

1818-1843: The Beginnings Of A Catholic City

Like a mountain climber on a craggy peak, the Catholic Church of 1815 had a tenuous hold on the Mississippi rivertown of St. Louis—with faith-filled hopes of a steady climb ahead, yet vulnerable at each new step.

This rough and tumble frontier St. Louis was still a jumble of building materials waiting to be turned into a thriving city. And, as any 21st century dreamer who has set out to build a cabin or a cathedral knows, original plans often get revised, rethought, penciled in and erased before a final structure begins to take shape. St. Louis and Catholicism would share growing pains—but revised blueprints were nothing new for the Church which had gone through centuries of change and was accustomed to finding that God had saved surprises around every corner.

In early 1815, in Louisiana, Andrew Jackson defeated the British at New Orleans...in Belgium, Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo...and in St. Louis, it was reported that Catholics in the area had "calloused hearts" and "extreme indifferentism." There were few priests, religion practice was spasmodic and the quality of faith was uneven. Then, on September 24, 1815, Pope Pius VII appointed Louis W.V. DuBourg Bishop of Louisiana and the Floridas.

Pioneers of Faith

Bishop DuBourg had been apostolic administrator of New Orleans but had not visited the Missouri territory, many hundred miles upriver. However, he asked and received permission to set up his episcopal see in St. Louis.

Following his consecration at the Church of St. Louis of the French in Rome, the bishop spent months in Europe recruiting priests and Sisters to work in the almost-unknown "wild west" of his new diocese. His first recruit, Father Felix De Andreis, gathered personnel to start a seminary, and enlisted a promising young priest, Father Joseph Rosati.

In 1816, DuBourg sent these two Vincentian priests and their small group—armed with a few books, religious articles, and a scant knowledge of the English language—to sail before him to the new diocese. They landed in Baltimore, made their way across dirt roads turned to quagmires by heavy rains, and then took a flatboat 500 miles downstream to Louisville.

Bishop Flaget of Bardstown, Kentucky, welcomed them and they spent the winter with him, teaching at the Bardstown Seminary and adjusting to the local food of cornbread and salt pork. By mid 1817, Bishop DuBourg and a larger group of recruits followed them to America, also landing in Baltimore. Before completing his journey, DuBourg asked Bishop Flaget to travel to St. Louis to make preparations for his group's arrival.

Flaget, De Andreis and Rosati headed out on horseback, were joined by Father Donatien Olivier at Kaskaskia, crossed the river to Ste. Genevieve and were welcomed by Father Henry Pratte, the first native-born priest of Missouri. Leaving De Andreis in Ste. Genevieve, the group continued on to St. Louis where they were shocked to find things in terrible shape.

Flaget's log seminary in the Kentucky woods looked like a southern mansion in comparison to the St. Louis church and rectory. The church was a tumbledown log building which needed a lot of repair and the rectory had no doors, no floors, no windows, no furniture. Bishop Flaget slept on a cot furnished by a neighbor and the rest slept on buffalo robes.

Calling together the local citizenry, Bishop Flaget asked them to plan to welcome their new bishop. Father Pratte managed to tidy up the rectory, which had been built in 1777—78, and put in a few windows and doors. Finally, on January 5, 1818, Bishop DuBourg arrived on the riverfront to an enthusiastic welcome by 2,500 residents and a joyous procession led his party to the sorry-looking "episcopal palace."

[St. Louis has a Bishop—Louis DuBourg](#)

Bishops DuBourg and Flaget changed into full pontifical robes and processed to the log church. With tears in his eyes, the kindly Flaget commended DuBourg to his people. DuBourg's first sermon won over all those in the crowded church, according to Father De Andreis, who wrote, "Kindness, dignity and suavity of manner...dissipated in a great measure every prejudice, and captivated all hearts."

But this was just the first brick to be laid in constructing DuBourg's diocese. His responsibility included areas on the gulf coast and the entire Louisiana Purchase, an expanse of 885,000 square miles—four times as large as the kingdom of France! In this vast area, there were only two small cities, New Orleans and St. Louis. Settlements did not go much farther than the waterways. Small towns in both Missouri and Illinois hugged the river and there was only one organized English-speaking parish—St. Mary's at Perryville in southeast Missouri.

