

GILBERT A. ENDERLE, C.SS.R.

LOUIS F. GILLET (1813-1892),  
REDEMPTORIST IN IMMIGRANT AMERICA,  
FOUNDER OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS, CISTERCIAN MONK (\*)

*AN OVERVIEW*

The year 2013 marks the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Louis Florent Gillet, Frontier Redemptorist missionary in America, founder of a major group of Religious Sisters, and eventually a beloved Cistercian Monk.

Technically he came into the world a French subject. For when he was born in Antwerp on January 13, 1813, Napoleon's empire still reached into the Low Countries. Belgium was still seventeen years away from realizing independence.

Gillet was the eighth novice in the history of the Redemptorists of Belgium. In 1843, when he had been professed for eight years and ordained for five, he was chosen to serve in the mission of America. There, as his many confrères were ministering to *German* immigrants, Gillet's explicit dream was for the Redemptorists to have a "French foundation." With the blessing of superiors, he saw this dream come to life in the state of Michigan, in the upper portion of the midwestern United States. But the foundation had a short lifespan. Huge misunderstandings between Gillet and his Redemptorist superiors developed, but not before he had founded (or co-founded)<sup>1</sup> the distinguished group of women religious who continue to this day. After more misun-

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(\*) This article represents, in digest form, the complete biography of Father Louis Gillet: Gilbert Ahr ENDERLE, *I Desire to be Everywhere, Louis Florent Gillet, Frontier Missionary, Founder, and Contemplative Monk*, OSP/IHM Board of Directors, Monroe, Michigan 2012, 550 pp.

<sup>1</sup> It may well be that *cofounded* is the more correct term, as Gillet and Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin depended much on one another in establishing the community of Sisters. In fact, the term *cofounded* is the more common usage.

derstandings, in 1850 he was officially dismissed from the Redemptorists, although his dismissal, in his mind, was not finally confirmed until January 1855.

By 1858 he was accepted into a new group of Cistercian monks in France. Among them he was a revered member, holding a number of important posts, including Abbot of the famous Hautecombe monastery in the Savoy region of France where he died in 1892. Only one year before his death he learned that the Sisters whom he began in Michigan in 1845 were now a large, well-known group of American educators.

### *Back to beginnings*

Louis was the son of Florent Gillet and Barbara Mercier. He was baptized in Antwerp's St. Anthony Church on the day of his birth, January 12, 1813, and then he lived in Antwerp until the Gillets moved to an *area* called Neutral Moresnet, close to the intersection of today's Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands. Moresnet was a tiny wedge of disputed land, desirable because of its large zinc deposits. Declared "neutral" by an 1815 international agreement, it offered employment to many, and this may have been what attracted the Gillet family. The date of their move to Moresnet is uncertain, but it is definite that when Louis Gillet was nine, his only sibling, Anne-Catherine, was born there on April 23, 1822.

The earliest indication of Louis Gillet's schooling comes from a letter by him in which he indicates that at the age of fifteen he was a student in Liège, in his native Belgium.<sup>2</sup> According to the current educational system, he would have been pursuing the study of languages, history, and rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> The first verified academic

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<sup>2</sup> Gillet to Leonard Poilvache, Feb. 11, 1848, original in AGHR, Gillet Dossier; Gillet says he and Francis Poilvache were students together in Liège seventeen years previously. – It is believed that this was at the *Royal Collège/ l'Athénée* of Liège. The basis for this belief is an original but unsigned two-page letter in French in AGHR, Gillet Dossier, which provide a number of reminiscences about the Poilvache family and "Matthias" Poilvache (the name used by the family for Francis) in particular. It states that "Matthias" studied first at the "*college de Vise, ensuite à l'Athénée de Liège.*"

<sup>3</sup> This system is basically what is followed in Belgium to this day.

records of Gillet discovered to date, however, are from the *Petit Séminaire* (preparatory seminary) of the Liège diocese at Rolduc.

Studying with Gillet at the Rolduc seminary was a young man named Francis Poilvache who had also been a fellow student of Louis Gillet in Liège.<sup>4</sup> During a retreat in 1833 at Rolduc these two young seminarians were introduced to the Redemptorists in the person of Father Joseph Berset.<sup>5</sup> They were so much impressed that they decided that they wanted to be members of these missionaries founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori.

September of 1834 found Gillet and Poilvache entering the Redemptorist community located in St. Trond, Belgium. After a few weeks of an introductory postulancy, they were invested with the Redemptorist habit along with two other candidates. Then began their official year as novices, which was not to be a wholly pleasant experience. The novice director was also superior of the entire community of about thirty, which, besides the novices, included several active parish mission preachers, philosophy and theology students along with their instructors, a handful of Redemptorists recently exiled from Portugal, and several support staff. The St. Trond building (a former Franciscan monastery) was undergoing renovations for which there were not enough funds. The novice master, Johann Baptist Pilat, was much in demand as a preacher and confessor, and so was often absent from the community. Also, during this year Gillet's friend Francis Poilvache became seriously ill.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Matthias François Poilvache, b. Jan. 27, 1812 at Eben Emal near Liège; prof. Sept. 04, 1835; ord. July 03, 1842, d. Jan. 27, 1848. Among friends he was called "Père François" but his family used his baptismal name of Matthias.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Berset, b. Nov. 11, 1794; prof. May 18, 1818; ord. Mar. 25, 1819. Some authors say, without reference, that Berset was accompanied on this retreat by Father Frederick De Held. Joseph WUEST, *Annales Congregationis Sanctissimi Redemptoris, Provinciae Americanae*, Typis Congregationis Sanctissimi Redemptoris, Ilchester, Maryland 1903, Vol. I, 207. Hereinafter this multi-volume work will be indicated as J. WUEST, *Annales*, followed by the pertinent volume number and page.

<sup>6</sup> Poilvache's illness was so serious that he was allowed to make an "early profession" of vows after only ten months and sixteen days of novitiate. The illness, in effect, put Poilvache and Gillet on different "time-tracks" for the rest of their seminary days. It would not be until 1843 when, after Poilvache's delayed priestly ordination, the two friends would be really together again as

This disjointed situation called for a Visitation by Father Joseph Passerat, the superior of all Redemptorists north of the Alps. Opting to name a new novice master, Passerat chose Father Alois Dobisch, aged only twenty-five, who immediately and thereafter clashed with Father Pilat, who was retained as rector of the St. Trond community.

Such was the turmoil during the novitiate year of Louis Gillet. But due notice must be taken of the fact that, as a whole, the Belgian Redemptorists were themselves still in the early stages of their history and development. It would take some time for them to grow into the vibrant part of the Congregation they eventually would be.

Following his profession of vows as a Redemptorist on October 20, 1835, Gillet moved from the novitiate to the student section, or division, of St. Trond as he again pursued the study of theology. Suddenly, however, the St. Trond stage of his academic life came to an end. On Christmas Day, 1835, a stunning announcement was made to the community. A new student residence had been purchased. It was a former Capuchin monastery in Wittem, about forty miles to the east of St. Trond in the province of Limburg.<sup>7</sup>

On January 12, 1836, Gillet was among the group of fourteen Redemptorists who set out on the historic forty-mile trek to their new home. Several who were ill went by carriage; the rest had to plod the whole distance on foot, in one day. Heavy rains, winter cold, and a forced detour at the Meuse River in Maastricht were just some of their trials en route.<sup>8</sup>

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confrères and companions.

