

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

An Apostolic Woman

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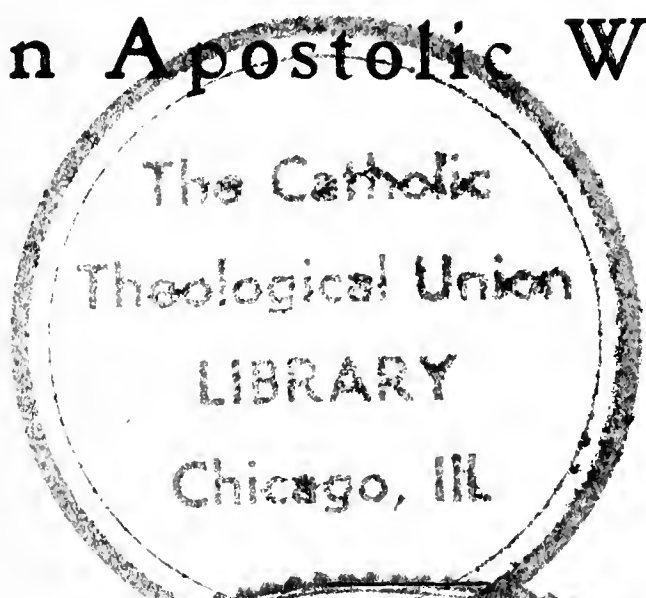
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SISTER ST. FRANCIS XAVIER  
IRMA LE FER DE LA MOTTE

1816 - 1856

# An Apostolic Woman



SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS  
INDIANA

*IMPRIMATUR:*

✠ JOSEPHUS

Episcopus Indianapolitanus

Feast of St. Mark, 1922

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Sister St. Francis Xavier  
Irma le Fer de la Motte



# SISTER ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

IRMA LE FER DE LA MOTTE

## Seraph of the Tabernacle

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“I found Him Whom my soul loveth.” —Cant., III.

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“ O fairest! O fortunate! O rich! O dear!  
O happy and thrice happy she,

Whoe'er she be,  
Whose early love  
With winged vows  
Makes haste to meet her morning Spouse.”

—*Crashaw*

In the revival of mysticism, as noticed in contemporary poets especially, one sees a good sign of the times. The world is tiring again of its old broken toy of materialism. It is hungering for Christ. And only the true mysticism of the old faith, of the old Church can satisfy this hunger. What a consolation for Christians to know that by a life of faith they may help the groping, fainting world back to its Father's house and a table of bounty! This life of faith is mys-

ticism, the only spirituality worthy of the name.

And this noble life is lived professionally by religious. Every religious should be a mystic, another Christ, in the most beautiful and glorious sense of the word. To be near to God, to be His devoted friend, His loving child, a mediator between Him and the toiling, forgetful, erring, idolatrous world,—what a joy! To be near Him, interceding for His people, by prayer, by labor, in love, in ardent devotion, in joy or in sorrow—what rapture! To be near Him, to experience His Divine Presence, His love,—what ecstasy! This is mysticism, the most potent intercession, the most efficient means of reconstructing a world broken and shattered, the most complete human life. This was the life of Sister St. Francis Xavier, Irma le Fer de la Motte.

The biography of Sister St. Francis is the story of a mystic of the nineteenth century. It might be summed up in these words—tender intercourse with God, her Father; strong personal love of Christ, her Beloved in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist; and fidelity to the Holy Spirit, the sweet Guest of her soul.

# CHAPTER I

## EARLY DAYS

“Lord, I am Thine, for I was born for Thee!  
Reveal what is it, Thou dost ask of me.”

—*St. Theresa*

Easter Sunday, April 15, 1816 brought new joy to the favored household of Monsieur and Madame le Fer de la Motte. Another precious soul, a little daughter was entrusted to these Catholic parents; little did they dream that the tiny babe nestling in its mother's arms was destined to be a shining light to future generations, an apostle of love to the new world. The younger members of the household, Eugene, Charles, and Pepa, gave their new sister a joyous welcome. On the same day this child of predilection was presented at the baptismal font, and in Heaven as on earth, her name was registered Irma, a name given in honor of the Immaculate Mother under whose pro-

tection she was placed. Indeed, her coming into the world with the paschal lilies was prophetic of her life's lilting song of purity, of praise, and of love. And never was a flower more fortunately surrounded; for the Le Fer family, one of exceptional culture and piety, was as a sheltered garden with the gentlest and wisest of parents for keepers.

Though the workings of the Designer of souls seemed visible in Irma from her birth, her childhood was not without its moments of caprice and willfulness. Many interesting stories are told of her pettish independence, her small vanities, and her waywardness. Of her tendency to anger, she wrote in after life, "During Pepa's illness, I overcame my temper for two cents a week, which was truly very cheap; but now I offer this impressionable character to Our Lord that He may employ it for His glory."

If there was anything alarming in Irma's disposition, it disappeared as the time for her first Holy Communion approached. Of these days, in the Introduction to the Life and Letters of Sister St. Francis Xavier, we read:

"Irma's mother spoke of her child's First Communion as if it were her dedication to

highest perfection.”\* Madame Le Fer herself in a letter to a friend describes this sublime event:

The child's father and I shed tears upon the little one, sweet tears, the prelude of still sweeter ones. On the beautiful morning, what joy was mine while clothing my Irma in her white garments, symbolic of the innocence adorning her heart! What a moment for a Christian mother who beholds her child for the first time approaching the God of Angels!

Marked was the change that came into Irma's soul after the great event. Child of a special influence of grace, she comprehended more than other children the mystery of the Divine Presence and the great privilege of receiving the Holy Eucharist. With each Holy Communion her understanding became clearer, her love deeper. As her biographer remarks, there was a rapid transition from childhood to maturity—Irma was beginning to live

“ . . . . For Him who is alone  
The Spouse of Virgins, and the Virgin's Son.” †

This development was manifest in her influence upon others. Her charming man-

\* The Reverend Walter Elliott, C. S. P. † Crashaw

ner, always attractive, was irresistible when she spoke of God. To know her was to love her, and to love her was to love God, to love Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Of this favored child it might also be said that her discourse was never tedious. Addressing her companions, she would say with a magnetic grace and unction, "Aid me to bless Jesus; my voice is too weak, my heart too little. Let us unite our praises, for drops of water form the rivers; voices give harmony; stars make the beauty of the firmament; souls are the delight of Jesus."

## CHAPTER II

### THE YOUTHFUL APOSTLE

“Love knoweth no burden, thinketh nothing of labors.”  
—*A' Kempis*

When Irma was thirteen years of age, she was made very happy by being chosen god-mother to her little sister Clementine. She had now a real opportunity for exercising zeal. She wrote:

I brought up my little Clementine for her parents and for God. Often, when she lay in her cradle, we spoke together of heaven. When she was older, I spoke to her of our Heaven on earth, Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. Fervent desires inflamed the heart of little Clementine, and God in His mercy gave me the happiness of seeing her admitted to the Holy Table one year earlier than the customary age. How delighted I was to conduct her to the Retreat preparatory to her First Communion, to speak to her of the goodness of God, and to

prepare in her heart an altar for this God of love! The evening before her First Communion I brought her to the feet of our father and mother that they might bless her. Afterwards when she had gone to bed, and we were alone, she threw herself into my arms and wept. And I wept, too. "Tomorrow, tomorrow," she said to me, "there is but one night between my heart and God."

All the family assembled on that day to share our happiness. Our dear grandmother also came to the great First Communion dinner. For many years, on similar occasions, she left Lorette\* and her old armchair to be present at these joyous feasts. How happy she was to be among us, and how happy we were around her!

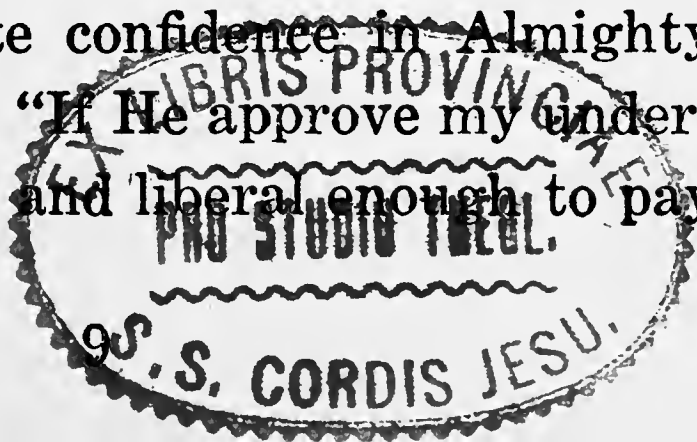
In her desire to make God known and loved, Irma assembled the poor of the neighborhood every Sunday evening to explain to them the catechism. Without knowing it, she was actuated by the maxim, "We can do good to men only by loving them." And if she did so much good among the poor, it was owing to the great love she bore these privileged ones of the Lord. She shared

\* Lorette, a beautiful estate situated on the Rennes highway, three quarters of a mile from Saint Servan, was the home of Irma's grandmother.



their poverty and the little money she possessed was theirs, for she could keep nothing for herself. She placed a small library of choice works at the disposal of those who could read. Irma also procured the opportunity of making retreats for all those who had the desire and the time to make them; and to facilitate this good work she had not only to provide food for those who attended the retreats, but, when it was the father of a family, she had to give what he would have gained by his week's labor, besides supporting the mother and children in the meantime. To her, when she worked for her dear poor, nothing was difficult or impossible.

One of Irma's sweetest dreams was to provide an orphanage for little boys. She often spoke of it to her sister Eugénie, to whom she wished to trust the temporalities, reserving to herself only the care of their souls. One of her objects in studying Latin was to teach its elements to the poor children whom God might call to the priesthood. Having an absolute confidence in Almighty God she would say, "If He approve my undertakings, He is rich and liberal enough to pay the expenses."



Later when the time came for Irma to leave Saint Servan, it cost her a great deal to abandon these pious works to which she had so lovingly devoted herself; before starting she distributed them to her sisters as a precious legacy, entreating them to continue these works of charity for God and for her.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SANCTUARY OF THE HOME

“The Lord is good to the soul that seeketh Him.”

*Lam. III, 25*

The house in which Irma so sweetly passed her youth is situated on a hillside bordering the Rance, and commands a distant view of the English Channel. The sight is delightful and could not but influence her impressionable heart. She loved the mysterious murmurs of the river, and listened with delight to the rippling of the waves as their sparkling and snowy foam dashed lightly against the rocks along its banks. Sometimes as she heard the distant fury of the raging ocean, she would reflect, “What a contrast between the smiling azure waters of the Rance and the sublimity and depth of the vast sea! Is not this an image of life, which at the beginning presents to our view a cradle surrounded by flowers and smiles, and at the close, a

tomb where the deep voice of death summons all into eternity!"

