



« WE HAVE LONG DESIRED TO HAVE A HOME IN THE UNITED STATES. »

St Marie Eugénie

On October 12th, 1919, the first sisters of the Assumption arrived in the United States to found the house in Philadelphia. The Archives contains many documents concerning this foundation. In particular, those that allow us to tell the "pre-history" of the Assumption in the United States.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven..." (Ecclesiastes 3,1): this quotation from the book of Ecclesiastes is very appropriate for the foundation of the United States. Indeed, in the Council's Book, one can find proposals for foundations on this land before the foundation in 1919. The first concrete proposal was in November 1892. A friend of the Assumption asked the Archbishop of New York to welcome the Sisters of the Assumption, but there is no place in his diocese. He then made two suggestions: a foundation in the Diocese of Chicago or a foundation in the Diocese of Wilmington. In Wilmington, the bishop would agree to the arrival of the sisters and at the meeting of November 14, 1892, the Council approves unanimously the project to found in the United States.

Mary Eugenie herself wrote to the Archbishop of New York to thank him: *"I cannot express to you how grateful we are... It was the object of our strong desires"* She asks her interlocutor to help her discern the place: *"I need a competent opinion to decide which of these proposals should be followed up... I also ask Your Grace to indicate to us the preliminary steps we will have to take."*

Two days after, Marie Eugénie writes to Mother Marie Célestine (November 16th, 1892): *"We have been invited for two foundations in America (USA). This is the country where it would be more advantageous for us to settle (...), because of the growing disorders in Europe. Then, she writes to Sister Marie Cécile: "We have been invited in America. Pray God to show us his will"*.

On November 30th, the Archbishop will reply that the best place is Wilmington. And Marie Eugénie doesn't hesitate to write to the Bishop of Wilmington: *"A letter from the Archbishop of New York encourages me to ask Your Highness to choose our Congregation for the school in view of the higher education of young girls that Your Highness proposes to found in Wilmington. We have long desired to have a home in the United States; we will be deeply grateful for all that your Grace will do to facilitate this first foundation and we will be happy to place ourselves under his guidance."*

Disappointment... The Bishop will reply on January 3rd, 1893 that *"the time has not yet come given the situation between Catholics and Protestants"*.

It's only a postponement! In 1894, the Fathers of Mercy founded a school in the diocese of Trenton, New Jersey. They have to leave it because they don't have enough vocations. On 23rd June, the proposal was discussed by the General Council. Since the first opportunity in Wilmington, the Assumption founded in Nicaragua and it now seems difficult to found immediately in the United States. In addition, the authorization of the local bishop should be obtained. However, due to the difficult situation in Nicaragua (see Trésors d'Archives No. 4), the request is put on hold because the United States could be a place of withdrawal.

At the same time, in September 1894, Mother Agnes Eugénie passed through America on her way to Nicaragua. Recommended by an English friend who has committed herself to rent a house for the sisters in Newport for two years, she is received by the Bishop of Newport. The bishop says that there are already

enough residential schools and that there is no place for another. He would authorize the opening of a worship house, with possibility of retreats for women, but another Congregation is already opening one. The bishop can only commit himself for two years. In fact, this proposal is not discussed in council because it is too uncertain.

With regard to the Trenton project, the Council decided on December 11th, 1894 that it could not be pursued because the sisters did not seem to be in danger in Nicaragua (thanks to the protection of their friends). For this reason, the number of available sisters was not sufficient for another foundation.

New missed opportunities! But God was preparing his plan! It took 25 years for it to become a reality. In January 1919, Mother H el ene Marguerite, then Superior of Manila, crossed the oceans and passed through the United States on her way to Europe. Bishop Dougherty, Archbishop of Philadelphia, former Bishop of Jaro in the Philippines, helped her to find hospitality in his city, in the house of the Sisters of Mercy. During her stay, she visited a property donated by Mrs. Penfield, which Bishop Dougherty was willing to give to the Sisters of the Assumption.

The same month, he wrote to Mother Marie C elestine: *“a very distinguished lady from Philadelphia (...) has just donated to the diocese a magnificent stone house built on several acres of land planted with beautiful trees, with roads, barns, stables and greenhouses...”*

It took three months for the Council to discuss it because Mother H el ene Marguerite arrived in Europe quite late. On April 22nd, 1919, the deal was concluded: the Council *“does not hesitate to declare that this unique and truly providential opportunity should not be neglected”*. In May, the Archbishop wrote to Mother Marie C elestine to say that they have to confirm soon the sisters' arrival because it was the time when parents chose their children's school. The donation documents are signed; the first community is named. The first sisters will embark at the beginning of October on the boat "La Savoie".

During the trip, they write to the Mothers of the Val to report on their valor and their ability (or not) to follow religious exercises.

“ October 11, 1919 - My dearest Mother, Now we are almost at the gates of New York since we are told that we are arriving tomorrow Sunday around 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon and if it happens like Bishop Nutter told us, we could even sleep that night in Philadelphia. What a joy to arrive at home after these eight days of living in the world. Our Lord has been very good to us by allowing us to have 2 masses every day. I only missed my communion and mass one day because of seasickness; the other days of severe discomfort, I was able to receive communion and attend masses. Monsignor could not have been more paternal than he was for us (...) Today we confessed to him because I had already 15 days that I had not confessed, and the others I suppose the same. We are very far from you but our heart stayed in the Val very close to you in your office where I contemplate you and surround you with my old affection (...) Sr Rosario M.”

Call to amateurs who want to come to the Archives in order to decrypt the original letters! From Le Havre to New York by boat. Arrival on "Columbus Day"¹, which augurs well for some great discoveries. Then from New York to Philadelphia by train.

Upon arrival, the sisters first went to the cathedral and, after a reception at the Archbishop's house, they went to Ravenhill's property through Fairmount Park. They discovered a magnificent property: the residence where, according to the sisters themselves, a seal of poverty was missing, a park with magnificent trees and greenhouses...

When the sisters settle in the house, their concern will be to find Auteuil's uses, both in the equipment and in the customs ; very quickly, in November, the boarding school is open! The Archbishop's nieces and some

¹The second Monday of October is a Feast day in the US. It is the commemoration of Christopher Colomb in the « New World ».

friends are the first students. A small group that will take a little time to expand but promises a great future for the Assumption Academy in Ravenhill!

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