<sup>7</sup> The village of Wittem in 1835 was in Belgium. By the 1839 Treaty of London, it was to pass over into the Netherlands. To be noted is that in St. Trond, Gillet had his first acquaintance with two famous Redemptorists, Victor Dechamps and Bernard Hafkenscheid. The former taught him Scripture and theology and later became Cardinal Primate of Belgium. The latter would be his mentor in the preaching ministry in Tournai, and his conflictual superior in the American mission.

<sup>8</sup> A full description of this famously hard trip is in AGHR, *Chronica Provinciae et Collegiorum, Provincia Belgica*, Vol. I, 170-174; see also Jean BECO, "Les Rédemptoristes en Belgique, Les Débuts, 1ere partie, in: *SHCSR* 55 (2007) 35f.

Nevertheless, this was a remarkable group of Redemptorists. Some of Gillet's companions were: Father Alexander Czvitkovicz, slated as the first rector of Wittem and a future superior of the American mission; Father Michael Heilig, a future provincial of Belgium, 1848-1851; Father Marc Andreas Hugues, who was to translate St. Alphonsus' works into German; and Father Gabriel Rumpler, who would also serve with distinction in America.

Although the Wittem house was in a run-down condition, the students resumed classes just one week after their arrival. Louis Gillet continued his study of theology and related subjects there until 1838. His ordination to the priesthood came on March 10, 1838, in the Cathedral of St. Paul in Liège, the ordaining prelate being Bishop Cornelius van Bommel, a great friend of the Redemptorists.<sup>9</sup> Gillet's longtime companion, Francis Poilvache, meanwhile, had suffered periodic bouts of illness. He was at last able to join the others at Wittem in the summer of 1836, but would not be ordained until July 3, 1842.

*The young priest Louis Florent Gillet*

After his ordination, Gillet still had to complete several months of theology at Wittem. Then on September 13, 1838, he left for what was to be a short six-month assignment in Liège, at the Redemptorist Church of Ste-Catherine.<sup>10</sup> The house chronicles of Ste-Catherine mention no ministries in which Gillet took part during his stay. However, from a letter of Father Frederick De Held, superior in Liège, we learn that Gillet received permission in 1838 "to help in preaching parish missions" even though he was short of the requisite age of thirty for such ministry. This permission had one condition, namely that Gillet would not be "employed to hear women's confessions."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On the same day three other Redemptorists were ordained with Gillet: Gabriel Rumpler, Marc Andreas Hugues, and Joseph Arnold.

<sup>10</sup> It was not until 1839 that the Redemptorists took up residence at Liège's Church of the Immaculate Conception on Hors Chateau where they would remain for the next 125 years.

<sup>11</sup> Passerat to De Held, Dec. 16, 1838, original in Redemptorist Archives, Köln; photocopy AGHR 30060001,83868. According to a long-standing Redemptorist custom, the months which followed soon after ordination were

On March 21, 1839, the young Gillet was transferred some 100 miles to the west, to the Redemptorist house in Tournai, Belgium. At this picturesque location, on the bank of the River Scheldt (or, in French, *Escaut*), he was to have a rich experience as a preacher of parish missions and retreats.

Detailed information is lacking about these missions and retreats which he preached in the next four years.<sup>12</sup> But fortunately there is a basic listing of where and when this missionary work took place. It is an impressive list, and even more impressive is the high quality of older Redemptorists with whom he labored. One of them was Father Joseph Berset who had inspired Gillet's vocation back at the Rolduc seminary. Another was Father John Kaltenbach,<sup>13</sup> who had known and loved the Redemptorist Saint Clement Hofbauer when the latter headed the Redemptorist community in Triberg, Kaltenbach's native place in Germany's Black Forest.

One of Louis Gillet's last missionary efforts while in Tournai had to have been a special joy. His schoolmate and friend, Francis Poilvache, who was now in better health, came to be a member of the Tournai community in early November 1842.<sup>14</sup> Soon, in January 1843, the two of them were teamed together for a parish mission near Tournai, January 23 until February 3. Within a year's time they would be conducting similar missions together in far-off America.

#### *The call to the American frontier*

At this time, the dynamic Redemptorist Father Alexander Czvitkovicz was working with his customary vigor to gather missionaries for America. This excellent religious, as mentioned, had been superior of the band who trekked to Wittem in early 1836,

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usually used by a new priest to compose his mission and retreat sermons under the direction of an older missionary.

<sup>12</sup> During World War II, May 22-24, 1940, air strikes during the Battle of Tournai, destroyed many valuable records of the Redemptorist community.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Baptist Kaltenbach, b. June 30, 1791; prof. Sept. 20, 1813; ord. Sept. 19, 1814, d. Dec. 19, 1875.

<sup>14</sup> Poilvache, having dealt with persistent health issues, had finally been ordained priest on July 3, 1842.

and then served as the new seminary's first rector. Now, seven years later he had been appointed vicegerent in America.

Czvitkovicz's personal diary entry for March 30, 1843, contains these succinct words, "Fathers Gillet and Poilvache got ready for the voyage to America."<sup>15</sup> It seems that Czvitkovicz had actually asked for Gillet and *another Redemptorist* named Peter Renand,<sup>16</sup> and, for some unknown reason, Renand did not join the group bound for America. But Father Francis Poilvache did, perhaps as a late substitute for Renand.

Whatever the case, Louis Gillet and Poilvache were soon in London after a short trip from Belgium across the Strait of Dover. On Easter Tuesday, April 18, they, along with Czvitkovicz and four more of his newly-recruited Redemptorists, went aboard the three-masted packet ship *Philadelphia* which was docked on the River Thames. That afternoon the ship weighed anchor and was towed down to the Thames Estuary at the North Sea, and soon the passengers were in the English Channel, bound westward for their American destination, New York City.<sup>17</sup>

Father Czvitkovicz had decided that the Redemptorists would be "cabin passengers" rather than among the people who paid the lowest fare and traveled in "steerage class." Czvitkovicz had personally witnessed, and in his diary described, the pitiful, crowded conditions of steerage which he had seen on a previous trip in 1841, concluding that "Decency would not have permitted a priest to room in this compartment."<sup>18</sup>

Delays caused at times by storms, and at other times by contrary wind conditions, lengthened their journey to four weeks and two days, with arrival in New York being on May 18, 1843.

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<sup>15</sup> Diary of Alexander CZVITKOVICZ, within Joseph WUEST, *Annales Supplementum ad I, II, III*, 448. This separate volume is part of the multi-volume series of J. WUEST, as indicated in FN 5 above. Hereinafter this supplemental volume will be indicated simply as J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, with pertinent *Pars* (I or II), and page numbers.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Passerat to Frederick De Held, Feb. 18, 1843. Original in Redemptorist Archives, Köln. Photocopy AGHR, 30060001,84312.