On one occasion Irma wrote:

If you only knew how very, very beautiful the sea was last evening! It was high, very high; it surrounded the cottage near the road. The boat we were in, though tied to the shore, was tossed by the waves. Today we have high tide, and this evening we intend going to the beach again. How I wish you were here to share our pleasure! I beg you, I entreat you to come. My Mother bids me invite you. Do come. And prepare yourself; you will need to be calm. In the midst of the waves our blood will course through our veins like the white foam against the rocks; but you will remember that it is God who created this vast sea, and who in His goodness has placed us so near this beautiful ocean. We shall be surrounded by God's immensity, we shall rejoice and find pleasure, but like children in the arms of their father.

The days spent in the country, the walks in summer, and the evening reunions with the neighboring families were not Irma's only diversions. The holy patrons of the family were joyously feasted. St. Joseph's Day had, above all other days of the year, its

peculiar solemnity; for Irma's grandmother, who was born in Spain bore the name of Pepa, a Spanish abbreviation of Joseph. On the 19th of March the children and grandchildren assembled at Lorette to celebrate the feast of her great patron. All responded with joy to the call, and each offered flowers to the dear grandmother. The older ones added needlework made for the occasion. Irma's piece was never finished, but she presented the part begun, concealing the other under the flowers, very certain that on so joyous a day she would escape reproach.

Everywhere in her letters we see the influence of her charming environments. The beauty of the surroundings at Saint Servan was, however, a mere reflection of the charm and beauty of this ideal Christian home.

In a letter to Mlle. Marie le M...living at Rennes, Irma takes the reader into the sanctuary of the Le Fer home.

You have not dared to visit us, because you dread the seductions of the world. I thank God that He has inspired you with so great a fear of its dangers that you are even ready to sacrifice the pleasure of ever seeing me again. It is thus we should act. God cannot be placed in the balance with the

world. For Him we should be willing to leave country, family, all, and ourselves. But in approving your sentiments, I am happy to say that you may come without fear. You are mistaken in thinking we lead a worldly life; our home is even called a convent, and no gossip from the outside world reaches us; we are often ridiculed for our simplicity. You may object to our large family. It is true we are many, and during vacation there is a great deal of noise. The children laugh, play, and scream in their amusements. This may make the head ache, but it does not trouble the heart. Our friends are very pious; my Father's family is exemplary. Every morning we all—Father, Mother, children, and servants assist at Mass; in the afternoon we sing hymns and say the beads; towards evening we often go to the church to pray for half an hour; before supper we have some pious reading, and before retiring we recite evening prayers in common,—such is the interior of a home that you believe dangerous.

When we meet next year, I think you will be delighted with us. Perhaps you smile at my simplicity. No matter. I am sure you will be charmed by intimate association with people who think as you do, and who frankly exchange their thoughts. I am so happy in my family that it seems to me any one would regret leaving it.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CALL

“Behold my Beloved speaketh to me.”—*Cant.* II, 10

“The harvest is great, but the laborers few.”

—*Luke* X, 2

Irma's zeal was not confined to her home, nor to the village of Saint Servan; like sparks among reeds, it must communicate itself. Naturally in so ardent a heart, a desire for the foreign missions was inevitable. It was her fidelity to God and her zeal for souls that prepared Irma for the inspiration that came to her in 1834, when the Abbé Carret, a missionary apostolic, visited Saint Servan to beg alms for his poor. His earnest pleading kindled in Irma's heart that yearning for the foreign missions which was to be so fully satisfied. She kept her secret to herself, confiding it, however, to her confessor and to her Divine Confidant in the Blessed Sacra-

ment, knowing that He never fails the souls that trust Him. Her director,\* not wishing to decide the case himself, approved her intention of consulting a holy Jesuit, Father Besnoin, who was preaching a course of Lenten Sermons at Saint Servan. This Father advised her to consecrate her virginity to God and to use every means to procure His glory. He ended by saying, "You will go to the missions to convert the little pagans."

Only those who have yearned to bring souls to Christ can understand the sentiments which filled Irma's heart during her four years of patient waiting. But the summons came at last. In 1839 Bishop de la Hailandière of Vincennes, Indiana, an intimate friend of the family, who was in France, seeking aid for his mission, visited Irma's home. Here was the heaven-sent messenger. Never did a Desdemona listen to an Othello with half the eagerness with which Irma listened to the details which Bishop de la Hailandière gave of those distant lands in America where so many souls were in darkness and in the shadow of death. Immediately after the visit, Irma wrote to a friend :

\*Abbe Cardonnet, chaplain at Lorette.



We had a visit yesterday from Bishop de la Hailandière, who spoke of his diocese and his great labors. Cecile wished to set out with him immediately. I did not say anything, but I thought, "It is there perhaps that God calls me." Eugénie laughs and will not believe me; her gayety and her assurance make me heartsick. Poor dear sister how she will weep when I leave her.

Abbé Cardonnet who was a friend of the missionary bishop spoke to him of Irma's desires. Her offer was accepted. Bishop de la Hailandière would take her with him that very July.

Writing again to her friend, Irma said:

I have just been to hear Bishop de la Hailandière. He preached nothing but America. It was a conversation rather than a sermon. On leaving the Church I went to Madame B- - - -'s, where I again saw him and also Abbé Cardonnet. His pressing exhortations to follow him to America were not mere jests, and I did not laugh while listening to them. An hour later I saw the two in the garden, and I went up to them. They were talking of me. Oh, what a moment! What! leave all I love, and so suddenly! How shall I ever ask my father, how speak of it to my mother! And he would take me away in

three months! Abbé Martin\* and twenty priests are going with him. My dearly loved Elvire, I am happy here, perfectly happy, and it is for God alone I would abandon my happiness in France. God! Ah! He indeed is worthy of some tears and heartbreakings.

“That which I took—thou’lt find it in my arms,  
It’s stored for thee at home, not lost.  
Rise, clasp my hand and come.”

—*Francis Thompson*

At this time Irma le Fer de la Motte was a young woman of unusual beauty and accomplishment, graceful, witty, and vivacious, charming in disposition and manner, a type of the intellectual French gentlewoman. She was indifferent to social pleasures on the one hand, but, on the other, was eager to acquire knowledge and to appear brilliant, and yet, notwithstanding this complexity of gifts and confliction of attractions, she had hearkened to His voice.

“Arise, my love, and come.” —Cant. II, 10

In resolving to give herself to God, Irma did not have to sacrifice the love of worldly pleasures; these had little attraction for her. Dress, amusements, dances, and all

\* Consecrated Bishop of Natchitoches in 1853

those things that ordinarily captivate young girls were to her painful tasks. She complained of them in her letters. To one of her sisters she wrote:

Mother wishes me to fix my hair in a way that will take so long and be so tiresome that I feel like crying even in thinking of it. Pity me, for in a few moments I shall have to commence my toilet. What a misery to have to go to a party; it wearies me only to think of it! This evening I shall have to dance, hold myself straight, step in time, and be confined within the four walls of a parlor, with the prospect of finding the bean in my piece of cake, and then being made queen! Oh! I'll die of it! And to die of ennui! What a frightful death!

Irma's repugnance to going out in society was sometimes manifested on her pretty face. One of her father's friends in undertaking to make her dance, said smilingly, "Since they will make a martyr of her, I might as well do it as anyone else." Later when all her thoughts turned to God, she endeavored to sanctify this tediousness, and when she had to take part in these soirées, she offered them to God for the conversion of sinners, the deliverance of the souls in purgatory, and other intentions of this kind.

To one of her friends she remarked:

There is, perhaps, no one more indifferent than I am to the luxury of the house, to dress, and to the table; but the devil loses nothing thereby, for he fills me with an excessive desire of acquiring knowledge. I dream of nothing but books and study. I fear to lose the thought of my salvation in all this tumult, for books inflame and intoxicate me as champagne would do. Without religion, study would become a passion for me. Sometimes I think it is permissible, but that is an error. All is vanity except to love and serve God.

Deeply rooted also in the affections of Irma were her works of zeal at Saint Servan—her catechism classes and retreats, her poor, the little children, her plans to help the needy. Should she leave them all? Would she really be able to do the same good if she embraced the religious life? To work for souls, this to her had always seemed glorious, but to subject herself to the religious life, this held no attractions to her, who though always deferential and submissive to her parents, retained a spirit of independence which made all subjection painful to her. It was even difficult for her to bear the regular-

ity of family life. When she left the house for an errand of charity, it cost to return at meal-time, though she was exact in doing so. "How I should like," she said, "to eat only when I am hungry, retire only when I am sleepy, and always wear the same clothing! How happy sheep are! God clothes them for the winter, and men shear them when summer comes, and they never have to think of their dress. I wish men would mutually agree to adopt a uniform which might always be worn; but these words in the Psalms of David, you will change the form like a mantle, show that the custom is so ancient that I fear it will subsist long after I am gone."

That spirit of independence which kept far from Irma the thought of embracing the religious life, seemed to place insurmountable obstacles to her working for souls in heathen countries. Nevertheless, He who had inspired her with this desire provided her the means of fulfilling it.

This was the young woman who now professed her heart and her life to the service of God, to the service of Him for Whose love no pleasure, no honor was too great to sacrifice.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CALL HEEDED

“I will arise, I will seek Him Whom my soul  
loveth.” —*Cant.* III, 2

Irma le Fer de la Motte realized the supreme sacrifice she was about to ask of her beloved parents. When she had the opportunity to speak, her courage failed; she then wrote to her father this touching appeal:

Saint Servan, June 7, 1839

My beloved Father:—

My Mother dressed me so elegantly to go to Rennes, and made me look so beautiful that, although destitute of fortune, I have found a rich Suitor. You know how much I love you all. Well, notwithstanding the love I bear my country and my family, the proposal made me is so advantageous, so un-hoped-for, that I have replied I shall accept if you give your consent. One thing, how-

ever, afflicts me, it is the thought of leaving you, for I shall have to go far away from my dear Saint Servan.

It will be a bitter grief to me; nevertheless, if you have the courage to sacrifice your daughter, I am determined to follow everywhere the One Who asks my heart. To be willing to leave you—you, O my Father, whom I love so much—is a proof that my poor heart is entirely captivated. Yes, I acknowledge it. If you refuse your consent to this union, I feel I shall always be unhappy. I would even be unhappy with you. Oh! I do not say this to my Mother,—this one word would draw forth from her the permission I desire to obtain only after she has fully deliberated.

You will, perhaps, ask the name of Him whom I love with a love so strong that I would sacrifice my country and the thousand ties that bind me to it. His name? Ah! that would reveal the high destiny that awaits me, the immense fortune that is offered me. His name alone would take away from both you and my Mother the liberty of opposing my desires. My poor Father, did you but know Who it is that asks your child! Think how good and lovable He must be, since He gives me the desire to leave you and follow Him. Were He to demand your six daughters, whom you love so tenderly, I believe you would give them

all. But He does not ask my sisters; they will remain with you to love you and make you happy, as I would have wished to do all my life. Their lot is beautiful, but mine is still more beautiful.