Undaunted, Bishop DuBourg immediately planned to build a church, start a seminary, open schools and send missionaries to nearby Indian tribes. He was a European gentleman, born on the island of Santo Domingo but raised and educated in France.

He was cultured, refined and known as one of the most intellectual men in the country at that time. But one historian noted, "The bishop's optimism was equalled only by his imagination, which always bypassed the difficulties involved in the arrangements he proposed."

Only two days after his arrival, DuBourg met with parishioners and received pledges to build a new church. Eventual contributors—both Catholic and non-Catholic—included such well-known St. Louis family names as Chouteau, Soulard, Papin, Cabanne, Gratiot, Mullanphy, as well as Thomas H. Benton, William Carr, William Clark and Frederick Bates. Contractors soon broke ground in the church square at Second and Market Streets and on March 29, the bishop laid the cornerstone.

After an initial surge of activity, construction slowed and moved as sluggishly as the Mississippi in the good ole summertime, and due to a shortage of funds, the architects had to modify the original plans. When DuBourg finally

blessed the not-quite-completed church on January 9, 1820, some thought it was an architectural gem, others thought it a monstrosity.

DuBourg Brings Duchesne to St. Charles and Florissant

While recruiting in Europe, DuBourg had asked St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, to consider sending some of her Sisters to teach in St. Louis. An enthusiastic volunteer, 47-year-old Mother Philippine Duchesne, who had been begging to go to America to work among the Indians, at last got her wish. In 1818, she led a group of four nuns to the New World, hoping to start a girls' school in St. Louis. However, DuBourg sent her to St. Charles where she opened the first free girls' school west of the Mississippi. Later, she and the Sisters moved to Florissant, near St. Ferdinand Church, where their students included girls of the Osage tribe and their convent offered hospitality to others who came to work in the new diocese.

In November 1818, DuBourg's academy for boys opened in St. Louis, with classes in Latin, English, French, arithmetic, mathematics and geography. Tuition was set at \$12 a quarter. By the fall of 1820, enlarged boarding facilities had been added and the school offered its first adult evening classes. Sadly, on October 15, 1820, the school's first professor of prominence, Father De Andreis, died, leaving the memory of a saintly life and the legacy of his remarkable recruit, Father Rosati.

Some seminarians went to the academy, others studied with Father Rosati in Perryville—where a permanent seminary would be incorporated as St. Mary's Seminary in 1822.

Ste. Genevieve

Father Pratte continued steady work in Ste. Genevieve, the oldest town in the state, and built an academy there. Brother Antonin became the first teacher and the first Christian Brother to teach in the United States. When Father Pratte died of yellow fever at the age of 34, he was succeeded by Father Francis Xavier Dahmen, C.M., who had been a cavalryman in the French Imperial armies and had stories to tell of Napoleon's campaigns. He served the French and German settlers there for 18 years. Ste. Genevieve was to remain a small city but a strong center of Catholicism.

Indian Territory

Intrigued by the opportunity to work with native Americans, DuBourg had been influenced in his choice of St. Louis by the fact that it was near Indian territory. When a number of Osage chiefs visited him in 1820, he presented them with medals and crucifixes and promised to visit their villages soon. Although that visit had to be postponed because of a journey to New Orleans to handle problems there and many other pressing duties in the diocese, the bishop did not forget his promise. In 1822, he sent Father Charles de la Croix to visit the Chouteau trading post, 60 miles south of the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. Father de la Croix later travelled to other Osage villages and baptized many French-Indian children, asking Catholic fur traders to act as baptismal sponsors.

Bishop DuBourg had long hoped to get the Jesuits to work among the Indians and, in 1823, he entered into an agreement with Father Charles Neale, superior of the Jesuits in the United States, giving the Society of Jesus exclusive care of all the Indian missions already set up and those to be begun on the Missouri river and its tributary streams. The bishop agreed to give a valuable tract of land in Florissant to be used as an Indian school and a Jesuit seminary—and this was the beginning of one of the most significant mission enterprises in the nineteenth century.