<sup>17</sup> Diary of A. CZVITKOVICZ, within J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars I, 449-450.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

*Gillet preaching a mission within days*

One of the missionaries, Father Peter Cronenberg was immediately assigned by the American superior Czvitkovicz to be the assistant of Father Gabriel Rumpler, the Redemptorist pastor at the German parish of St. Nicholas in New York. Father Gillet, however, within days made contact with a French community at St. Vincent de Paul Church on Lower Manhattan Island and was given permission immediately to conduct a mission there. This was a historic event, being the first-ever Redemptorist mission preached in the city of New York.<sup>19</sup>

*On to Baltimore, Maryland*

It is unclear exactly when Gillet traveled south about one-hundred and ninety miles to the city of Baltimore, Maryland. But just four weeks after his arrival in America, he was listed on June 19, 1843, as one of the guests at the birthday observance of the rector of the Baltimore's St. Mary Seminary.<sup>20</sup> This may have well been an enjoyable gathering for Gillet, as most of the other guests could speak French. But, in general, his brief stay in Baltimore in the summer of 1843 was, at best, a mixed experience. The least pleasant part of his weeks in Baltimore was his interaction with the German-speaking Redemptorists at their residence, then located at the Church of St. James, Aisquith and Eager Streets. A few months later he would write back to Belgium, "I have no further inclination whatever to reside in a German house, as I did in Baltimore; I would rather return to Europe."<sup>21</sup> One must note, however, that at St. James there were then present some outstanding Redemptorists, among whom was

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<sup>19</sup> J. WUEST, *Annales* I, 445.

<sup>20</sup> Thus the Diary of Louis Deluol, S.S., the St. Mary Seminary Rector, under date of June 19, 1843. This diary is found in the Deluol Papers, Associated Archives of St. Mary's Seminary and University, 5400 Roland Ave., Baltimore, MD, 21219, USA.

<sup>21</sup> Gillet to De Held, Oct. 12, 1843, as quoted in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars I, 488. Gillet's aversion to Germans was not just a matter of language. In fact, he could communicate in German and later ministered to Germans in their native language in Michigan.



Father Francis Xavier Seelos (now declared *Blessed Francis Seelos* in the Church calendar) who made his profession of vows at St. James on July 16, 1843.<sup>22</sup>

Very gratifying and noteworthy among Gillet's 1843 Baltimore experiences was his coming to know the sixteen Oblate Sisters of Providence. They had been founded in 1829 and their distinction was, and is, that they were the first American congregation of women religious of African descent. Their early growth had been slow partly due to the prejudice and racial tensions surrounding them as they served the African-American Baltimore community, especially the French-speaking refugees from the slave revolts in Haiti (1793-1810). They were delighted when Gillet celebrated Mass and preached for them in French.

Among these Sisters of Providence was, significantly, Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin. This woman of deep faith, gifted intelligence, and strength of personality was to figure prominently into Gillet's missionary experience in the State of Michigan.

#### *Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere and the call to Michigan*

The Fifth Provincial Council of Baltimore, attended by the bishops of the United States and other invited clergy, had concluded on May 21, 1843, when Father Louis Gillet had barely landed in New York. Afterwards, in order to attend to various business matters, certain bishops remained in Baltimore and among these was Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere of Detroit, Michigan, a frontier diocese with few priests.

Strangely, Lefevere and Gillet previously had become acquainted with one another in Tournai when, during 1841, Lefevere had been to his native Belgium for a rest, and shortly after the day when he had learned of his appointment to be a bishop in Detroit.<sup>23</sup> And, according to Lefevere, he and Gillet had at that

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<sup>22</sup> Other members of the community were Fathers Joseph Helmprecht, Joseph Mueller, Albert Schaeffler, Joseph Glaunach (the novice master), and Brother Louis Kenning.

<sup>23</sup> This meeting is attested in Lefevere to Alexander Czvitkovicz, Mar. 6, 1844, to be found in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Letterbook of Bishop Lefevere.

time made unspecified “reciprocal promises.” Whatever the nature of these promises, they most likely included a general agreement that Gillet might perhaps one day serve in Lefevre’s diocese in America. Now their meeting face to face in Baltimore fleshed out that possibility and made it a reality.

Surely Father Gillet would have first needed the approval of his superior, Father Alexander Cvitkovicz, in order to go off as a missionary to Michigan which lay far to the west of Baltimore. Apparently the permission was forthcoming, for on or about July 20, 1843, Bishop Lefevre and Gillet were on their way to Michigan. The route they followed first took them north by train to New York City, and onward by a Hudson River steamer to Albany, New York. From there they went west to Buffalo, New York, possibly by horse-drawn canal boat. And the last portion of their trip was by steamboat across Lake Erie to Detroit. This necessarily indirect route covered almost 1000 miles and required ten days. Gillet was so impressed by the two days and two nights on Lake Erie that he exclaimed, “...it is a veritable sea. And still, all of that massive stretch is fresh water.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *Early days in the Diocese of Detroit*

Once in Detroit Father Gillet was housed in the rectory next to Old St. Anne’s Church which then served as the diocesan cathedral. (Accustomed to the grand cathedrals of Europe, Gillet referred to St. Anne’s as *la pauvre cathédral de Détroit*). Already two days after his arrival, he presided at the funeral of an infant, Catherine Tromblé, who had lived only eleven days from birth.<sup>25</sup> Then within only five days of his arrival, he had enlisted the vicar general of the diocese, Father Peter Kindekins to team with him in preaching a parish mission not far from Detroit in Grosse Pointe which they began on August 6.

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<sup>24</sup> Details from Gillet to Frederick De Held, Oct. 12, 1843. The original of this letter cannot be located. But it is quoted in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplémentum* I, and also in Pierre KERSTEN, ed., *Journal Historique et Littéraire*, Liège, Vol. X, février, 1847, 487-494.

<sup>25</sup> Old St. Anne Church, Detroit, burial records, under date of Aug. 3, 1843.

The anchor point of this mission was the small chapel of St. Paul, “five steps away from Lake St. Clair,” and in the opposite direction was “the forest inhabited by bear and wolves.”<sup>26</sup> The Catholics who lived in this huge area north of Detroit had been without priestly ministry for so long that the mission involved instructing children for First Communion, blessing marriages, and arranging baptisms of many young folk (some as old as seventeen). Somewhat stunned, Gillet said this was “completely new for [him as] a European.”<sup>27</sup>

From this, his first Redemptorist mission in Michigan, there eventually ensued a distinct, providential grace. The St. Paul Chapel was located on property farmed by the Renault family. The twenty-one year-old daughter of this family, Theresa, told Father Gillet of her desire to dedicate her life to God. Within two years she was among the founding members of the religious sisters he established; and later a second Renault daughter, Isabelle, followed her.<sup>28</sup>

After the Grosse Pointe mission, Gillet and Kindekens moved more than a hundred miles farther north, in the area of Saginaw Bay. In two different locations they engaged in basic evangelization, discovering adult French-speaking believers who had never experienced Reconciliation or Eucharist.<sup>29</sup> Before the frigid winter set in, there was also time to minister at an encampment of a thousand members of the Native American Chippewa tribe. This ministry met with only limited results, but Gillet left a fascinating, vivid description of these people and their way of life “among deer, wolves, bears, and rattlesnakes.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gillet to De Held, Oct. 12, 1843. Cf. our FN 24 above. To be noted is that Grosse Pointe, Michigan, is nowadays (2013) a beautiful suburb of Detroit, and St. Paul’s continues as a most distinguished parish community.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sister Rosalita KELLY, I.H.M., *No Greater Service, the History of the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan* : Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 1945, 55-58, and 760, FN 32. In religious life, the younger Renault sister was called Sister Celestine, and her elder sibling, Sister Frances. Hereinafter, this work will be cited as R. KELLY, *No Greater Service*.