My beloved Father, you will not refuse your daughter to Him Who promises to make her happy, Who seeks her only for the love He bears her, and Who will accept her without the goods of earth. You will not have the courage to pain me; you will not refuse your consent. I ask this favor of your heart, which beats only for the happiness of your children. The same I also beg from my dear Mother.

I did not have the courage to speak to you, to throw myself at your feet and entreat you to let me go. My soul needs all its strength. I beg you, do not make me lose it by your tears. I can write no more—ah! you know me well.

Pray for me, and rejoice at a happiness which makes me shed so many tears. Wherever I may be, I shall never cease to love you and to be your devoted and cherished Irma.

To a friend she wrote:

My Father was alone when I took him the fatal letter; he was sleeping. Oh! what an awakening; I hurried off to church, and on my return I threw myself weeping into his arms.



I then explained the beginning of my vocation, its continuance, and my decision. I told him I intended to go the United States, but I could not tell him that it would be in a few weeks that I must leave him.

It is ten o'clock at night, and my mother has just returned from the country. While I am telling you my feelings, doubtless, my father is showing her my letter. My heart throbs, but to-morrow I shall receive Holy Communion; I shall have my God to console me, and I shall be happy again.

In spite of the deep sorrow that Irma's parents felt when they learned of her determination, their faith and love would not permit them to think of refusing their child to God, if He deigned to call her to His service; but her departure so soon to a community yet to be founded in America, to a country hardly civilized and with a climate so severe; her delicate health, the lifelong separation,—all these thoughts greatly distressed them.

Madame Le Fer consulted Bishop de la Hailandière, Abbè Coëdro, and Father Besnoin. All advised her to consent to the departure which under the circumstances appeared contrary to human prudence. God,

undoubtedly, wished to give Monsieur and Madame le Fer de la Motte the opportunity of making a great sacrifice, and they did not recoil before it. An overruling Providence, however, was directing all. As unlooked-for events prevented the immediate carrying out of Bishop de la Hailandière's plans, many months would elapse before the sacrifice would be required.

## CHAPTER VI

### SOULAINES-RUILLE

“Open the temple gates unto My love,  
Open them wide that she may enter in.”

—*Spenser*

Despite the assurance she gave her family that she no longer had her former apprehensions of the religious life, Irma was in no hurry to embrace it. But Abbé Cardonnet did not approve of delay, which might weaken her resolution, and in a rather severe letter to her he disregarded the pretexts of health, family, and studies, and concluded thus: “When God calls, death alone should hinder you from starting. Go, then, and if death surprises you on the way, it will be but the means of bringing you sooner to Him.” Irma hesitated no longer, and in November 1839, she left her loved and beautiful home at Saint Servan. The days preceding her departure were very sad ones for the family,

but Irma, sustained by grace, continued courageous, and preserved that sweet calm which might have appeared indifference to those who did not know the sensitiveness of her heart.

The very day of her departure she took a painting-lesson at Lorette, and worked with as steady a hand at her brother Charles' portrait as though she intended returning that same evening to the paternal roof which she had quitted forever. She left home without daring to bid adieu to her father, whose health would not permit painful emotions. She was soon to leave her brothers and sisters, who were very dear to her, and whom she would never see again. In a few hours she would receive her mother's blessing and bid her a final farewell; yet, nothing in Irma's manner betrayed the feelings of her soul. God, who proportions His grace to the sacrifice He demands, gave Irma the courage, and her family the generosity and needed resignation.

Before entering the Novitiate of the Sisters of Providence at Ruillé-sur-Loir, Irma went to Soulaines to spend some time with Mother Theodore Guérin, who had been appointed by her superiors to found the mis-

sion in far-away Indiana. Of Mother Theodore, Irma wrote to her family:

Mother Theodore is as good, amiable, and gracious as I expected. She is tall and well-formed, but her beautiful black eyes do not make her the beauty that her cousin described her to be. Perhaps I have come too late to see her in her splendor . . . . "the sun is declining."

To her sister Cecile:

I shall not speak of your letter, my beloved sister, otherwise my eyes would resemble Lia's. I am beginning my religious education. I do not even know the A B C's of community life. I have found with Mother Theodore two very sweet and good young Sisters. They have informed me of the days of labor, especially of humiliation, that await me at Ruillé. It will cost me much to learn that I am nothing—nothing, less than nothing, since I am culpable. How my self-love is going to scream! But I feel that to renounce myself, I must make desperate efforts. With the grace of God I will make them. I am called to high perfection. Ordinary perfection will not suffice for me in those distant countries, and God has brought me here that I may learn to die before causing other souls to live.

And to her sister Eugénie:

Imagine Mother Theodore taking me aside last evening and, after a few words concerning my appearance, saying to me: "My dear child, I believe you are not vain of your exterior, but you have too much consideration for your intellect." I blushed like a cock. Think of it! At the first glance she had guessed my weakness. She advised me not to display such amiability. I was amazed; but I am prepared for anything. I proposed to become a simpleton; but she would not agree to that. Finally, today I have not uttered a single witticism. Please tell this to Cecile. How clear-sighted Mother Theodore is! I have promised to be so simple at Ruillé that they will think me like everybody else, if not less—I whose vein of wit is always open, I from whom it had escaped in such sallies for eight days! Mother Theodore told me my style was too poetic when I wrote to her. What will it be then when Mother Mary sees my letters? They are going to flay me alive. I hear myself scream from here. You are undoubtedly astonished that I relate such nonsense today. Ah! you see I can say everywhere that I love you, I pray for you, think of you; and behold, it is the last time I shall open my heart to you on the subject of wit, for I must not speak of a thing I shall not be supposed to possess.



Mother House of the Sisters of Providence  
Ruillè-sur-Loir  
Where Sister St. Francis made her novitiate





During the month Irma spent at Soulaines, there developed between herself and Mother Theodore a union of heart and desire that later accomplished great things for God and souls. In December Mother Theodore took Irma to the Novitiate at Ruillé-sur-Loir. In her first letter from her new home Irma wrote:

At last I am at Ruillé, my dear Mother,—this Ruillé of which I was so much afraid at a distance, and which pleases me so much now; yes, pleases me, because here I hope to learn to love God and to esteem myself at my real value. Here also, I shall learn absence, which is so difficult a science, especially since it is far from you that it has to be practiced for the first time.

I arrived at Ruillé last Monday night. All the doors were closed. It was not without a throbbing heart that I heard the unfastening of the bolts and saw this vast edifice, which, rising before me in the silence of the night, filled my heart with emotion. But the feeling I experienced in the church was deeper still. Mother Theodore took me there. Midnight struck—I had just spent my last day in the world. Oh! I did not regret it. I fell on my knees and wept, and before the altar of God I offered myself entirely, and you, also, my beloved Parents.

It is here in this chapel, I thought, that in a few short months I shall be clothed in the religious dress. Here I shall find happiness, for here is my God. Then I thought of you, of America, of heaven, of everything. My heart beat so loud that it seemed to me Mother Theodore must have heard it.

In March Irma wrote:

O my dear sister! to belong to God, to God alone,—this is so great a happiness that the anticipation alone makes my soul palpitate with joy.

And to a friend undecided regarding her vocation:

Had I been guided by my own light, I should not be here. I thought I had not even the shadow of a vocation to the religious life. My tastes, my love of liberty, all seemed an obstacle which I did not care to surmount. Yet, like you, I wished to belong to God, though I was not like you, undecided about my future. I did not think a higher destiny awaited me than to remain in the world and do good there. I was satisfied; but God wishes me to belong entirely to Him. One day He raised doubts in my soul; the next day I made them known. You know the rest. I should like you to partake of my happiness; it all consists in obedience. I have

an excellent superior. I tell her simply all that goes on in my soul. At first these avowals cost me much, but now I could not sleep quietly if there were anything in my heart which I had not the courage to tell. O my dear Marie, if you were here, she would unlock your strong box, not as a thief to steal your treasure, but as a wise administrator to utilize the riches that you bury in the depths of your soul—riches of which God will demand an account, and for which, if you continue, you will have but this answer to give: “Lord, I have heard that you are severe. I was afraid, and for this reason I buried my treasure, lest I should lose it.”

December 1840 brought a great joy to Irma. In letters to her dear ones at Saint Servan, she imparted the glad tidings.

I thought the year would close and another open without bringing me any exterior change but the Lord was mindful of me. He wishes to clothe me in His livery and employ me in His service. My dear Mother, could you but know how happy I am! I was afraid I might die before becoming a religious. I found I was advancing so slowly in the path I pursued that I feared I should never see the end; and besides, I felt myself so incapable of any employment or of any fatiguing occupation. But the Providence of God is the

Refuge of the miserable. . . . Bless your Irma, dearest Mama, and pardon all the trouble she has given you.

On the same day she wrote to her father:

How I bless the moment, my beloved Father, when, notwithstanding all the anguish of your heart, you courageously gave me to Our Lord! It had to be so; what seemed folly in the eyes of human prudence was the only means of bringing me here. Do not weep. God has counted all your tears, my beloved Father, and will transform them into pearls which shall beautify your crown throughout eternity. We shall receive the Holy Habit next Sunday, the 13th.

And to her sister Eugénie:

The day has come at last, the day I so little deserve to see, the day of my reception of the Holy Habit! If you only knew how happy I am, you, too, would be happy, for you are my second mother and will joyously offer me to Jesus by the hands of Mary. I ask a Communion from you and from my other sisters to thank God for the great favor He bestows upon me. You must put a beautiful bouquet before the shrines of our Blessed Mother and of our Guardian Angel. Please ask Mama to make a feast for my dear poor the day I take the Habit. Do not insist,

however, and tell her I desire only what she finds convenient to do. Recommend me also to the prayers of my good people.

She finished her letter with some lines to her sister Cecile:

If you could see my joy, Cecile, you would have, if not a vocation, at least the desire of being a religious. What you tell me has little of your old fancies for a vocation, but every one is not called to the same state. Abandon your heart to Jesus; behold Him Who comes to seek it.

And to her mother a few days after her reception, Irma wrote:

It is easy to describe the exterior ceremonies, but to tell you what passed in my soul would be utterly impossible. God alone, who sent torrents of joy into it, can know the sentiments of gratitude and tenderness that I felt. How I thank you, my dear Mother, for having given me to Our Lord. Father tells me in his excellent letter to prepare for combats, and he is right; for the life I have embraced is a life of sacrifice and death. But God gives a little foretaste of heaven to His soldiers to put them in good heart on the day they are clothed in His uniform.

