licking Rivers.

<sup>6</sup> Life is always in motion.