<sup>29</sup> Gillet to De Held, Oct. 12, 1843. Cf. our FN 24 above.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Back at the pro-cathedral of St. Anne, Father Gillet settled into somewhat routine parish work for several weeks. But then in December, with the arrival in Detroit of Father Francis Poilvache,<sup>31</sup> the two long-time friends began a mission at St. Anne's on December 16. Bishop Lefevere himself announced this mission beforehand, and then was himself present for it. On the opening night the prelate symbolically "commissioned" the two preachers by placing stoles on their shoulders, and later assisted by spending long hours in a confessional.<sup>32</sup>

In the early months of 1844 the burial and marriage records of St. Anne Church show that Gillet continued to be busy in parish ministry in Detroit. But he was also involved in his first experience of "circuit riding." That is, these same records show that he traveled with some frequency to outlying districts both north and south of Detroit.

*Monroe, Michigan: a Redemptorist French-language foundation begins*

Bishop Lefevere liked what he saw of Redemptorist ministry. By early March 1844 he was petitioning the Redemptorist American superior, Father Alexander Czitkovicz, for "a permanent house of your Order... because there would be missions to give everywhere." The bishop mentioned that the city of Monroe, some forty miles south of Detroit and "the most important place after Detroit," seemed suitable for this foundation.<sup>33</sup>

Consultations and serious negotiations moved swiftly, for within three months the foundation came to be, indeed in Monroe, at the church of St. Antoine, or St. Anthony.<sup>34</sup> On June 16,

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<sup>31</sup> Poilvache had first been sent to Rochester, New York, but having no ability in German, he was not fit to serve there. See J. WUEST, *Annales* I, 137.

<sup>32</sup> This mission is described in length in Pierre KERSTEN, *Journal Historique et Littéraire*, XI (1843), 102-103.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere to Alexander Czitkovicz, March 6, 1844, Archives of Archdiocese of Detroit, Letterbook of Bishop Lefevere.

<sup>34</sup> St. Antoine was a historic parish dating back to 1788; some of its previous pastors were Father Gabriel Richard (co-founder of the University of Michigan and the first priest to serve in the U.S. Congress); also, Father Stephen Badin, the first priest ordained in the U.S.A., and donor of the land on

1844, all official parties gathered to sign the contract. Father Louis F. Gillet was authorized to act for the Redemptorists, and added below his signature, “Superior of the Redemptorists at Monroe,” a confirmation that by now he officially held this office. Most amazing about this contract was that its validity was to be for “the space of three-hundred years.”<sup>35</sup>

The first parishioners of St. Antoine’s in the late 1700s have been described as happy-go-lucky French-speaking people from Canada who lived from day to day. But in the 1800s Irish and German immigrants were added to the local population, and gradually substantial homes stood in place of the log cabins of earlier days. The city of Monroe in the 1840s knew a relative prosperity along with a fair number of respected merchants and educated professionals.<sup>36</sup>

The ministry assigned to Gillet and Poilvache was not only within Monroe, but stretched in three directions as much as one-hundred miles. In general, Father Poilvache cared for the French-speaking Monroe parish, and Gillet went out to nine mission stations in which the necessary languages were French, German, and English. Already capable in the first two languages, Father Gillet soon learned and ministered in English. He traveled either by horse or by horse-drawn buggy.

And yet many Catholics remained without proper pastoral care. To his European superior, Frederick De Held, Gillet wrote in 1845, “I desire to be everywhere – when I think of so many people in need.”<sup>37</sup>

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which is built Notre Dame (Indiana) University, and Francis V. Badin, brother to Stephen, who also was a well-known frontier missionary in America.

<sup>35</sup> Copies of this contract can be found in various archives, two notable ones being the Archives of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Monroe, MI, (these archives hereinafter cited as IHM Archives Monroe) and the Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province (these archives hereinafter cited as RABP).

<sup>36</sup> Descriptions of the people and their environment in early Monroe can be found in Ghislaine PIETERS BARTOLO, and Lynn WAYBRIGHT REAUME, *The Cross Leads Generations On, A Bicentennial Retrospect, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Formerly Known as St. Antoine at the River Raisin, Monroe, Michigan*, Custombook, Inc., Tappan, NY 1988. Also, Craig E. and Kimberly A. HUTCHINSON, *Monroe, the Early Years*, Charleston, South Carolina, et alibi: Arcadia 2004, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Gillet to Frederick De Held, April 13, 1845; see our FN 24 above.

*A strategic trip back to the East Coast of the U.S.A.*

In July of 1844 Father Gillet found it necessary to travel back east. He went to New York City in search of (and eventually finding) a shipment of valuable goods from Belgium. It had lain abandoned in a corner of a government customs office. Days later, after the trip south to Philadelphia, he was a witness to the famous 1844 religious riots in which Catholic churches were set afire. When leaving Philadelphia for Baltimore, fearing an attack from “nativists,” he chose not to dress as a priest and instead used a white coat as part of his disguise.

The main purpose of this trip back east was to have his recent contract negotiations ratified by his vice-gerent Czvitkovicz. But, in addition to finding his lost shipping crate of goods, other notable benefits came his way. In Baltimore he was able to have serious talks with Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin and Sister Ann Shaaff of the Oblate Sisters of Providence about joining him in Michigan to begin a school for girls. Also, he convinced a Philadelphia Redemptorist, Father Louis Cartuyvels, to return with him in order to oversee a building project he had in mind.

*Building projects in Monroe*

The project contemplated by Father Gillet at first was simply to have a decent residence for a Redemptorist community. In itself, this was a rather major undertaking. But it seems that, at the instigation of Father Cartuyvels, this one project grew into two. Soon they were busy also with enlarging the parish church. This endeavor called for the addition of a new sanctuary and altar area at the north end of the former worship space. Thus the pew area for the parishioners could be greater—better able to accommodate a congregation that had grown with the advent of the Redemptorists.

With the help of Cartuyvels and much volunteer labor, everything progressed so well that in a little over a year, plans could be made for a grand day of blessing and dedication.

This day came on December 8, 1845. Bishop Lefevere agreed to preside at the occasion, with a number of diocesan priests at-

tending and with one of their number, Casimir Mouret, being chosen to preach with his booming voice. With his usual flare for ceremony, Gillet arranged to have a long banner unfurled from the church tower as the bells pealed and cannon shots echoed over the immense crowd that had gathered. In all it was a six-hour ceremony as the bishop consecrated the church and blessed the new Redemptorist house under the title and protection of St. Joseph. And there seems to have been no objection to Gillet's renaming of the church; it was no longer St. Antoine—but St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>38</sup>

*The religious sisters are founded at Monroe*

Even before the two building projects had gotten underway, Father Gillet was determined to offer Christian education in the Monroe parish, something that for him was a matter of conscience. Toward this end, as already seen, when he was in Baltimore in 1844, he had serious conversations with two women religious, both of them belonging to the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Theresa Maxis Duchemin and Charlotte Shaaff. At the time they tentatively expressed a desire to join him in far-off Michigan.