## CHAPTER VII

### A DISAPPOINTMENT

“Dear soul, be strong,  
Mercy will come ere long,  
And bring her bosom full of blessings,  
Flowers of never-fading graces.” —*Crashaw*

All preparations for the departure of the missionaries to Indiana were complete. Mother Theodore and her companions were to leave Ruillé-sur-Loir in July, 1840. Irma, of course, was to be one of the number. As the time approached, Mother Mary, the Superior General, found Irma's health so delicate that she considered her unable to bear the hardships to be endured by the pioneers in the American forests. Bitter was this disappointment to the eager Irma. Though a novice, she had hoped to leave France with Mother Theodore and finish her Novitiate in America.

“Send me, Mother,” she entreated, “if I

die, what is the difference? I shall be a martyr.”

The letters written by Sister St. Francis Xavier, at this time, tell us with what heroism she accepted the sacrifice.

I saw in this decision the manifest will of God. I did not hesitate one moment, for God said to me interiorly that He wished me to wait. Shall I ever go to America? Shall I remain in France? I know not. God knows; that suffices. Since He is my Guide, it is not necessary that I should know the road. From the moment He takes on Himself the charge of me, I have no need to know what path will lead me to heaven. When I was at home I never felt uneasy or anxious about myself, for I was with good parents; and now it would be very strange if I had any disquietude about my future, being the beloved child of a rich and generous Father. O my dear Mother! Do not trouble yourself about me, my portion is excellent.

She wrote some days later:

They are gone! Last night at nine o'clock dear Mother Theodore and the companions of her exile left this dear home. I was calm until the end. I had, it seems, an attack of resignation to the holy will of God. I thought

that my Sisters in leaving had carried off all my happiness; but this morning, on going into the chapel, I saw that they had left me my most precious Treasure—my Savior Jesus and His holy Will. His altar is my refuge. I shall weep at His feet. I shall speak to Him of the absent ones and of my dear mission. I shall learn from Him how to practice the virtue of resignation; and, thus, I shall be happy. My future is to love and to suffer.

“So comfort blooms in pain, and peace in strife,  
And gain in loss.

What is the key to everlasting life?

A blood-stained cross.”

—*Kilmer*

The good parents sympathized with their beloved daughter in her disappointment and in referring to their views in the matter, she wrote:

You ask whether I desire to enter another Order. I answer, “No”. Last summer being unable to choose for myself, I begged God to select for me a religious Order in which I might save my soul and love Him more. Now that He has brought me here almost in spite of myself, after I had consulted Abbé Coëdro on this final step, I am convinced that it is here He wants me. True, there are older communities, and many which are



better known, but this is the one God has selected for me. It is His Providence they adore here. "Providence of God, repose of the heart! Providence of God, the way of heaven! Providence of God, calm in the tempests!" Every day we say this, and I repeat with all my heart, "Providence of God, for me the way of heaven, I abandon myself to Thee. I rest in Thy arms."

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONFIDENCE REWARDED

“Who hath ever trusted in the Lord and hath been confounded ?” —Eccl. II, 11

The summer of 1841 brought at last to Sister St. Francis Xavier, not only the longed-for permission to set out for Indiana, but the unhoped-for privilege of sealing her union with her Divine Spouse by the perpetual vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, and the wonderful favor of consecrating herself by special vow to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, which permission was granted to her by the saintly Bishop Bouvier of Le Mans. On July 14, 1841, she wrote:

God is going to grant me the greatest grace He can bestow, that of taking my vows before starting for America. Next Sunday, at eight o'clock Mass, I shall give myself irrevocably to God. O my father, my good

mother, my sisters, all who love me, rejoice with me! I am very happy. I am weeping but it is for joy. I did not ask for the favor, but God who desires to possess me inspired my Superiors with this thought, the accomplishment of which makes me so happy.

Later writing to her mother, she said:

July 23, 1841.

Sunday morning, my dearest mother, I said the eternal beautiful words, "I am Thine forever," for God whose mercy is without bounds has allowed me to take Perpetual Vows. What more shall I say? Ah! I have been permitted by special Vow to give myself to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I have always desired to belong, in a special manner to Him in this Sacrament of His Love, and He has deigned to grant my request. O how good, how generous He is! What will He be to us in heaven, when even here on earth He gives us so many proofs of His goodness!

## CHAPTER IX

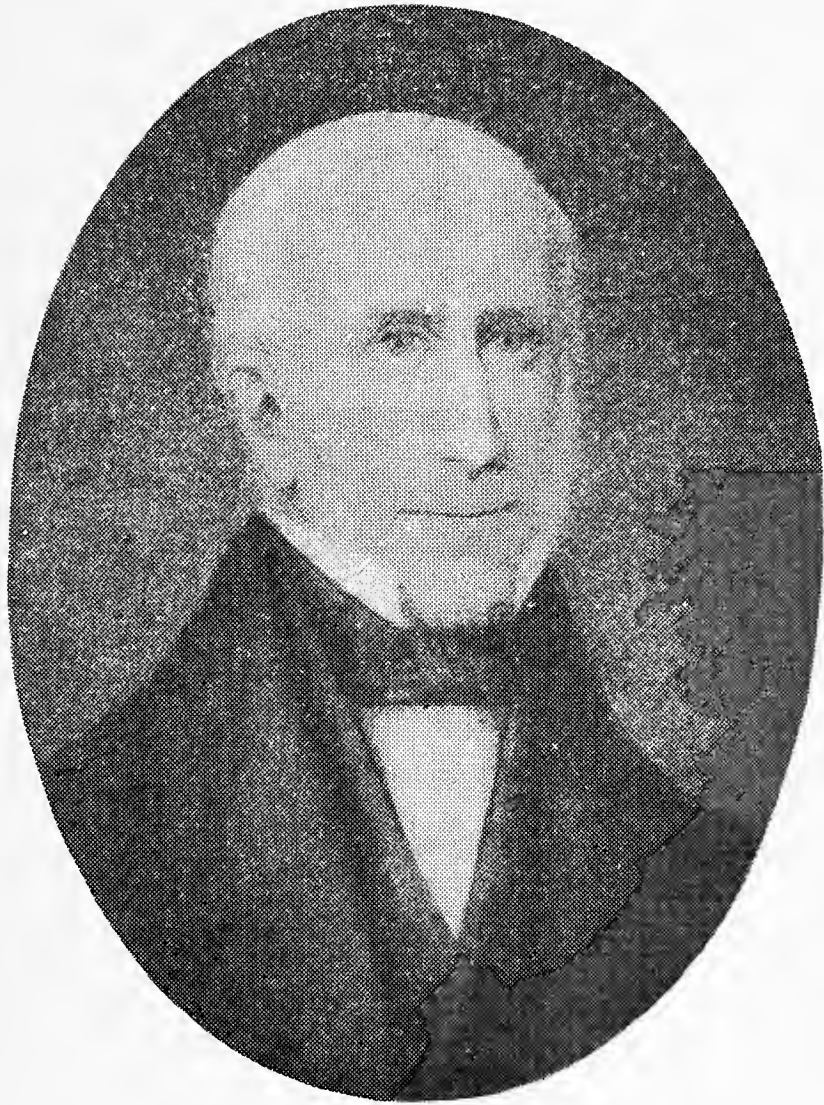
### OFF FOR THE FOREIGN MISSIONS

“Many waters cannot quench charity, neither can the floods drown it.” —Cant. II, 7

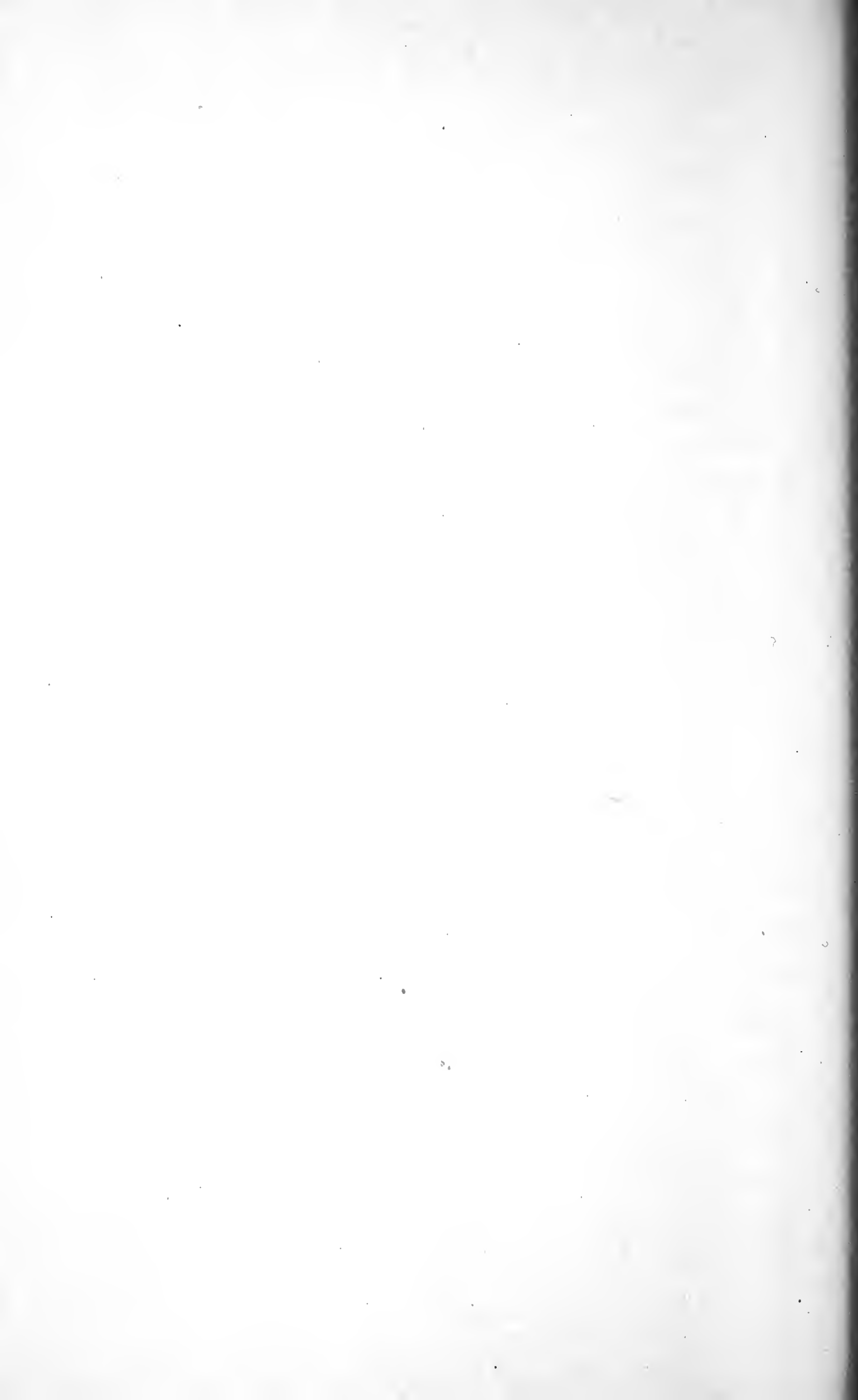
In August 1841, Sister St. Francis Xavier left Ruillé-sur-Loir to begin that journey which was to mean spiritual benison, untold riches to how many future generations! Truly after her were virgins to be brought to the King. The very setting out was auspicious. On the way to Havre in a stage coach, she met Monsieur Dupont, now known throughout the world as the Holy Man of Tours. And what a meeting it was for these two hearts so aflame with love of God and souls!

