

INTRODUCTION

THE JESUITS OF MID-AMERICA, 1673-1763

The arrival of Father Van Quickenborne and his Belgian novices at Florissant, Missouri, in 1823, marked the renewal after a period of forced interruption and not the actual beginning of Jesuit missionary enterprise in the Middle United States. That beginning was made at least as early as 1673 when Father Marquette in his historic voyage down the Mississippi ministered to the Indians along its banks and formed plans for evangelizing the region drained by the great waterway and its tributary streams. These plans were to be realized, if not wholly, at least in part. The work of religious and humanitarian service on behalf of the native red men inaugurated by Marquette was carried forward in the face of tremendous obstacles by successive members of his order, mid-America remaining a favorite field of Jesuit missionary activity down to 1763, when, as an incident in the general destruction of the Society of Jesus throughout the world, its missions in that section of North America were stricken down at a single blow. Between Marquette, the first Jesuit to traverse the watershed of the Mississippi, and Sébastien Louis Meurin, the last of his eighteenth-century successors to exercise the sacred ministry in that region, a long line of missionaries of the Society of Jesus devoted themselves to the formidable task of Christianizing and civilizing the savage population of mid-continental North America. It would not be in accord with the facts to say that their labors issued in complete success. Difficulties of every description were met with thwarting their pious designs and preventing them from reaping in proper measure the fruits of the harvest. But the work was nobly planned and heroically persevered in, and its written record, as we read it in the letters of Gravier, Gabriel Marest, Vivier and their associates, is a fascinating chapter in the history of Catholic missionary achievement in the New World. The group of Belgian Jesuits that settled on the banks of the Missouri in the third decade of the nineteenth century were therefore not the first of their order to enter the great sweep of territory flanked by the Alleghanies and the Rockies. A path for civilization, no less than for the Gospel, had been blazed before them by their brethren of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and, as grateful personal recollections of the earlier line of Jesuit workers still lingered in the memory of the oldest inhabitants when

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Van Quickenborne and his party appeared on the scene, the thread of continuity between the old and the new Society of Jesus in the Middle United States remained in a sense unbroken.¹

Rounding out in 1936 a hundred and thirteen years of history, the midwestern Jesuits of the United States were in this year conducting establishments in the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, as also in British Honduras and British East India. Moreover, they had in the past maintained houses in Louisiana and Kentucky and in the territory now comprised within the states of Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. Their present field of operations may be said to comprise in the rough two great regions, one, the part of the basin of the Great Lakes lying south of the Canadian border and west of New York State, the other the upper Mississippi Valley, exclusive of its extreme northwestern reaches.^{1a} The first Jesuit name to be associated with the upper Great Lakes region is that of St. Isaac Jogues, who, in 1641, in company with Father Charles Raymbault, planted the cross at Sault Ste. Marie in what is now the state of Michigan, the first Jesuit name to be distinctly connected with the Mississippi Valley is the historic one of Jacques Marquette, who with Louis Jolliet discovered the upper Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, June 17, 1673. With these memorable names, Jogues, the martyr-priest, and Marquette, the discoverer, begins the story of Jesuit activity in the great sweep of territory now cultivated by the Society of Jesus in the Middle United States.

No more engaging pages in history may be read than those which unfold the successive scenes in the gripping drama of discovery, exploration, and splendid pioneering that was enacted on the stage of mid-America by the French of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The theme has been handled repeatedly by the historians, notably by Francis Parkman in his classic volumes and by Clarence Walworth Alvord in his *Illinois Country*. Two sharply contrasted groups of participants divide the action between them, on the one hand, the empire-builders, the colonial officials of whatever grade, the fur-traders, the adventurers by forest and stream and the sparsely scattered habitants, on the other hand, the Church's representatives, more particularly the missionaries to the Indians, as the Franciscans and Jesuits,

¹ The Trappist, Dom Urban Guillet, communicated to Bishop Carroll, November 16, 1810, a petition on the part of the people of the "Illinois country" for a Jesuit missionary. Baltimore Archdiocesan Archives.

^{1a} The Jesuits of the lower Mississippi Valley are organized as a separate administrative unit with headquarters at New Orleans.

whose activities in evangelizing the native tribes of the New World are of lasting record. On the secular side the stage is crowded with figures whose names spell the very glamor and romance of history—the roll-call includes, among others, Nicolet, Radisson, Groseilliers, Frontenac, Jolliet, Tonti, Duluth, Perrot, Bienville, Iberville, Cadillac, and LaCade-Liguest. But outstanding ecclesiastical figures mingle with these, lending to the moving drama in which they shared just those elements of the spiritual and supernatural which, as much as anything else, probably more so, make of that drama a thing of perennial interest and charm.