[DuBourg, the Pioneer Bishop, Departs](#)

DuBourg's duties drew him to travel in many directions and his last extended stay in St. Louis was in the summer of 1822, when he held an elaborate celebration of the feast of the city's namesake, Saint Louis IX of France. The local "Enquirer" newspaper reported, "The ceremony was one of peculiar interest and novelty, particularly to a number of American inhabitants, who were politely invited by the bishop to join in the festival."

DuBourg had also invited the Captains of two volunteer companies, the "Guards" and the "Chasseurs," to march into the Cathedral and present their flags for a blessing. In his sermon at the Mass, DuBourg spoke on the seeming contradiction of cross and sword. He asked, "Is it possible to reconcile military valor with Christian humility?" Citing Moses, David, Constantine and Louis as examples of this reconciliation, he praised Louis as being intrepid yet compassionate, cool in the heat of battle and a bright example of true virtue. Following this tribute to St. Louis, the crusading king, DuBourg left St. Louis a month later to work in other parts of the diocese.

In 1823, Joseph Rosati was appointed coadjutor (auxiliary bishop with the right to succeed his superior) to DuBourg. Rosati's work in Missouri had combined heavy responsibilities—superior of the Vincentians throughout the United States, pastor, teacher and founder of St. Mary's College and Seminary in Perryville—and now there would be added duties. He traveled to Louisiana for his consecration by DuBourg and said the Pontifical Mass on Easter Sunday, 1824, in the New Orleans Cathedral.

Writing to his brother, Bishop Rosati said, "I take comfort in the consciousness that far from desiring this dignity, I have done everything in my power to prevent its being bestowed on me." After visiting many towns and priests in Louisiana, Rosati boarded a steamboat to return to St. Louis.

In 1826, DuBourg also returned for a brief visit to St. Louis but then sailed for his native France and surprised many by offering his resignation to Pope Leo XII. He continued his interest in the St. Louis Diocese and regularly sent contributions from his friends until his death in December, 1833.

Although the expanding, unorganized new frontier land had been a great challenge to DuBourg—a church dignitary of the old regime rather than a spontaneous religious leader—he had many successes. He left a legacy of big dreams, many beginnings and a sturdy though incomplete foundation for the continued building of the Church in this part of the New World.

St. Louis Becomes a Diocese under Rosati

When Rosati heard of DuBourg's resignation, he wrote, "I was absolutely bewildered and could not persuade myself it was true." Still other changes were in the wind. In 1826, Rome divided the Louisiana territory into two dioceses—New Orleans and St. Louis—and appointed Rosati administrator of both. Then, in 1827, Rosati was named the first bishop of the new St. Louis Diocese.

There were striking differences in the personalities and approaches of DuBourg and Rosati. DuBourg was a splendid orator—in both English and French—speaking in the grand style of a Daniel Webster. Rosati spoke simply, usually basing his homily on the Scripture reading of the day. DuBourg often bit off more than he could handle and jumped from one project to another. Rosati set realistic goals and stuck to them. The frontier Church benefitted and was blessed by the work of both men.

When Rosati took over the new St. Louis Diocese, it included the state of Missouri, the western half of Illinois and all American territory west of the Mississippi and north of the state of Louisiana. It was the largest American diocese, equalling in extent all of the other nine dioceses. A new era had begun.

Westward migration had become an avalanche with new travellers constantly arriving on the banks of the Mississippi. Between 1820 and 1830, Missouri's population doubled! The Catholic population of the St. Louis Diocese was estimated at 30,000 to 40,000. And St. Louis, which had begun as a small French village would soon become a major American city.

Rosati knew the church building on the riverfront was now on the verge of collapse due to poor workmanship and the lack of money for repairs. He began to lay plans for the first true cathedral beyond the Mississippi. A committee was formed to raise funds and architects were employed. They chose a design of Greek Revival style with Doric pillars and a facade of Joliet limestone, and the cornerstone was laid on Sunday evening, August 1, 1831.