Writing to her mother of the journey, she said:

We spent the night as if waiting at the gate of heaven. We spoke continually of



M. Dupont, the Holy Man of Tours



Jesus and Mary. From eleven o'clock until midnight we made the Way of the Cross on an indulgenced crucifix. We took turns in meditating aloud and could not tear ourselves away from the Cross of Jesus, at the foot of which we found Mary, His Mother. Dear mother, if you could know what depth of faith, simplicity, and love there is in the heart of this man. He is spending his time making pilgrimages to shrines of our Blessed Lady. He intends soon to publish, from the data he has gathered, a book which will suggest a pilgrimage for every day in the year. He will see grandmother's little chapel, and he will see you. He is a saint, an angel, whom God has sent me on my journey to sustain and humble me; for I am as a worm before his profound faith and his sublime humility. Whenever he saw a church steeple, he would recite in Latin a prayer of St. Francis Assisi: "There and in all the churches of the world You are present, O Jesus!" His soul would then seem to melt away in thinking of the love of Our Lord. I went to sleep but he continued his meditations until morning; when I awoke he said to me, quoting a saint, "We must speak of God or keep silence." We did speak of our good Savior, and to profit by his counsels and example, I, in my turn, speak to you of Jesus, so kind, so generous to your child. Good-bye, my dear mother, be hopeful and thankful.

Pray much, redouble your prayers. Sunday evening or Monday morning I shall begin my great journey.

M. Dupont, in his turn, was strongly impressed by the ardent love and the familiarity with divine things which he discovered in his fervent traveling companion, and three years later in writing to Father Sorin, the saintly founder of Notre Dame, he said, "I am sending a copy of this beautiful work (the Life of Marie Eustelle) to my dear Sister St. Francis Xavier. She can understand and appreciate the great love of Marie Eustelle for our good Savior Jesus."

Sister St. Francis Xavier was often called the Marie Eustelle of Indiana. One of her saintly contemporaries wrote:

In the first glance at the Life of Marie Eustelle, I noticed a striking resemblance to our dear Sister St. Francis, and in reading the Life I discovered much that reminded me of the letters I have received from our dear Sister St. Francis Xavier. The love of both for the Holy Eucharist, their familiarity, their tender raptures humbled me on account of my coldness.

Sister St. Francis sailed from Havre, August 8, 1841, bound at last for America.



On the 28th writing to her sister Cecile, she says:

You asked me to keep a journal, dear sisters. I shall epitomize in two lines the first twenty days of my voyage: Sea-sickness reduced me to the state of an infant in swaddling clothes; this is the unvarnished truth. I could not help myself in any way; I was cared for by the good Ladies of the Sacred Heart and our American negress, Rebecca. I gave the latter a medal of the Blessed Virgin, which she put around her neck. I preach English sermons to her; you can imagine how eloquent they are.

To her mother, Irma wrote:

In Sight of New York,  
Sept. 12, 1841.

Blessed be God! We are now near New York, and by the time I finish this letter we shall have arrived after five weeks of the most happy and peaceful voyage that our heavenly Father could give us; not a single stormy day. The sea has not been so bad, even for a quarter of an hour, as it was from Honfleur to Havre. The upsetting those three leagues gave me, made me write to the Superior General that I certainly could not reach New York alive. I predicted my death so positively that now I scarcely dare tell her I am still living. You ask me for my

journal. I have sent it to Cecile in three lines, and I have given Louis the exterior news.

News of my soul would please you perhaps, yet more, my dearest mother. Well, I shall tell you that the weather was but an image of the peace I felt during our happy voyage. It is true, I was not able to enjoy the beauties of nature; once only did I see the sun set and the moon rise; during three weeks it was impossible for me to look at the water two minutes, and even afterwards I could not look out over the vast expanse of the sea without feeling sick. Still, I received Holy Communion as often as we had Mass, which happiness God gave me nine times. When my health permitted, I followed the exercises of my good companions. All six of us were in a little cabin that served as a chapel, recreation room, and confessional. I would you could know how happy we are when our Divine Savior comes into our little cabin to encourage and strengthen us.

We have very poor ornaments; our chalice is copper, but the priest is gold; he has the heart of an Apostle. . . . O my beautiful vocation! If I could understand it well! Help me by your prayers. Remember I am working for the whole family. . . . Yes, to gain souls to God and to correspond with my sublime vocation I must make sacrifices.

I have prayed much for all of you, and I

offered all of the sufferings of my seasickness for your intention. Laugh at this offering if you wish. . . . . I do not forget that the 13th is your feast, as well as my dear Eugénie's, whom I embrace with all the others.

. . . . . On leaving Havre the only sensation I experienced was one of haste. We left so hurriedly that I had no time to write to Ruillé, nor even to say good-bye to the religious of Saint Thomas. I arrived at New York as if I were returning from my drawing lesson at Lorette, or from the little grove of Providence at the Mother-House. I do not understand myself. I seem to be as well acquainted with America as if I had left it only yesterday. I have no other emotions than those which show me the land as one where I must make Jesus known and loved; as for the rest I feel nothing. My beautiful vocation quickens my heart-beats every time I think of it; but the words "country," "foreign land," have not yet affected me. God performs miracles. And how good it is to trust in Him!

Despite the exceptional weather that Our Lord granted the little colony which left Havre for New York on board the Iowa, Sister St. Francis suffered greatly from seasickness and had a most painful voyage. She

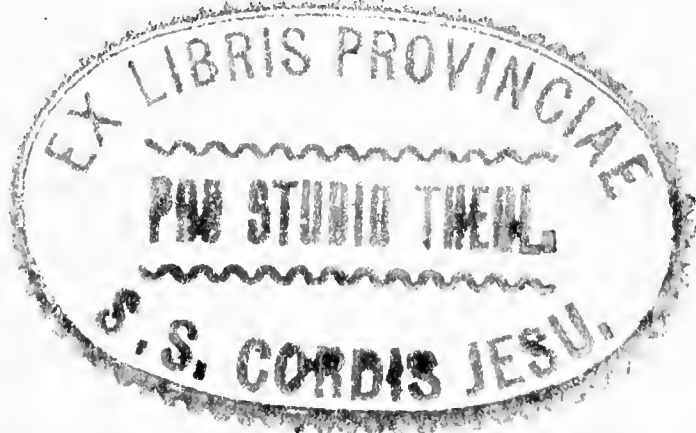
went to Confession every day, believing herself on the point of appearing before her Judge. She was not alone in this opinion. One day when the Ladies of the Sacred Heart had left her as if dead in her cabin, she overheard a discussion between the Superior and the captain as to what should be done with her body.

From New York, where she was the guest of Madame de Gallitzin at the Sacred Heart Convent, Sister St. Francis Xavier wrote to Mother Theodore Guérin:

My thoughts, more rapid than the steamboat, often go to visit you at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. I offer myself to you; I speak of the happiness I experience in finding myself, at last, where God has called me from the beginning. I make acquaintance with my new Sisters, I embrace and find the same old companions. I distribute all the good wishes that France sends you. Edified at the piety and devotion of all, I am ashamed at coming so late, and having no share in your first privations; but we look up to heaven and say, "God has willed it thus. May His Will be forever blessed!" Oh, yes, may He be forever blessed! I came when He sent me, and because He sent me. Dear holy Obedience! My good Savior Jesus, oh! how

I shall endeavor to please Him, to thank Him for having kept me for my beautiful vocation, for Vincennes! I do not know what He will be able to do with me, for I cannot see for what part of His service I am fit, unless at Saint Mary's they build with reeds. My good Mother, if I am wanting in strength and in virtue, at least I come to offer to you, as to one who holds the place of God in my regard, my good will, my whole life. Receive all, for I only come to obey God in everything and everywhere.

The voyage and the incidents from New York to Indiana, she describes in letters of charming style with a mingling of wit and piety, of hopes and fears, but always with unwavering trust in Divine Providence.



## CHAPTER X

### SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS

“God’s holy angels faithfully have watched

. . . . .

The virgin forest, destined to surround  
A holy convent,  
Where love should dwell, and God’s sweet  
providence  
Should hallow all the land.”

—*Sister Mary Genevieve Todd*

Mother Theodore Guérin, with five Sisters from Ruillé-sur-Loir, had made the foundation in the forests of Indiana on October 22, 1840. Poverty and sufferings were the portion of these valiant six. To join them in the beginnings of a work, that today pays monumental tribute to heroic sacrifice and labor, Sister St. Francis Xavier left her beloved France, arriving at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, November 15, the feast of St. Gertrude, a coincidence indeed, when one considers the likeness between Indiana’s

ardent lover of Jesus in the Eucharist, a soul that basked in God's sunshine of confidence and joy, and the Saint whose heart delighted the Heart of her God.

To her Mother she wrote:

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods,  
November 17, 1841.

My dearest Mother,

At last I am at Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. Now, more than ever, I can say, I believe in God, the Father Almighty! I arrived at Vincennes, the ninth of November. Six days later, I heard in the forest the bell at Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods sounding the Angelus. A few minutes later, I was there—there in the dear little Chapel with my Mother Theodore, thanking our Lord Jesus for all His tender mercies, and offering Him the remainder of a life which belongs to Him by so many titles.

In one of her first letters to France, Sister St. Francis said:

I feared that during my absence they had taken all the poverty; but, if our Sisters have borne the greatest part, some remains yet for me. . . . . You would have to come here to know how much Jesus has loved us in insti-

tuting the Holy Eucharist. Four years He dwelt in a little cabin scarcely high enough for one to stand erect.

I can truly say, "My God and my All!" How sweet these words are! Say them with me, and whenever the thought of me afflicts you, remember that I belong to God without reserve and forever. Since I am His I cannot be lost, for not one of those who have been given to Him has perished. He will give me back to you in heaven, and if I fulfill well my beautiful vocation, I shall not be alone. I shall present you my little children of Indiana, whom you will have gained to Jesus Christ through me.