Suddenly in late summer 1845 “Mother” Theresa (as she was later to be known), became convinced that it was the Will of God that she go to Michigan. With the consent of her confessor, and carrying his letters of recommendation, she set out on the ten-day trip, arriving on September 17. The first thing she did was to write back to Baltimore that Sister Ann Shaaff should follow her. Sister Ann agreed to do so immediately, and by mid-October she had arrived.

This precipitate action on the part of Mother Theresa seems to have delighted Father Gillet, and it also took him by surprise. The new Redemptorist house was not yet finished. He was in charge of St. Mary's parish and nine outstations. He had no firm

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<sup>38</sup> Gillet to Frederick De Held, January 27, 1846. The original letter cannot be located; it is quoted in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars I, 506ff; also, it was published in Liège in Pierre KERSTEN, ed., *Journal Historique et Littéraire*, vol. XIII, mai, 1846, 10ff. (A full set of this journal is in the Accademia Alfonsiana library, Via Merulana, 31, 00185, Roma, Italia).

financial resources. And now he had to provide for two additional personnel and also be serious about starting up a school.

By God's Providence everything fell into place. The Redemptorists moved into their unfinished building. The two sisters, after being temporarily housed by a generous married couple of the parish, moved into the primitive log cabins vacated by the priests. On November 9 a third member of the "sisters' community" arrived; this was Theresa Renauld from the Grosse Pointe family where Fathers Gillet and Kindekins had preached their inaugural Michigan mission in August 1843. Completely fluent in English and French, the intrepid Mother Theresa flew wholeheartedly into laying plans for a girls school. On Christmas Day the local newspaper gave notice of a new "Young Ladies Academy," due to open on January 15, 1846.

Meanwhile Father Louis Gillet, on November 10, with the approval of Bishop Lefevere, had proceeded formally to "establish" the two religious sisters from Baltimore and Theresa Renauld, their novice. He created a ritual for this occasion, resting a stole on the shoulder of each, which to the three pioneers signified cooperation in the work of the Church.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the thirty-two year-old Redemptorist Father Louis Florent Gillet launched one of the most outstanding congregations of Women Religious in the United States. First known as the *Sisters of Providence*, some two years later they opted to be known as *Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*.

#### *A growing community and ministry in Monroe*

Within a year Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere of Detroit named Father Gillet as the delegated "Director" of the sisters, meaning that the Redemptorist had certain discretionary jurisdiction regarding the nascent community of sisters and that he would

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<sup>39</sup> R. KELLY, *No Greater Service*, 58, drawing also on Sister Celestine RE-NAULD, *Historical Chronology of the Beginning of Our Community*, (unpaged ms), to be found in the Archives of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 610 West Elm Ave., Monroe, MI, 48162. Hereinafter these archives will be cited IHM Archives Monroe.



“take care and provide for it.”<sup>40</sup> Whenever possible he gave them a weekly spiritual “conference” (or sermon on their life as women religious) and provided liturgies for them.

Gillet also continued to conduct parish missions, sometimes teaming with Father Poilvache, and, of course, he had responsibility for the Redemptorist community, which itself was growing. Their new building had been built large enough to serve as a formation center for prospective members. Several young men came as “Brother Candidates,” aiming to profess vows but not aspiring to priestly ordination. Records show that only one of these Brothers persevered. In 1846, however, a third Redemptorist priest, Father Simon Sänderl, came to Monroe and was an outstanding addition in the year and a half he was in Michigan.<sup>41</sup> Because of his language abilities Sänderl was able to care especially for Germans and the (English-speaking) Irish in the large territory embraced by the Monroe parish. (The further story of Father Sänderl will be taken up later).

As for the sisters, their number increased by one in April of 1846 when the young widow, Mrs. Josette Godfroy-Smith, joined them. Although she was to be their last applicant for three years, the sisters could give thanks that their little school for girls had taken firm root with forty pupils—and then had the joy of beginning the school’s second year with an enrollment of eighty.

*The year 1847 began well, and then...*

Besides the success of the “The Young Ladies Academy,” St. Mary’s Parish and its outlying mission stations were being served well as the first weeks of 1847 advanced. Nevertheless, one concern tugged at the mind of Father Louis Gillet: the sisters needed better accommodations for themselves and for their

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Paul Lefevere to Mother Theresa M. Duchemin, December 6, 1846. Original in IHM Archives Monroe.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Sänderl, b. Sept. 30, 1800; ord. May 28, 1825; prof. July 18, 1829; he had been the first superior of the Redemptorist mission to America in 1832. Fluent in his native German, and in English, he had also mastered Chippewa and ministered among this Native American tribe. His Chippewa dictionary and his sermons in that language remain in RABP, Special Collections.

teaching. He had already been refused financial help from the Redemptorists at their Baltimore headquarters. "No more debts" was the constant refrain coming out of Europe from Father Frederick De Held, the provincial in Liège, Belgium.

Nonetheless, Gillet knew that he had to have funds, and he looked in the direction of New Orleans, Louisiana, at that time the third largest city in the nation. It had a thriving economy, a large Catholic population, and was where clergymen often turned when in need. With an invitation from Bishop Antoine Blanc to conduct a series of Lenten sermons in his New Orleans Cathedral of St. Louis, King of France, Gillet left Michigan for Louisiana in early February. His preaching was well received and he decided to remain "nearly two months" after Easter to oblige those who sought him as a confessor.

In May he returned north with \$835.00 and "thirteen large crates" filled with furnishings of all kinds. Later he wrote, "I was rich at that moment...the condition of the sisters was better...our Redemptorist house was finished. There remained for me only to enjoy in peace the realization of my plans." But he woefully concluded, "The consolation was not to be mine."<sup>42</sup>

Two unrelated, false accusations against Father Gillet occurred between July and September of 1847. The first was made by a woman parishioner, a Mrs. Livingston, who claimed that he had seduced her. She filed suit against him which came to public trial in Monroe on August 17. The verdict went against Mrs. Livingston when Gillet's defender caught her in a perjured statement that "[Gillet]conducted her into an adjoining room, of which there was none."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Louis F. GILLET, "Historical Account of the Founding of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary," page 5 of (unnumbered) original ms. in French. This original is preserved in the Archives of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters, Immaculata, PA. Hereinafter these archives will be cited as IHM Archives Immaculata.

<sup>43</sup> Letter of Simon Sänderl to Bishop Lefevre, August 17, 1847, University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, III-2-h-A.L.S. (Hereinafter these Archives cited as: UNDA). A number of people have made extensive searches for the trial records, all to no avail. There were two extensive fires in the Monroe County (Michigan) Court House, one in 1879 and another in 1992; these fires destroyed an unknown quantity of court records and the

Barely able to breathe in relief, a second false accusation came two weeks after his acquittal, originating from within his own Redemptorist community. This event was to end in Gillet's sudden and definitive removal from Monroe.

