

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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23

[Excerpt from Report to the Central Council of the Louis Mission Society Regarding the Explosion on the Mississippi]

It was June 13, the feast of St. Anthony of Padua, a Sunday morning between five and six o'clock, about 60 miles from Memphis when the boiler exploded. One single bang and a third of the ship was blown to the sky! Almost 200 people lost their lives, were torn to pieces, burned, scalded, crippled or drowned. Among them – O inexplicable destiny – the two Reverend Fathers Urbanek and de la Crosse. The Sister of Charity had the consolation of seeing her Reverend Confessor still alive. Longingly, he asked for Holy Communion, which however could not be given him. Reverend Father Urbanek disappeared without a trace, God alone knows how. I searched and found nothing; everything was useless. I cannot describe my sorrow and the fearful worry that came over me. Naturally speaking it is inconceivable that I did not lose my presence of mind, even when holding on to the strong cable between fire and water, in order to save my life.

Even in the wooden boat that came quickly and which I grasped happily, life was not a certainty; the boat came too near the flaming steamer and hovered in great danger of being set on fire by the leaping sparks. Horrible were the lamentations and cries for help of those who were left on the burning ship, who still had hope to be taken by the boats, but the boats had to be pushed away by force in order to avoid being burned themselves. The cries for help were soon stilled; they had become victims of the angry elements. In the boats were 68 passengers, who – except for the Sister of Charity, the two girls and I – were agnostics. They called on no God in their distress, but desperately looked to heaven and swore against their Maker, so that I had no more hope of being saved, but had to await the vengeful hand of God. I was facing the possibility of dying and commended myself to God, when suddenly, by a lucky turning of the ship we saw ourselves saved. Quickly we were at the bank. It was flooded but our boat could be tied to forest trees.

Five little boats gradually brought 20 severely wounded, who with their broiled bodies had to lie on the hard bottom of the ship without bedding, and who soon fell into a fever. This mourning, groaning, complaining, and then, too, the great poverty! Everything had gone to pieces! No doctor, no medicine, no other cover than the foliage of the trees! unfortunate people, to whom we could offer no other comfort than to fan them with a little clothe, and to alleviate their parched lips with a little dirty Mississippi water. Thus they had to languish for seven hours under the burning heat of the sun, a time that seemed to me to be eternity. During this time I tried to get some information about Father Urbanek. Perhaps he, too, was just now battling life against death. Did his pious spirit retain its sense under the force of the pain, then like David in his misfortune only bemoan the fact that he was so far from the house of God? At last a three o'clock in the afternoon a steamer, which had heard of the catastrophe, arrive to pick up us shipwrecked, whereby some relief could be given to the wounded. We passed the scene of our misfortune and saw the smoldering wreck, which now was a toy of the waves of the Mississippi.

Soon thereafter we arrived in Helena Island where we halted to again pick up the wounded, who had been thrown here by the explosion. Oil had been poured into their burn wounds and their bodies were covered with flour. Once more a ray of hope glimmered in my heart. I searched among them, looked at them carefully but to no avail. In the meantime three large steamships arrived, one of which went to New Orleans and the two sailed westward. The Sister of Charity returned to New Orleans, taking with her the corpse of her Spiritual Father. My young companion also went with her since, frightened by the accident, she wished to return to her homeland. I permitted her to do so because the fright brought on a homesickness so strong that I feared she would suffer a mental disorder. The Sister of Charity promised to take care of her.

So in God's name, battered in body and soul, I had to return home alone, which I at first thought impossible; but God came to my assistance. I entered the boat that was going homeward and sat down in a corner, giving my tears free reign. It was not long until I was surrounded by a crowd of American ladies, who cried with me. Wondering about my dress, they presented me with clothes, so I could change into dry ones. The generosity of these great American ladies! They vied with each other to relieve my condition to some extent. One fanned me, another offered me refreshing water and perfume, the third a dress, which she said was too small for her. Likewise, they offered me a cabin and a bed, for which I, poor beggar, could offer only my wordless thanks. The help and the tender attention of these American ladies pleased me very much; their sympathy went so far that they collected traveling money for me among themselves. A Negro slave girl with a noble heart came to me one evening and pressed \$5.00 into my hand. I said to her, "No, I will not take any money from a slave." She said however: "I am a slave, but not poor and you should know that slaves also can do good," whereupon she hurried away.

Three days after this catastrophe I arrived at the dear Motherhouse, for which I had such a great longing. Gladly had I carried the pain alone, but now I had to see not only the whole Motherhouse, but also the whole Order in mourning, orphaned by the loss of a spiritual father, who was so hard to replace. The dear sisters, who had heard the telegraph reports and read the newspapers, and who hovered for several days in fear and uncertainty, praying unceasingly in their misery to God, were greatly surprised on seeing me and filled with the sincerest gratitude for my safety, since they had just about given up hope for my safety. Tears of gratitude and joy flowed when they saw me entirely unharmed. A thousand thanks to Divine Goodness for wonderfully saving my life, which, however, I would have gladly given like Reverend [Anton] Urbanek, although most unworthy of such a grace!...

Praised be Jesus and Mary!

Most obedient poor School Sister

Mary Caroline Friess

(Taken from *The Letters of Mother Caroline Friess, School Sisters of Notre Dame*, edited by Barbara Brumleve, SSND, 1991.)