In January, 1842, Sister St. Francis wrote:

As we had delightful weather last Sunday, I went with the postulants for a walk over our grounds. I had not yet seen the effect produced by our little dwelling in the midst of the forest. It is very pretty, I assure you. Looking around I saw on all sides forests, limitless, it seemed to me, as the ocean; near by, between Providence and the boarding school, was the ravine spanned by a rustic bridge; to the south, the little dwelling where the faithful assemble for High Mass and Vespers; a beautiful sky overhead; in the distance some white crosses, reminding us of the road over which we must one day pass to arrive at our true country; a flock of



birds, sheep in a meadow cleared by our Sisters; cows and peaceful oxen, and, nearer the house, dogs and chickens. All this mingled vision of grandeur and littleness, life and death, could easily excite an imagination less impressionable than mine. But to the glory of the God I serve, the God of miracles, I can say that at that moment I thought of Saint Servan, of Lorette, of you all; and yet I did not weep. But when my eyes fell on the poor little Chapel in which our God, the God of the universe, dwells for love of us, ah! then my tears flowed—tears of gratitude. What indeed have I left? What have I lost? I am ashamed to have made so much ado over so small a sacrifice; for, in truth, is He not rich enough who possesses God? Our life is short, eternity so long, what matters a little more or less of happiness in our exile?

God, who knew Sister St. Francis Xavier's desires, permitted her to have a large portion of the treasure of poverty she so much esteemed. When she came to America, the house was not finished. The Sisters still lodged in the garret, and Irma shared in all their privations. At the end of a year, however, their dwelling was almost completed; but, before arranging shelter in it for themselves, they opened classes there for stu-

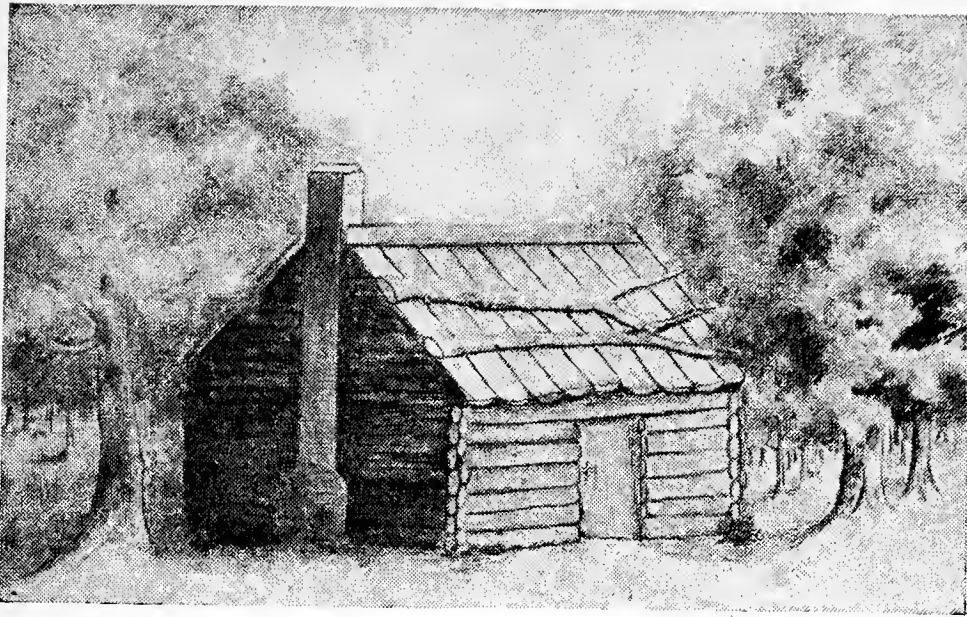
dents, who were first received in July 1841.

In the fall of 1842, the barn containing their provisions for the winter was destroyed by fire. Sister St. Francis wrote thus to her mother:

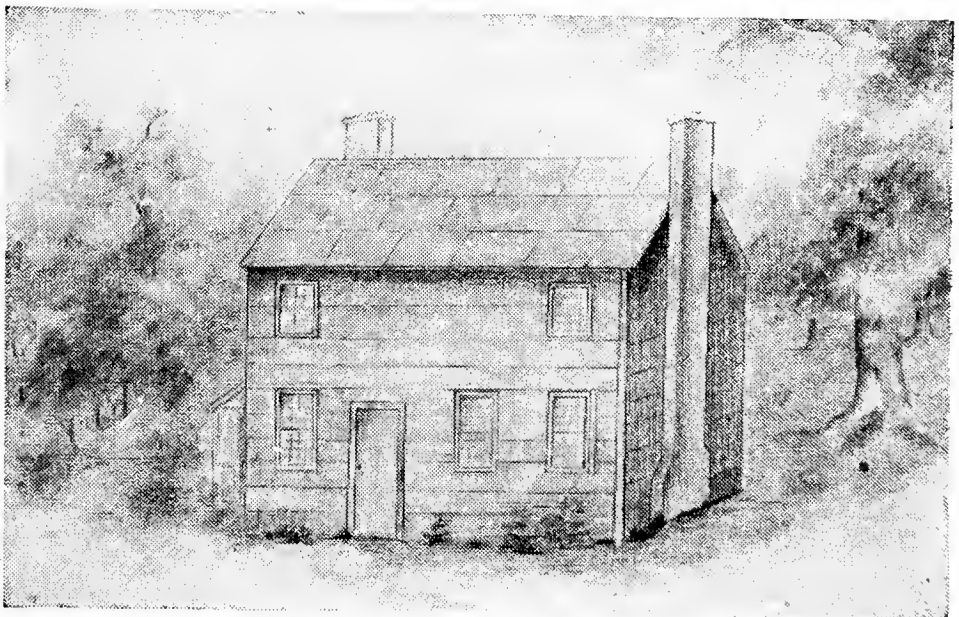
Give thanks to God, since He deigns to try us. After the fire we were three days without bread; and yet, my health is better than in France. American potatoes are excellent; and, besides, God can perform miracles for the stomach as well as for the heart.

On arriving in America, Sister St. Francis' first occupation was to give drawing-lessons to the pupils of the boarding-school; she also taught sacred history, a study for which she had always showed a marked predilection. Later she was employed in teaching catechism to the little boys, and in giving religious instructions to the pupils and postulants. She assisted Mother Theodore by attending to part of her correspondence, and she had the care of the novitiate for some six years before she was officially placed at the head of it in 1848.

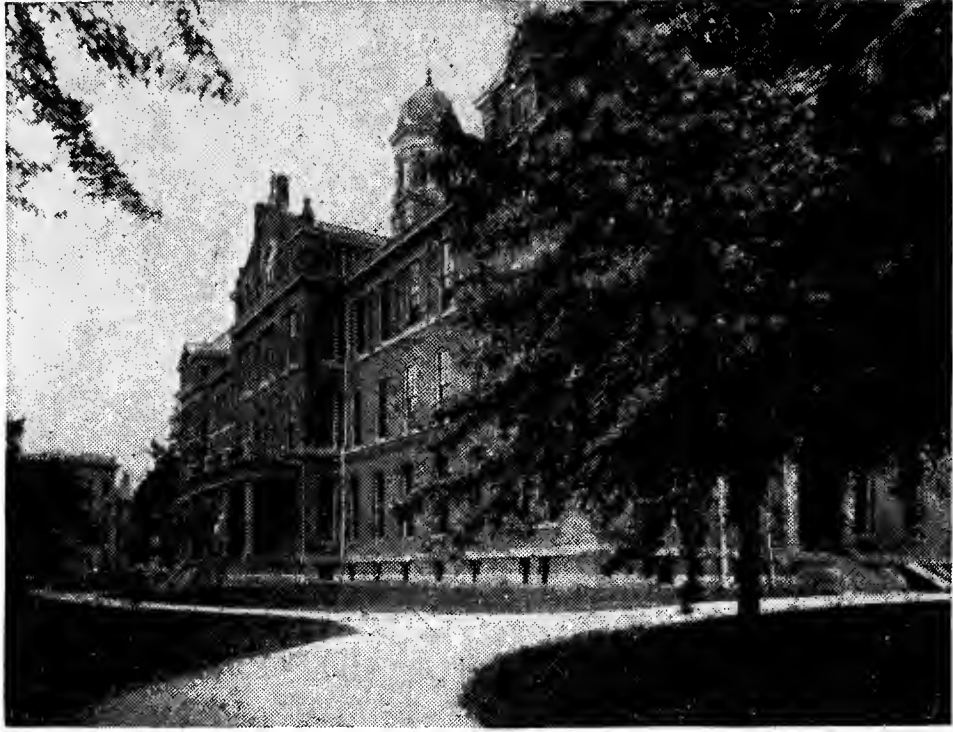
The Bishop of Vincennes, knowing Sister St. Francis' zeal for souls, commissioned her to establish in Indiana the work of the Prop-



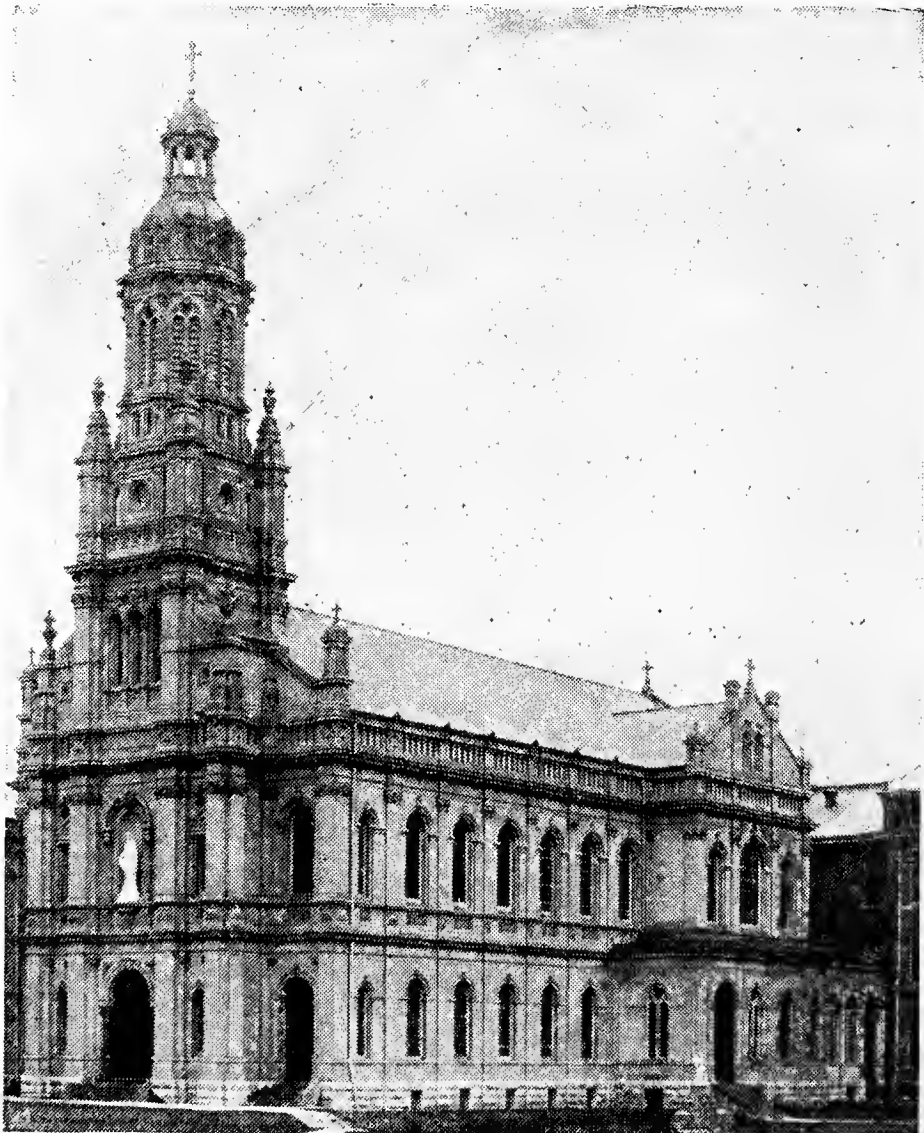
First Chapel 1840



First Convent 1840



Providence Convent 1923



Conventual Church 1923

agation of the Faith. Under her direction the Sisters in a short time succeeded in forming forty circles. With the assistance of the Bishop and of Mrs. Sadlier, widely known as an author and translator, Sister St. Francis established a library for the poor, hoping that the facility of obtaining good books might preserve them from the danger of seeking or accepting bad ones.