The basic facts, as recalled by Father Egidius Smulders who succeeded Gillet as Redemptorist superior in Monroe, were as follows: "[Father Gillet] was accused by F[ather Martin] Hasslinger to Rev. F[ather] Neumann of improper conduct with a widow woman, who swept the church. [Gillet] had sent away a novice and a postulant [of the Redemptorists]; these went to Detroit and F[ather] Hasslinger took their testimony and made most of circumstantial evidence. I was sent to replace [Gillet] and found him innocent. F[ather] G[illet] was a pure man and kept scrupulously our rules of modesty."<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, further details of the second false accusation against Gillet were sent by to Vienna by Father Hasslinger of Detroit. This priest was an Austrian Redemptorist practically unknown to Gillet. He was in Detroit in order to found a new Redemptorist house. The two "Redemptorist Brothers" who "reported to Hasslinger about the widow woman in Gillet's room" were a novice and a pre-novice or postulant. A portion of the Hasslinger report follows:

As regards the Brothers, on his authority [Gillet] had dismissed one of them on account of his constant fault-finding [which] caused bitterness in the [Monroe] house. Because I conditionally took this Brother in, Father Gillet conceived a deadly hatred of me... Later he took this Brother back, and shortly afterwards he threw him and another Brother headlong out of the house. He was guilty of imprudence in taking into his room a woman (she being about thirty-eight years old and usually swept the church) for the purpose of scrubbing his room, as he afterwards said. As

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Gillet trial records may well have been lost in these fires. – A strange twist to this story is that the "defense attorney," James B. Sheeran, was not an attorney at all, but a tailor. Furthermore, the very intelligent Sheeran, after his wife died, became a Redemptorist priest and a rather famous chaplain in the USA Civil War, 1861-1865. He later left the Redemptorists and died a diocesan priest in New Jersey.

<sup>44</sup> Egidius Smulders to Joseph Wuest, April 6, 1888. Original in RABP, SMULDERS, *Personalia*, reprinted in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 97.

there was already a suspicion in the house in this regard, the Brothers went to his door and sought to enter his room, but the door was locked. He opened it and drove them away, and soon afterwards he put them out of the house. That the woman was in his room, Father Gillet himself admitted to Father Sänderl. Whether there was ground for the suspicion, as they conceived the situation, cannot be proved to evidence... It would be a pity if he were to leave the Congregation; under good and firm guidance he could do much work; only the American freedom is somewhat dangerous for him...<sup>45</sup>

Two other incidents in September and October 1847 caused additional pain to Father Louis Gillet. One was that the Redemptorist authorities in Vienna had ordered another Visitation of the American Mission, only two years after a previous Visitation. They were concerned about several issues not to their liking. When the two Visitors, Fathers Martin Stark and Charles Kannamüller, came to Monroe they clashed with Gillet, who judged that Stark employed “merciless and unjust procedures” and “took steps by which [my] reputation in all of North America [was] called into question...on account simply of suspicion without sufficient proof.”<sup>46</sup> Whereas, about Kannamüller, who was specifically delegated to “investigate” Gillet, the Belgian provincial Frederick De Held commented later, “The choice of Father Kannamüller was unfortunate, and the procedure itself had to provoke Father Gillet, without its being able to produce anything good.”<sup>47</sup>

The other painful event was the September 1847 loss from

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Hasslinger to Joseph Passerat, Jan. 14, 1848. See Johannes NORDMANN, *Die Liguorianer! Ihre Constitution und Correspondenz*, von Lechner's Universitätsbuchhandlung, Wien 1849, 183-184. This rare Nordmann work constitutes an anthology of letters salvaged and published by revolutionaries who destroyed the Redemptorist archives of Vienna in 1848. What they saved was deemed savory evidence against “the Ultramontane Redemptorists,” this Hasslinger letter being a prime example. (Nordmann is most probably a pseudonym). The complete work can be found in the library of the Accademia Alfonsiana, as in our FN 38 above.

<sup>46</sup> Gillet to Nicolas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, AGHR, Baltimore Province, *Personalia*, Gillet dossier.

<sup>47</sup> Frederick De Held to John Neumann, Nov. 3, 1847. Original in RABP, Letters from Europe, Neumann Collection, Photocopy in AGHR, 30060001,84782, p. 3.

the Monroe community of Father Simon Sänderl. This loss was caused by a combination of misinformation and disillusionment. When Sänderl came in 1846, it was under a cloud of suspicion. He had been ousted from Baltimore by the local archbishop, Samuel Eccleston, over a difference of opinion. After working briefly in Canada, he was ordered by the Redemptorist vice-gerent Peter Czackert to report to Monroe by a given deadline. En route to Monroe, his horse fell on him and broke his leg, causing him to miss the deadline. In Baltimore Czackert, after learning that Sänderl was not yet in Monroe, angrily expelled him from the Redemptorists. The expulsion notice, which was probably invalid and illegal, had come to Gillet, and he quietly slipped it into a drawer, but eventually told Sänderl of it. This fine man, who had been the first superior of the American mission and an outstanding missionary, simply lost heart and departed from Monroe.<sup>48</sup>

Sometime in mid-October Father Louis Gillet left Monroe for the Redemptorist headquarters in Baltimore, to which location he had been summoned. His departure came after the arrival in Monroe of his young replacement, Father Egidius Smulders, and after he had decided to petition Pope Pius IX for a dispensation from his Redemptorist vows. The text of this petition has only rather recently been discovered in the Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome.<sup>49</sup> It reveals the pain Gillet suffered at the time. In general he felt betrayed by his fellow Redemptorists who seemingly had no regard for “my very honorable life thus far as a priest of fourteen years.” This sense of betrayal extended even to his vice-provincial, Father (and, later, Saint) John Neumann who had suspended Gillet from all public ministry.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Father Simon Sänderl entered the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in the state of Kentucky in March 1852, professed vows there on Mar. 27, 1853, lived as a devout Cistercian Monk and died there on Feb. 22, 1879. See BOLAND, 334.

<sup>49</sup> Gillet to Pope Pius IX, Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome, Scritt. Ref. Nei Congressi America Centrale, Vol. 14 (1845-1848), 610v. A copy of the original Latin is in possession of the author.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* – St. John Neumann, b. in Bohemia, Mar. 28, 1811; came to U.S.A. and ordained diocesan priest in New York City, June 25, 1836; met Redemptorists in New York State, and professed as Redemptorist, Jan. 16, 1842, first C.Ss.R. to be professed in America; became American superior of Redemp-

*Baltimore and New York: the beginning of years of wandering*

Father Gillet arrived in Baltimore sometime in the latter half of September 1847. It is reasonable to assume that he then had an interview with John Neumann. This would have given the vice-provincial an opportunity to hear Gillet's side of the story about what Martin Hasslinger had reported.

On October 24 Father Gabriel Rumpler, Gillet's ordination classmate, wrote to Father Neumann from Holy Redeemer Church in New York, "If you find that it is a good thing to do, send Rev. Fr. Gillet here. I am content with your stipulations."<sup>51</sup> Nothing can be found to explain these stipulations. But it seems clear that Gillet was still in Baltimore in late October, and that Neumann was willing to allow Gillet to reside in New York. Another important fact is that there is evidence that soon after arriving in Baltimore Father Gillet revoked his request for dispensation from his Redemptorist vows. This was probably soon after meeting with Neumann.<sup>52</sup>

The chronicles of the Redemptorist house in Baltimore do not even mention Gillet's presence, nor his departure, whereas the official roster of Holy Redeemer in New York, drawn up at the beginning of January 1848, states that Gillet was living in the community of Holy Redeemer, although apparently not active in any ministry.