The incidents and conditions of whatever kind that entered into the highly significant action of which we speak do not merely constitute a phase of French colonial history on American soil, they mark also the historical beginnings of many of the middlewestern states. With these beginnings the Society of Jesus came in various ways to be identified. While detail is not pertinent here, even a meagre enumeration of particulars may serve its purpose, as suggesting the wealth of significant data left unnoticed. In Michigan pioneer history the outstanding Jesuit names are probably Menard, Marquette, and Dablon. The first Mass on the shores of Lake Superior was said by Father René Menard at Old Village Point, Keenewaw Bay, on St. Theresa's day, October 16, 1660, and said by him "with a consolation," so he wrote, "that repaid me with usury for all my past hardships."² Eight years later, in 1668, Father Marquette opened at Sault Ste. Marie, on the Michigan side of the rapids, a mission-post that was to become the first permanent white settlement within the limits of the state.³ Then, in 1670, came the establishment by Claude Dablon of the Ottawa Mission of St. Ignace at the straits of Michilimackinac or Mackinaw, a long-standing center of Gospel light and leading for all the region of the Great Lakes.⁴ In Wisconsin the earliest missionary endeavors on behalf of the Indian gather around the name of Claude Allouez. On Chequamegon Bay near the modern Ashland, at De Pere, and at various points in the interior of the state, he set up mission-posts that became so many starting-points for the civilizing influences that he sought to bring to bear upon the children of the forest. His appointment to the post of vicar-general by saintly Bishop Laval, July 21, 1663, marked in a way the first organization of the Church in mid-America. From his pen came the earliest published account of the Illinois Indians,

² John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Akron, 1892), I 263

³ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 35 341 (1905-1906)

⁴ Antoine Ivan Rezek, *History of the Diocese of Sault-Ste-Marie and Marquette* (Houghton, Michigan), 2 73

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who were to give their name to the future state. No other figure at the dawn of Wisconsin history rises to a more commanding height. If the name of Jacques Marquette stands apart in the fervor of its appeal to sentiment and the historical imagination, the name of Claude Allouez deserves to be remembered as that of the first organizer of Catholicism in what is now the heart of the United States.⁵

To come to Illinois of the colonial period, its best known Jesuit figure is Marquette. One thinks of his heroic wintering of 1674-1675 on the banks of the Chicago River, the opening episode in the life-story of the future metropolis, also, of his memorable Kaskaskia Mission on the Illinois River, destined to stand out in history as the spot where Christianity and civilization made their first rude beginnings in the Mississippi Valley. It is to the pen of Father Marquette that we owe the earliest descriptions of the streams and prairies of Illinois. The expedition of 1673 led him along the entire western boundary of the state and then through its interior as he ascended the Illinois on his homeward course. His accounts of the upper Mississippi, the Illinois, and the Chicago Rivers are the earliest that we possess, and the record he has left us, whether of travel or missionary experience in the country through which they flow, is the first page in the written history of the commonwealth of Illinois.

Following Marquette, a succession of energetic Jesuit workers, among them Claude Allouez, Sebastian Rasles, Jacques Gravier, Julien Bineteau, and Gabriel Marest, gave their services to the maintenance of his beloved mission. When in 1700 the Kaskaskia abandoned their settlement on the Illinois for a new one on the west bank of the Mississippi on the site of St. Louis, they were accompanied thither by their Jesuit pastors. The town of Kaskaskia, which grew up around a later village of the tribe on the banks of the Okaw or Kaskaskia River, became in time the most considerable settlement of the "Illinois Country" and the center of a picturesque social life which survived the passing of French ascendancy in the basin of the Mississippi. Here, almost up to the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Jesuit priests relieved the spiritual needs of French and Indians alike, the entire group of French trading-posts and villages on either bank of the mid-Mississippi being brought within range of their ministry. Sketching Jesuit missionary work in colonial Illinois, one may not omit mention of Father Pierre-François Pinet's Mission of the Guardian Angel on the site of Chicago, very probably on ground which is now within the throbbing business center of the great metropolis. It ran its course in a few years

⁵ Shea, *op cit*, I 269. Chrysostom Verwyst, O.F.M., "Historic Sites on Chequamegon Bay," *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 13 426-440 (1895)

