

Motherhouse,
Milwaukee, WI

June 17, 1858
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My dear Sisters:

My visitation journey to New Orleans on which I set out May 28th, terminated with great afflictions. I had to take our two young Sisters, M. Patritia [Hussey] and Hyacinth [Zimmermann] with me, and our good Rev. Father [Anton Urbanek] accompanied us. We reached New Orleans with unusual speed, and on the feast of Corpus Christi at 6:00 a.m. we were at the Sisters' house. This unexpected meeting was a joyful surprise for all. I had the consolation to find the sisters all enjoying good health, excepting our dear sister Jacobina [Diener], who is not really sick, but very delicate. We have 120 orphans in our [St. Joseph] asylum there. Notwithstanding the great heat, they, too, are all well and in good spirits; but the Sisters have hard work to take care of them. The English as well as the German schools, have a great increase of attendance, for which reason, I had to hasten thither with the two above named Sisters. We stayed six days and suffered considerably from the heat; yet it was not so oppressive as we had expected.

New Orleans is threatened with an inundation. The Mississippi has been overflowing for six weeks, and many disasters have occurred, in consequence. All the sugar and cotton plantations are submerged, so that there is no hope for any harvest. The water still continues to rise, and danger threatens more and more. Let us pray that God may arrest it, for the Sisters in New Orleans are so dear to our hearts as all the rest. The poor Sisters so far away from the Motherhouse wept bitterly when we bade them adieu. Rev. Father assured them that nothing but sin could separate us.

June 9th, at 9:00 p.m. we boarded the large steamer *Pennsylvania* on our homeward route. I had a girl of sixteen with me, who had begged admission into our Order, and had decided to accompany me. On the steamer, I met a Sister of Charity, by name of Mary Ellen, who was traveling to her motherhouse at Emmittsburg, [Maryland]. She, too, had a young girl with her. Rev. Father found an agreeable traveling companion in a French Lazarist, De la Croix.

Our steamer, heavily loaded, made but slow headway. High water, too, may have been the cause. Our journey, however, appeared prosperous; no one apprehended any danger. Sunday morning, June 13th, feast of St. Anthony, I had just risen and dressed, when there was a tremendous crash and the bolted cabin doors burst open with great force. I went to see what happened and found there was an explosion. My first thought was of Rev. Father [Urbanek]. I turned to go to his stateroom, but no trace of it remained. Together with many others, it had been hurled into the air – yes, a third of the steamer had met this fate, and the sleeping passengers had been dashed – some alive, others dreadfully mangled – into the burning mass or seething water.

I stood aghast, for a moment, till the fire, crackling beneath my feet, warned me to make my escape. A Negro provided me with a life preserver and hastily told me how to help myself in

the water. He also placed a strong rope in my hand, by means of which I could reach a life boat below. I succeeded, as did also the Sister of Charity and the two young girls with us. Our boat was, however, so near the burning steamer, that we were, by no means, secure. The raging flames threatened to devour us at every moment. I had no longer a thought for this world. Recommending myself and all the dear Sisters to the mercy of God, I awaited my death. But God in inscrutable providence, had ordained otherwise.

I was spared, reaching land in safety. The rescued passengers numbered about 160, whereas there had been nearly 500 on board. From this you see that many lost their lives, among whom, alas! our good Rev. Father appears to be included. Notwithstanding all my efforts, I could, up to this time, find no trace of him – neither among the living and wounded, nor among the dead. It was his nameday, just between five and six o'clock, when the Sisters were surely offering their prayers and Holy Communion for him.

Let us continue to pray, dear Sisters, and have prayers said for him. The prayer of innocent children is powerful with God. Request prayers also of the Reverend clergy, of all our friends and well-wishers. This is a heavy visitation from God, showing us how closely we must cling together, especially now, as the Order has lost a strong support. In prayer alone – in faithful attachment, in deep humility, we shall besiege Heaven and obtain assistance. You will have three Holy Masses said, through grateful love for our Rev. Father, and offer all your Holy Communion and prayers, during a month, for the repose of his soul. It was very humiliating for me that the pious priest lost his life, and I was saved. God has shown me mercy. Return thanks with me. May God's name be praised!

I shall probably be obliged to remain in the Motherhouse for a long time, feeling assured that you will be faithful and pray for me. In this thought alone, I find consolation in my present affliction. God help us, and Mary protect us!

Mary Caroline