While residing at Holy Redeemer in New York on East Third Street, Gillet received dreadful news. He learned of the sudden death of Father Francis Poilvache on February 11, 1847. This longtime friend, companion, and Redemptorist confrère had been stricken two weeks earlier in Monroe, Michigan, with spotted fever. He died in less than twelve hours. How much this death affected Gillet is evident from the poignant letter which he addressed back to Belgium, to Poilvache's father. In very tender terms he offered his condolences to the Poilvache family.<sup>53</sup>

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torists in 1847; chosen bishop of Philadelphia, 1852; died suddenly Jan. 5, 1860; beatified 1963 by Paul VI and canonized by same 1977.

<sup>51</sup> Gabriel Rumpler to John Neumann, Oct. 24, 1847, as found in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 170-171.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Stark to Frederick De Held, Jan. 10, 1848; original in Redemptorist Archives, Köln; photocopy in AGHR, 30060001,84804a, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> This original letter to the elder Poilvache is in AGHR, Baltimore Prov-

It is certain that Gillet remained in New York until at least mid-to-late March 1848.<sup>54</sup> After that there is no definite information of his whereabouts until September of 1848.<sup>55</sup> It was then that he preached a parish mission in the historic location of Kaskaskia, in southern Illinois. Teaming with him was a beloved diocesan priest of the area, Vital Van Cloostere, and a Vincentian, Father Angelo Gandolfo.

The Church of St. Mary's Immaculate Conception dated back to 1693, to a time when Kaskaskia was a flourishing trading post on the Mississippi River. In 1818 the town had even served briefly as the capital city of the state of Illinois. Now thirty years later, the parish still had hundreds of parishioners who flocked to the ten-day mission preached in both English and French. The closing on September 14 was in the ceremonious style of Father Gillet, as attested by an article that later appeared in New York's *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*. Among other pageantry, eighty-men carried the mission cross meant to commemorate the event; at the top of the cross was a time capsule made of lead and containing a proclamation signed by church and civic officials.<sup>56</sup>

As a matter of fact, Father Gillet stayed at Kaskaskia during most of the month of September, and perhaps longer. His name appears in extant baptismal and marriage records as late as September 28, and in the official United States *Catholic Almanac, 1849*, which holds data gathered in 1848, "V. Rev. Father

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ince, *Personalia*, Gillet dossier, under date of Feb. 11, 1848. How the letter found its way to the AGHR in Rome cannot be explained.

<sup>54</sup> See Michael Heilig to John Neumann, Apr. 30, 1848, RABP, Letters from Europe; [photocopy is in AGHR, 07 X E 2721], this letter reads, in part, "Father Gillet has written me from New York." Given that a letter took four to six weeks to reach Europe, one can surmise that Gillet was still in New York in the latter weeks of March.

<sup>55</sup> Seven years later, in Gillet to Superior General Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, AGHR, Baltimore Province, Gillet dossier, Gillet made vague references to preaching at this time in Missouri, and to "the Indians in the North." But no further details have clearly surfaced.

<sup>56</sup> *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*, Sept. 21, 1848, James Alphonsus McMASTER, editor, p. 6. – Other records of Gillet's ministry in Kaskaskia are found in the sacramental records located under various September 1848 dates in the Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Belleville, Illinois. Photocopies in possession of author.

*Louis*” is listed as the official priest in Kaskaskia. This could indicate that he was there earlier than September and at least into November, at the end of which month he went to New Orleans.

*Briefly in New Orleans*

Yellow Fever was raging in New Orleans. On the very day that Gillet and his team had begun the mission in Kaskaskia, the Redemptorist Father Peter Czackert died of the fever. He had been the vice-gerent superior in the American mission, immediately prior to the term of John Neumann. Then, to his delight, Czackert was able to return to New Orleans, where he had previously served. In the summer of 1848 he was day and night at the side of Yellow Fever victims, and then he was stricken himself, dying four days later. Meanwhile two other Redemptorists became ill.

Somehow word of the crisis reached Father Gillet, who agreed to go to New Orleans, arriving on November 26. The sacramental records of St. Mary’s Assumption show that he was active in this parish until his departure on December 23, 1848.

Research has not yielded the reason for Gillet’s leaving after only one month. But these were disturbed times for Redemptorists on both sides of the Atlantic. Revolutions sent shock waves through 1848 Europe, Redemptorist superiors in Vienna were driven into exile, and waves of this turmoil reached over to America. John Neumann’s status as the American superior was, for a time, in doubt, which led some of his subjects to claim that his decisions were invalid. Neumann repeatedly offered to resign and Michael Heilig, the new Belgian provincial, at one time suggested that would be a good idea. Then, hoping to stabilize matters in America, Heilig chose to replace Neumann with Father Bernard Hafkenschaid. This announcement of this man to be in the top leadership position in America would prove to be dire news in the life of Father Louis Gillet. Hafkenschaid arrived in New York on January 9, 1849.

*A meeting in St. Louis with Bernard Hafkenschaid*

Bernard Hafkenschaid (who now validly held the title of “vice-provincial of the American vice-province”) was a man who



faithfully kept a diary which has come down to us. It is only in this diary that we learn of a meeting between himself and Father Louis Gillet in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, some 680 miles north of New Orleans.<sup>57</sup> Gillet was very likely in St. Louis at this time to attend the episcopal ordination of James Oliver Van de Velde, on February 11, 1849. This Belgian Jesuit friend of Gillet had been chosen to be bishop of Chicago.<sup>58</sup> A story that surfaced only later was that, without Gillet's permission, Van de Velde had named Gillet to be his Vicar General in Chicago, an appointment immediately declined by Gillet when he learned of it.<sup>59</sup>

A later statement by Bernard Hafkenschied claimed that when he came to America he had a mind to "put an end to the affair of Father Gillet."<sup>60</sup> Beyond that general indication, no clue has been discovered as to specific discussions during his St. Louis meeting with Gillet. Moreover, there is a time lapse of about six weeks, until the end of March, in which the whereabouts of Father Gillet are not known.

*The critical meeting, Hafkenschied and Gillet, Philadelphia, March 25, 1849*

The second meeting of 1849 between Father Gillet and his American superior is problematic, the reason being that are three lengthy versions of what took place, two by Hafkenschied and the third by Gillet himself. As an introduction to these versions,

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<sup>57</sup> Diary of B. Hafkenschied, Jan. 8-Feb. 5: *Actes Authentiques de Bernard Hafkenschied*, original in AGHR, X-E, 07XE2732. Reprint in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 184-185. This meeting is mentioned under the diary entry of Jan. 26, 1849, but the meeting was probably around Feb. 5, judging from a letter written by Hafkenschied to all Redemptorists in America, and the heading on the letter states, "St. Louis, Feb. 5, 1849." See J. WUEST, *Annales*, Vol. II, 20-24.

<sup>58</sup> James Oliver Van de Velde, b. Apr. 3, 1875; prof. vows as a Jesuit, 1809; ord. priest Sept. 16, 1827; taught at Jesuits' University of St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, became its president 1840-1843; ordained bishop of Chicago in St. Louis, Feb. 11, 1849.

<sup>59</sup> Gillet to Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, AGHR, Baltimore Province *Personalia*, Gillet dossier.