The poverty of Jesus in the Tabernacle caused keen suffering to Sister St. Francis Xavier. In order to assist the missionaries, she established the "Work of Mary in the Temple," founded to procure by labor, or by gifts, the means of supplying suitably the needs of the altars and of the missionaries.

At the request of Sister St. Francis Xavier, her friends in the cities of Rennes and Tours gave, collected, and made a great many articles necessary for service in poor churches. Another work to which Irma devoted herself, almost upon her arrival in America, was that of making known the merciful Heart of Mary, the refuge of sinners.

I have the happiness of helping to propagate devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. When I passed through New

York, I lent the Manual of the Archconfraternity to Madame Parmentier, and explained the object of this excellent work. And on Assumption Day of this year (1842), the Church of St. Paul in Brooklyn had the privilege of celebrating its first solemn act in honor of the Heart of our Immaculate Mother. Madame Parmentier tells us that nearly all the persons in the church associated themselves in the work and received Communion for this intention.

Fixed employments and regular work were not sufficient for Irma's zeal; she united, if not always actively, at least in heart and desire, with all that her Sisters undertook for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. She had given her whole heart to her new country at the moment when, Father Sorin having said, "Sister, behold us now on American soil," she fell on her knees and lovingly kissed the earth, which Our Lord had given her to cultivate. Saint Mary-of-the-Woods had become her new home; the Superiors and Sisters a second family loved equally with the first. In the religious life, her affection, without losing any of its ardor, merely extended to a greater number of subjects. She had no greater pleasure than



to serve as a bond between her family in France and the one in America, and to establish a relation of friendship between them.

In a letter to her mother we find this passage:

Need I tell you to work for the success of our mission? Is it not yours? Have you not given it your most precious gold? Oh! when you offer your daughter, you can refuse nothing afterwards. Is not our community like a new family for you? Whenever you are in need of prayers, we are all here to help you. Mother Theodore loves you as we love at home.

## CHAPTER XI

### AN OVERFLOWING FOUNTAIN

“You shall draw waters with joy out of the Saviour’s fountains.” Isaias XII, 3

Next to the conversion of sinners, nothing attracted the zeal of Sister St. Francis Xavier more than leading souls to perfection and to the love of Our Lord.

One of Sister St. Francis’ novices has written:

Holy, lovable, irresistibly so, Sister St. Francis had been described to me. Many times had I painted imaginary portraits of my future Mistress. I had made her spirituelle, haloed with sanctity, charming, ideal, with beaming eyes and smile. It was the evening of October 22, 1850. The sun was declining that beautiful autumn day when I arrived at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. My feet scarcely touched the earth as I eagerly hastened towards “Providence” where, await-



ing me at the entrance, stood a Sister. No one need have told me her name. What a countenance was hers! At first there seemed to be no features, so luminous was the heavenly expression. The transparent complexion was illumined by large brown eyes, well set, and lighted with a heavenly sweetness surely God-given to draw souls to Himself. Alas, for my imaginary portrait! Vain attempt to picture her who clasped me to her heart in that first embrace of love. Holy? Yes, sanctity shone in her face, but it was a sanctity that made itself all things to all men to gain all to Christ. Fortunate I, to have found a friend for time and for eternity, to have my lot in life cast with Sister St. Francis Xavier.

Soon I made the acquaintance of my Sister-novices. Know that the golden age lives again in the novitiate of every religious community. Moreover, ours was a novitiate with a saintly Mistress. We breathed an atmosphere of holiness and happiness, and drank joy from an ever-flowing fountain. That we were human and young, Sister St. Francis knew, and she was human and youthful with us, spiritualizing our lives and guarding us with the mercy and love of the Divine Master while she entered into our recreations with the zest of a child. Our feast days were days we always employed usefully. Sister St. Francis was ever our

model for industry. At the noon recreation she painted water colors, busily plying her brush as she amiably, even merrily, talked and laughed. If we loved our recreations for the merry times we had, we loved even more, for their spirit of divine unction, Sister St. Francis' instructions.

After sixty-six years there yet remains with me the impression that Sister St. Francis' chief characteristic was the unconsciousness of her own holiness, a holiness that edified, but never rebuked us, never made us unnatural or uncomfortable. Fortunately for us young Americans, God had sent us a saintly woman with a cosmopolitan spirit, a woman so unmeasured in His Divine love that she lived in its elements as a creature. All her actions seemed a breath with the Divine Spirit, so that she might have said, "I live, now, not I, but Christ liveth in me." She was indeed an Apostolic Woman.

On October 20, 1852, Elvire le Fer de la Motte arrived at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. Great was Sister St. Francis' joy to receive this loved sister whom she had not seen for eleven years. To her mother she wrote:

October 22, 1852.

At last I have seen her and embraced her. My mother! I did not recognize her countenance, but how soon I recognized her heart.

It was the family—whole, entire. Dear Mother Mary had written me, “You will find it in Elvire.” And I did, or rather I have never lost it, for it is imprinted in the depths of my soul—this dear family—it is engraved there; but Elvire is the frame wherein those beloved beings seem to live and speak. Father Corbe and the Sisters all think her charming, and old Sister Olympiade has become ten years younger.

Three days later Irma added:

Elvire amuses us by her naïveté and does many things in the wrong way. When I undertake to set her right, she tells me that Mother has given her full liberty for a week and that she is not to be scolded till after that time. Like an evening breeze, she has brought the fragrance of my native land to the home of my exile. My heart cannot express its gratitude to God for myself and for my sister, for the happiness of a religious vocation prevails over every other feeling, and Elvire is here to share it and the hundredfold!

Sister St. Francis Xavier cherished her dear novices with the tenderness of a mother, and to their willing hearts she imparted her own love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. She often repeated, “Where my treasure is,

there is my heart,—with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.” She told them:

When the love of liberty assails you, think of Our Lord wrapped in swathing bands by the Blessed Virgin and laid in a manger. He could not even move His little arms. Think also of the chains with which He was bound, and ask Him by this suffering endured for you, to accept the sacrifice of your liberty. See Him nailed to the Cross; He could not even wipe away a single drop of blood that flowed into His Sacred Eyes.

But I need not send you away to Jerusalem to find Jesus a prisoner. Look from the window of the room where you study, and you can see the prison of Jesus. How narrow the tabernacle is! He Who could fly among the stars of the cherubim is enclosed in a little silver case! Though He could enjoy the privilege of glorified bodies, He sacrifices all for you. Consider Who has made the greater sacrifice, He in the tabernacle, or you in your employment. But to be a prisoner for you is not enough; He delivers Himself to you, and in Holy Communion, makes Himself your captive. Do you still regret your liberty, your indulgence?

I answer for you to Our Lord, “No, no.” May you be until death perfect victims of His will and His love! When we have Jesus, we have all. If we shed tears,

Jesus has shed His Blood. Let us love Jesus Who has suffered so much for us. Let us love Him in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. May this sacrament be our strength, our refuge, our all, as it is the pledge of our eternal happiness.

The questful zeal of Sister St. Francis Xavier was not confined to her religious household. To her cousin Cecile who was very much interested in art she wrote:

Let us paint Jesus Christ on the canvas of our hearts. He is so beautiful! Let us look at Him in the sweet light of faith, in the pure day of His love. Our brushes are unskillful, our colors dull, our canvas badly stretched, but it is Jesus Who is our Model. We shall take Him with us in Heaven, and the Eternal Father will recognize the cherished image.

God will take care of you if you abandon yourself entirely to Him. I say entirely, without wishing to keep for yourself His heavenly consolations, not even His peace, if it is His will to take it away. This is easily said, I know. But to carry it into execution, we must go to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. He has never refused me anything. Tell Him that I sent you, and that I have promised you His assistance. Tell Him that you no longer wish to be concerned about yourself, that you renounce the

desire to find peace, that you wish for Him and for Him alone. Your soul will then repose in this thought: "You, my Jesus, are happy. You are eternally happy." Yes, let your heart indulge this sweet thought, "God is happy!" and then endeavor to contribute to His glory by all the means in your power. Go to Jesus with confidence. He is so good, and loves you so much. If one of you were thinking of coming to Vincennes, she would like to talk about Vincennes. Well, you intend to go to Heaven, and Jesus is the Bishop of that diocese. Speak of it, therefore, to Him often, for He alone knows the road that will lead you there.

"He is all lovely, such is my Beloved." —Cant. V, 16

The abundance of her heart overflowed always with love for the Eucharist. In writing to a missionary priest she said:

Like you, I am hard to please. Even Bossuet, when he speaks of the divine subject, the Blessed Sacrament, is not able to satisfy me. Only the heart of a seraph should direct the pen in treating this Mystery of Love, and how much would still remain unexpressed. Happy are you priests to be initiated so intimately into the knowledge of this ineffable Sacrament; truly, it is not too much that you pray for us at the altar. To be a priest is more than to be a king; it is more than to be

an angel. The human reason is lost in the depth of this dignity. I love to pray for priests; to pray for them is almost like praying for Jesus Christ Himself; at least it is to pray with Him Who so much desires that His priests love Him, and that they make Him loved. How happy we are to work for so good a Master, for Him, Who is most grateful for the good He makes us do! What will be the reward if the work is so sweet?

To her father she wrote:

When I think that, like myself, you possess Jesus in the Eucharist, I do not know what can be wanting to you, except the knowledge of your riches.

And to one who consulted her about a vocation to the religious life, Sister St. Francis said:

After Communion, when in silence with Jesus, ask Him to make known what He wills you to do; and if He asks the sacrifice of all that you love, tell Him to take your heart, if you have not the courage to give it to Him.

Years afterwards Sister Mary Ambrose, one of Sister St. Francis' novices, wrote:

Sister's devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to the Saints, especially to St. Joseph

was inspiring. But how describe her tender, her intense love of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament? During prayer she seemed wrapt out of herself, totally unconscious of her surroundings. Of a piece with her union with God were her constant gentleness, her patience in trials, and her considerateness for others.