(c. 1696-1702), but authentic details about it survive in measure enough to enable us to realize the part it played in the frontier life of that remote day. Of contributions made by the Society of Jesus to the initial economic and social growth of Illinois two may be noted: its missionaries were the first growers of wheat on a large scale in Illinois and in their residences at Kaskaskia and other points were the earliest school-teachers of that same region.⁶

Missouri of the eighteenth century counted two Jesuit missions, one at the mouth of the Des Peres River within the present municipal limits of St. Louis, and another, of later date, at Ste. Genevieve.⁷ To a Jesuit, Sébastien Louis Meurin, belongs the distinction of having been the first priest to officiate in Laclède's settlement of St. Louis, destined to become very intimately linked with the history of the restored Society of Jesus in the Mississippi Valley. Few scenes became more familiar to the members of the Society than the physical aspect of the eastern edge of Missouri, which they came to know as they went up and down the Mississippi on their missionary trips. The first Jesuit to descend the mighty stream notes in his *Recit* the amazement that he felt when, for the first time, he gazed upon the Missouri River at the point where it mingles its current with torrent-like rapidity with the current of the Mississippi. "I never," Marquette wrote, "saw anything more terrible."⁸ He called the Missouri the Pekitanou, and, though he made no attempt to ascend it, he picked up much valuable information concerning the country through which it flowed. The map which he prepared probably as an accompaniment to his *Recit* shows the Missouri or Pekitanou discharging into the Mississippi a short distance below the Illinois. It shows, too, in most cases in the same localities in which they were found by the white settlers and travellers of a later day, many of the Indian tribes that were destined to play an important part in the early history of the West. To the west of the Missouri one finds indicated the country of the "Emissouri" and "Ochages," or the Missouri and Osage, the two tribes most intimately associated with the pioneer stage

⁶ Gilbert J. Garraghan, S.J., *The Catholic Church in Chicago, 1673-1871* (1921), pp. 1-21; Clarence W. Alvord, *The Illinois Country, 1673-1818* (Springfield, Illinois, 1920), pp. 198, 208; *Mid-America* (Chicago), 13: 72; Mary Borgias Palm, S.N.D., *The Jesuit Missions of the Illinois Country, 1673-1763* (Cleveland, 1933).

⁷ The tradition locating a Jesuit mission at the mouth of the River Des Peres, Missouri, has been authenticated by Laurence J. Kenny, S.J., *St. Louis Catholic Historical Review*, 1: 151-156. Cf. also Garraghan, *Chapters in Frontier History* (Milwaukee, 1934), *passim*; Francis J. Yealy, S.J., *Sainte Genevieve, The Story of Missouri's Oldest Settlement* (Sainte Genevieve, 1935).

⁸ R. G. Thwaites (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 59: 141.

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of Missouri history, while west of these tribes appears the country of the Paniasa, Kansa and Maha, or the Pawnee, Kansa and Omaha Indians.

But Marquette was not the only missionary of his order to put on record the wonders of the Missouri River and the country which it drains. Fifty years after him, Father Charlevoix, the historian of New France and a trained observer of the wonders of the New World, found himself at the mouth of the Missouri and was equally moved by the spectacle before him. "I believe this is the finest Confluence in the World," he exclaims with enthusiasm. "The two rivers are much of the same breadth, each about a half a league, but the Missouri is by far the most rapid of the two and seems to enter the Mississippi like a conqueror, through which it carries its white waters to the opposite shore, without mixing them, after which it gives its colour to the Mississippi, which it never loses again, but carries it quite down to the sea."⁹ To Father Louis Vivier, writing from Kaskaskia in 1750, the water of the Missouri seemed, to quote his glowing estimate, "the best water in the world," and the country drained by the Missouri, "the finest country in the world."¹⁰

The land that is now Iowa shows no other link of association with the path-finding Jesuits of the Mississippi Valley except the circumstance that Marquette and his party were the first white persons known to have set foot upon its soil.¹¹ In Minnesota, on the west bank of Lake Pepin, Father Michel Guignas opened in 1727 his Sioux Mission of St. Michael the Archangel, while, within the limits of the same state, on Massacre Island, Lake of the Woods, the Jesuit Jean Pierre Aulneau was slain by Indians, June 8, 1736.¹² Kansas and Nebraska, as far as is known, never made the acquaintance of the old-time Jesuit missionaries, but their leading Indian tribes are named for the first time in history on the maps prepared by Jolliet and Marquette in connection with the eventful journey of 1673.