When it was dedicated on October 26, 1834, the Cathedral would have been an impressive sight in any city—but on the rugged frontier, it was breathtaking. The weather had been so bad, the bishop thought he might have to postpone the dedication but on the night before, the storm passed, the clouds cleared and St. Louis awoke to a golden day. Clergy and religious from far-flung parishes and mission stations, Catholics and non-Catholics from near and far gathered for the historic occasion. The three companies of St. Louis militia and a military band from Jefferson Barracks participated in the ceremony—which began at 7:00 a.m. and ended about 3:00 p.m.—eight hours later!

Schools, Orphanages and Hospital

In the meantime, in 1827, Rosati had encouraged Mother Duchesne to open a convent and school in St. Louis as she had originally planned in 1818. John Mullanphy leased property to the Sisters for 999 years with the provision that they would care for 20 orphans each year—for the stipend of five dollars each per year. The soon-to-be-famous "City House" opened and Mother Duchesne continued her frontier work in education. At the age of 72, she finally achieved her life-long wish to work with native Americans when she went with Father De Smet to live and work with the Potawatomis. They revered her and dubbed her "the lady who prays always."

In 1828, Rosati asked the Sisters of Charity to come to St. Louis to open a hospital. Again, John Mullanphy provided property plus \$350 to purchase furnishings and \$150 traveling money. Four Sisters arrived by stagecoach in November and opened the St. Louis Mullanphy Hospital—the first hospital west of the Mississippi. They gave free services to many poor people and heroically cared for the victims of the great cholera epidemic of 1832. They also opened the first Catholic orphanage for boys in the West.

During this era, there were many Jesuits working in the diocese. Father Pierre Jean DeSmet became the best-known missionary of the American Northwest and the most world-famous Jesuit in the Nineteenth century.

When the Jesuit college opened on the edge of town in 1829, Father Peter Verhaegen headed it. On December 28, 1832, Missouri governor Daniel Dunkin signed the bill that made Saint Louis University the first university west of the Mississippi. According to Jesuit rule, priests could not charge tuition for their work. However, on January 13, 1833, Pope Gregory XVI, at the request of Rosati, signed a dispensation that allowed the university to charge tuition—one of the most significant changes in the Jesuit way of conducting schools since the founding of the Society of Jesus.

The university grew rapidly and within a few years added a medical college. Every prominent visitor to the city in that era visited the university, including Senator Daniel Webster, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, General John Charles Fremont, Senator Henry Clay, President Martin Van Buren and English novelist Charles Dickens.

Bishop Rosati, always interested in education, now hoped to establish an institute for the deaf. Mother St. John Fontbonne, superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph in France, agreed to assign Josephites to learn this method of teaching and a wealthy French woman, Countess de la Rochejacquelin, agreed to finance their journey to the distant missions of Missouri in 1836. Although the Sisters of St. Joseph were to teach and serve in many ways in the St. Louis Diocese, education of the deaf remained a prime apostolate.

Debt and Determination

Two problems plagued the early St. Louis Diocese—too little money and too many languages. Parishioners included French, English, Creole and German and they all wanted sermons in their native language. It was not easy to satisfy all requests. As for the money, some parishioners were very generous but this was not the general rule so it was unfortunately necessary to continue to depend on financial aid from Europe.

Rosati had been frugal in building the Cathedral, giving up his dream of marble altars and stained glass windows, keeping careful records of every transaction.

In April, 1840, Rosati decided he must travel again to Europe to try to raise funds. When he left St. Louis on April 26, he had no idea this would be his final goodbye to the diocese he had served so faithfully for 22 years. While in Rome, he was asked by the Pope to assume the work of the apostolic delegation to Haiti. Rosati died in Rome at the age of 54. Rosati had begun the Vincentian seminary, and as bishop, had kept it in the diocese. He had built an impressive cathedral, started a Catholic newspaper, welcomed several sisterhoods to the diocese and brought Jesuits to Saint

Louis University. The first Bishop of St. Louis had erected a diocese which had survived and thrived, served and led, educated and inspired. Rosati was recognized by his contemporaries, and later by historians, as "one of the most remarkable bishops of Christendom."