So implicit was the confidence of the Sisters in the influence of their holy Sister St. Francis with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament that they entrusted to her many of their petitions. They relied on her especially in regard to the feeble health of Mother Theodore Guérin, even going so far as to say that Sister St. Francis would depart first, for she would never let Mother Theodore die. And so it happened. When all natural hope had been abandoned, Sister Saint Francis would prostrate herself before the Blessed Sacrament, and remain motionless for an hour or longer. Returning to the bedside of the invalid, she wore so heavenly an expression of perfect calm as to inspire the beholders with confidence, and spoke with such unquestioning faith as to reassure the fearful.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE COMING OF THE BRIDEGROOM

"I am come into my garden, O my sister, my spouse."

-Cant. V, 1.

The latter part of January, 1856 brought sad, anxious days to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. The seraphic Sister Saint Francis lay at death's door. Though in intense pain, she spent her last nights on earth in sweet raptures with the Well-Beloved of her soul. "Jesus, O my Jesus," she would murmur, "Jesus, my Love! Jesus, my Jesus, how good you are! Jesus, You know that I love You! I believe, O my God, I believe! I am in Heaven! I am in Heaven! I see God! Oh! how beautiful! I see God! I am in God; all is in God." Then, remaining silent for a few moments she continued, "O my God, if such be Your will that I return to earth to begin again to live, to suffer, to die, for Your love, I consent, my God. Where You wish,

and as You wish ; but I am to go to Heaven! I believe! I believe!" During the days that followed, she continued to repeat, "Forever, O my God! and for so little, for so little! So much happiness for so little!" In such exaltation of spirit she awaited the summons to the eternal nuptials.

Sister Mary Joseph, Sister St. Francis Xavier's sister, Elvire, in writing to their mother of Irma's last illness said:

She was anointed on Tuesday the 29th. The next day she asked to speak with Mother. "I told you," she said, "what I saw the other day, but I did not finish. Our Lord called me by my name. He said, 'Irma, all this is for you; it shall be yours, but not yet.'" "Ah!" exclaimed Mother, "what joy! You will not leave us, then, my dear child?" "Yes, He said to me, 'You will stay a day or two longer, and then Heaven will be yours forever.'" . . . . On Thursday she became so weak that our Mother assembled the community and recited the prayers for the agonizing. For a little time she seemed better, but soon the exhaustion returned. All the Sisters came in turn to give her the last embrace. They placed in her hands her crucifix and the formula of her Vows. All this time I held her in my arms and Mother

recited the prayers. About two o'clock in the afternoon, she turned her dying eyes toward Heaven, and I was still waiting for her last sigh when Mother Theodore said, "De Profundis!" It was I who closed her eyes. Even after death she was still beautiful. Her face was sweet and composed. In her hands she held the formula of her Vows. At her feet we placed a wreath of white roses. All the pupils and villagers came to see her, even the non-Catholics asked to share in this favor.

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, the hour of two in the afternoon of January thirty-first is kept in loving memory of that day when the Heavenly Bridegroom came for His faithful Spouse of the Blessed Sacrament.

## CHAPTER XIII

### LINGERING FRAGRANCE

A saintly life in cloistered ways,  
Lends fragrance sweet to endless days.

To Madame le Fer de la Motte, Mother Theodore wrote:

The effect caused by Sister St. Francis Xavier's death is remarkable. She still continues to make Our Lord loved. I should like to send you some of the letters we have received during the last two weeks. Love broke the bonds that held her soul captive; it was an excess of love that caused her death. . . . . What glory for you, Madame, to be the mother of a saint, of a saint of the first order; for she is, I am sure, very high in the kingdom of heaven. She prays for you there, for God knows how much she loves you. It is said in the world that religious do not know any longer how to love. This is a great mistake. I am sure that among all your good and devoted children, there is not one heart more devoted than

was your dear Irma's. Is there another that possesses the same power of loving? I doubt it very much."

And Father Corbe, the ecclesiastical superior of the community, in writing to Madame le Fer said:

For a long time we by our prayers contended for her with Heaven. But alas! too soon, according to our human views, has the Divine Spouse taken to Himself the one whom He cherished with so many graces. Her spirit, however, remains with us and continues to animate the companions she has left.

Sister Eudoxie, Mistress of Novices at Ruillé, wrote to Irma's sisters at Saint Servan:

My memory faithfully retains the many occasions of edification Sister St. Francis Xavier gave us while among us, and I love to repeat them to my novices in order to animate them to fervor and love of duty. Never since I am mistress of novices have I come across a soul so strong, so generous, and, I may add, so privileged.

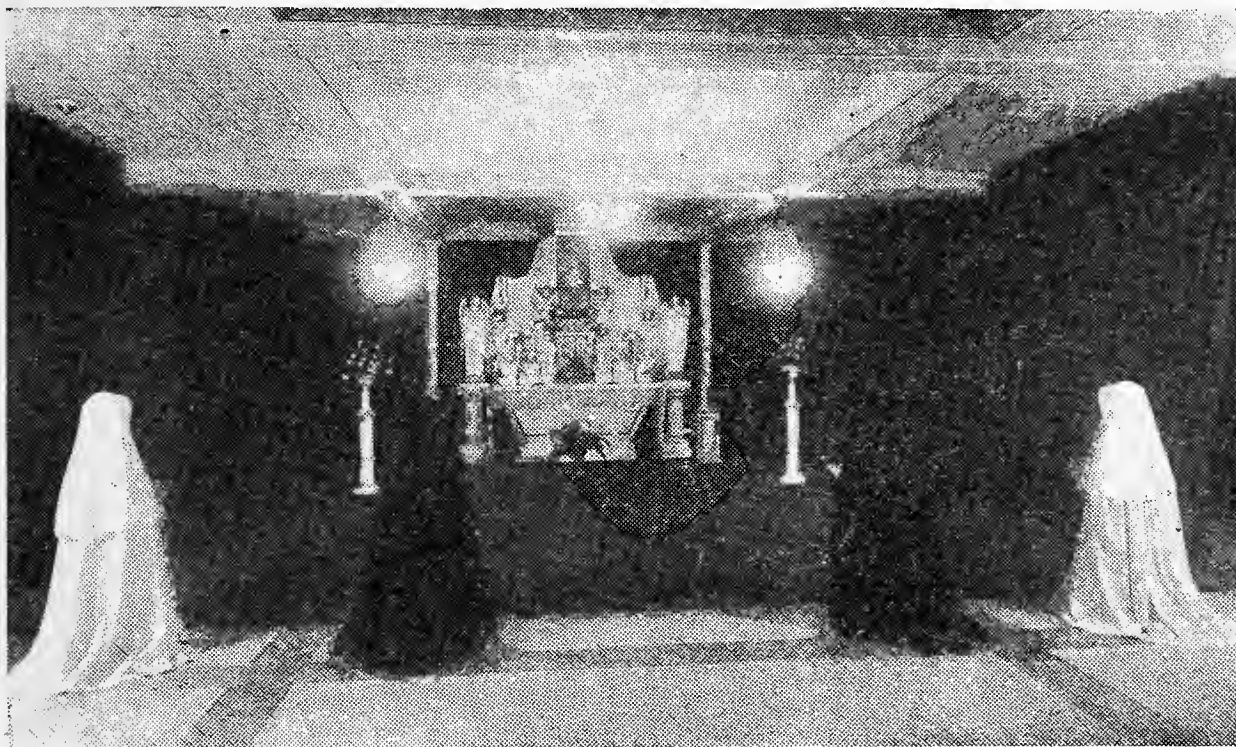
To one of the Sisters who had been a novice under Sister St. Francis, Mother Theodore wrote:

All the elect die in the love of God, but it is the privilege of few to die of love of God. Love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was so strong in our dear Sister that it broke the bonds which united her soul to her delicate body; and to die of love of God is the surest way of going straight to Him. It is true, my dear Sister, that I feel very keenly the loss I have sustained. I could not present to Our Lord any one who was so dear to me as was my beloved Sister St. Francis; but she was truly too pure, too holy, too much inflamed with the love of God to remain with us any longer. O how little, how small I feel in thinking of my dear and beloved Sister St. Francis.

In notifying Father Gleizal, S. J., of their bereavement, Mother Theodore says:

It cost me a great deal, my venerated Father, to say, "Thy Will be done, my God." Yes, it costs much to lose a subject like Sister St. Francis Xavier. You can realize it, for you knew that heart all on fire with love for God. You knew with what zeal she labored to form Jesus in the hearts of others. During the fifteen years of her life at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, we saw her walk with a firm step in the constant practice of perfection, without ever relaxing or showing those vicissitudes of good and bad days so common among persons of our own age. She was

THE PRIVILEGE OF PERPETUAL EXPOSITION  
OF THE  
BLESSED SACRAMENT  
WAS GRANTED TO  
THE SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE  
NOVEMBER 23, 1913, BY  
HIS HOLINESS, POPE PIUS X.



First Chapel of the Perpetual Adoration

*Tell the Sisters to pray much for the Pope, the Church, and the whole world.—POPE PIUS X.*





always a fervent religious, and I dare to say to you, Father, the most perfect I have ever known.

Mother Theodore Guérin wrote of Sister St. Francis' death to the Sisters on the missions:

Her death was an echo of her life. The divine fire with which her soul burned sent forth only sparks during life; but when the near prospects of heaven had taken away that reserve which caused this humble soul to hide its treasure, when her heart was no longer able to contain its ardent love, a torrent of burning aspirations burst from her lips with such vehemence that it would seem enough to break the bonds which united her soul to her body. In calling upon Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, her voice was so full of love, and her countenance so heavenly, that she appeared no longer to belong to earth; she was already in Heaven. I understood that this fruit of the garden of the Spouse had reached full maturity, and that He wished to gather it in.

Though this Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament departed long ago from Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, she has left there the fragrance of her virtues, and above all the example and inspiration of her tender love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. With what joy she

must now look down upon her beloved Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, so bountifully blessed with Eucharistic graces! Doubtless, she unites in spirit with the Sisters who hourly, day and night, pour out their love and adoration before the King of kings, in fulfillment of the blessed mission enjoined upon them by Pope Pius X, of holy memory, when in granting to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods the privilege of Perpetual Exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament, His Holiness bade them, "Pray much for the Pope, the Church, and the whole world."

On the feast of her patron, December third, 1907, the remains of Sister St. Francis Xavier were translated from the convent cemetery at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods to the crypt of the conventual church. The tomb is almost directly under the high altar and within a few feet of the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration, a most fitting abode for the earthly remains of her who loved with unbounded love her Eucharistic God. Here, daily, Sisters, students, and visitors come to honor and ask the intercession of the ardent lover of the Tabernacle, Sister St. Francis Xavier, Irma le Fer de la Motte, an apostle of the Blessed Sacrament.



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