Returning now to the eastern section of the Mississippi Valley, one finds evidence of Jesuit ministerial work among the Miami and other Indians settled in the eighteenth century around the French post, Fort Ouatenon, near the present Lafayette, Indiana. The documentary records of the Catholic Church in this state begin with a marriage-entry,

⁹ F. X. Charlevoix, S. J., *A Voyage to North America* (Dublin, 1766), 2 1

¹⁰ Thwaites, 69 207, 223, Garraghan, *op. cit.*, pp 51-72

¹¹ Laenas Gifford Weld, "Jolliet and Marquette in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 1 3-16 (Jan., 1903)

¹² J. G. Shea, *Early Voyages up and down the Mississippi*, "The Discovery of the Relics of the Reverend Jean Pierre Aulneau," *Historical Records and Studies*, 5 488, Nancy Ring, "The First Sioux Mission," *Mid-America*, 14 344-351.

under date of April 21, 1749, in the parochial register of the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Vincennes, the officiating priest being Father Sébastien Louis Meurin of the Society of Jesus.¹³ In Ohio the oldest Catholic establishment within the limits of the state was apparently the Jesuit Wyandot mission on the Sandusky River, established about 1751.¹⁴ Noteworthy as a contribution to the pioneer history of the same state is the journal of Joseph-Pierre de Bonnécamps, Jesuit scientist and mathematician of Quebec, who accompanied Céloron on his expedition of 1749 through the Ohio country. To Bonnécamps "Ohio owes the first map of her boundaries or outlines yet discovered."¹⁵

The few facts assembled in the preceding paragraphs may serve to indicate at what an early date the missionaries of the Society of Jesus made their entrance into the Great Lakes region and the Mississippi Valley and how the story of their ministry became blended with the pioneer annals of most of the midwestern states. For more than five-score years they made resolute effort to uplift the helpless Indians to something like self-respect and a sense of moral responsibility and to introduce among them the ways of ordered and civilized life. The number of the missionaries was ever small and the tasks they attempted stood in pathetic contrast to the paltry resources at their command. They were still engaged in their self-denying labors when a deadly blow similar to the one which had fallen on their establishments in France was levelled at the lowly mission-stations they had raised at the price of untold sacrifices in the wilderness of western America. The Superior Council of Louisiana, veiling its actual motives under a profession of zeal for religion, decreed on June 9, 1763, the destruction of all the Jesuit houses in the territory under its jurisdiction. The decree was carried out under circumstances of exceptional harshness, the lands and houses of the missionaries being confiscated, their chapels despoiled, their altar-equipment scattered and profaned, and they themselves violently carried off from their various posts to New Orleans, whence, with one or two exceptions, they were deported to Europe. Thus was the work of the old Society of Jesus in the Mississippi Valley, memorable for the first exploration of the Mississippi and for a thousand beneficent activities among the Indian tribes that roamed its wondrous valley, brought to an abrupt and tragic end. The last of the pre-suppression Jesuits to survive in the West was the veteran missionary,

¹³ Garraghan, *op cit*, pp 1-24

¹⁴ Shea, *op cit*, I 631, W Eugene Shiels, S J, "The Jesuits in Ohio in the Eighteenth Century," *Mid-America*, 18 27 *et seq.*

¹⁵ Rufus King, *Ohio First Fruits of the Ordinance of 1787* (Boston, 1888), p 63. Bonnécamps's map is in King's volume, p 13 For Bonnécamps's journal cf Thwaites, 69 150

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Sébastien Louis Meurin, who died at Prairie du Rocher, Illinois, February 23, 1777. His remains lie with those of the Jesuit founders of 1823 in the historic graveyard at Florissant, Missouri, a precious link of association between the old and the new Society of Jesus in the Middle United States.¹⁶

¹⁶ For a contemporary account of the expulsion of the Jesuits from Louisiana (*Bannissement des Jésuites de la Louisiane*) by François Philibert Watrin, S J, cf Thwaites, 70 211-301. The most satisfactory treatment of the topic is Jean Delanglez, S J, *The French Jesuits in Lower Louisiana, 1700-1763* (Washington, 1935). Jesuit mission activities in mid-America of the colonial period are treated in Mary Doris Mulvey, O P, *French Catholic Missionaries in the Present United States* (Washington, 1936).