<sup>60</sup> Hafkenschied to (Roman Consultor) Theodore Lelouchier, C.Ss.R., Dec. 22, 1855, AGHR, Province of Baltimore, *Personalia*, Gillet dossier.

we present the brief diary entry by Hafkenschaid for March 25, 1849. It reads: "Father Gilet [sic] arrived at Philadelphia. After a long and serious conversation I persuaded him to request from his superiors the dispensation from his vows, rather than be dismissed. He took up my proposal by a letter in his own hand and dated the same day."

The first lengthy version of this Philadelphia meeting is a letter which Hafkenschaid wrote to Archbishop Peter R. Kenrick of St. Louis. It is full of superlatives, such as stating<sup>61</sup> that he is *fully convinced* that Gillet is *entirely changed* and his spirit of religious life is *extinguished*. Moreover, Hafkenschaid seems unctuous and patronizing about his own *long and fervent prayer* as he has advised Gillet to leave the Redemptorists *for his own happiness*. This letter to Kenrick was written in the hope that the archbishop would accept Gillet into his own archdiocese since he has convinced Gillet to seek a dispensation from Redemptorist vows, and he has consented. Most important in this letter to Kenrick was a statement, "... I can positively assure your Episcopal Grace, that...Father Lewis [sic]...by no means [can] be charged with any fault as would render any bishop unwilling to receive him into his diocese."<sup>62</sup>

The second lengthy version, also by Hafkenschaid, was written seven and one-half years after the Philadelphia encounter (i.e., in December 1855); further, it was composed when Hafkenschaid was urging Roman authorities not to readmit Gillet into the Redemptorists. He stated to a member of the General Council in Rome that he had called Gillet *to Baltimore* in 1849, and gave him a chance to justify himself, which Gillet could not do. Moreover, Hafkenschaid claimed that he had used "a delicate approach," urging Gillet to ask for a dispensation to ask for a dispensation from vows, and he agreed to do so.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Use of italics here is this author's, not the emphasis of Hafkenschaid.

<sup>62</sup> Hafkenschaid to Archbishop [name not given, but internal evidence makes clear that it was Peter Richard Kenrick of St. Louis, Missouri], March 1849, as found in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 256-258. In this letter Hafkenschaid claims a long knowledge of Gillet and "I loved him always sincerely." Yet he misspells both Louis Gillet's baptismal name and surname as "Lewis Gilet."

<sup>63</sup> Hafkenschaid to General Consultor Theodore Lelouchier, as in FN 59

The third version of the 1849 encounter between Gillet and Hafkenschaid was written in November 1855, and this is by Gillet himself. He said their discussion in Philadelphia began with a scolding by Hafkenschaid who said Gillet had lost his religious spirit when he had served in Chicago as the vicar general to Bishop Van de Velde. Gillet responded that the Jesuit bishop of Chicago had appointed him without his knowledge or consent, and he had rejected the role of vicar general immediately when he heard of it. Then Gillet said Hafkenschaid pressured him to request a dispensation from vows based on his delicate health—and Gillet refused outright. But the badgering continued, Hafkenschaid trying to get Gillet to ask for his dispensation—until, in a fit of indignation, Gillet agreed to do so. However, he reconsidered what he had done, and wrote a retraction that very night. The retraction was met with “a very discouraging and imprecise answer” from Hafkenschaid.<sup>64</sup>

Whatever the facts, Gillet was then ordered to Baltimore to be kept under observation by Hafkenschaid.<sup>65</sup> He remained not at Old St. James, but in the new Redemptorist residence at St. Alphonsus Parish, from April 13 until July 17, 1849. During this time he celebrated some liturgies for the Oblate Sisters of Providence, served as a chanter for liturgies during the Seventh Provincial Council of Baltimore, and had occasional visits with his Sulpician friend Father Louis Deluol, the president of St. Mary’s (Archdiocesan) Seminary.<sup>66</sup> But by mid-July Gillet went to Hafkenschaid and said, among other things, that he had to get away from Baltimore, that he could no longer live among Germans. In addition he maintained that he had been the “butt of daily humiliations,” and that his health was declining, as he alluded to the

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above. Hafkenschaid mistakenly says the meeting was *in Baltimore*; his own diary (see our FN 56 above) says it was in Philadelphia.

<sup>64</sup> Gillet to Superior General Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, as in our FN 46 above.

<sup>65</sup> Hafkenschaid to Theodore Lelouchier, as in FN 59 above.

<sup>66</sup> See *Annals of the Oblate Sisters of Providence*, Baltimore, s.d. Apr. 29, 1849. Also Peter GUILDAY, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore, (1791-1884)*, Macmillan, New York 1932, 156. Also, *Diary of Father Louis Deluol, S.S.*, Deluol Papers, Associated Archives, St. Mary Seminary and University, Baltimore, s.d. May 6, 1849.

“the advice and decision of three doctors.” In the end Hafkenschaid put conditions on his leaving: that he could not enter any Redemptorist house, but he could, if he wished, “take a congregation”; that he should write the vice-provincial from wherever he stayed, and return whenever called by Hafkenschaid.<sup>67</sup> – Thus began the final five and one-half years of Father Louis Gillet’s life in America.

*Mid-1849 until early 1855: Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ontario, and expulsion from the Redemptorists*

When Father Louis Gillet was in Monroe, Michigan, he had become friends with a French priest by the name of Louis Amadeus Rappe, who served a parish about twenty miles south of Monroe, in Toledo, Ohio. In 1847 Rappe was named the first bishop of Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>68</sup> After leaving Baltimore in the summer of 1849, it was to Rappe’s diocese that Gillet traveled. We cannot be certain of his date of arrival or of his length of stay. In fact, only indirectly do we know of Gillet’s presence in the small hamlet of Harrisburg, Ohio, this information being in a letter written by Father Louis de Goesbriand, Bishop Rappe’s vicar general. De Goesbriand makes mention of Gillet conducting missions in Harrisburg and elsewhere in the Cleveland diocese.<sup>69</sup>

After this interlude in the Cleveland diocese, Gillet can next be located serving in a region of western Ohio. However, before following him there, it must be noted that soon after his departure from Baltimore, the vice-provincial Hafkenschaid made his move to have Gillet expelled from the Redemptorists. On September 15, the Belgian provincial, Michael Heilig, at the request of Bernard Hafkenschaid, applied to the Redemptorist General Headquarters, then in Pagani, Italy, for Gillet’s expulsion.<sup>70</sup> Allow-

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<sup>67</sup> The details in this paragraph are based on two documents: Gillet to Superior General Mauron as in our FN 46 above; and, Bernard Hafkenschaid to Theodore Lelouchier, as in our FN 63 above.

<sup>68</sup> Louis Amadeus Rappe, b. Feb. 2, 1801; ord. priest Mar. 14, 1829; ord. bishop, Oct. 10, 1847; d. Sept. 8, 1877.

<sup>69</sup> Louis de Goesbriand to Bishop John B. Purcell, Jan. 8, 1850, UNDA, II-4-K.

<sup>70</sup> This formal request, Heilig to Vincenzo Trapanese, Sept. 15, 1849, is to be found in AGHR, 07 XII 3265. Trapanese at that time was vicar general of the Redemptorists, but was acting in the capacity of superior general, due to the

ing at least a month for a letter's America-to-Europe crossing, this means that Hafkenschied's move to expel Gillet ensued only three weeks, and perhaps less, after Gillet's departure. The dismissal from the Redemptorists was issued on January 8, 1850, but for more than five years Gillet was steadfast in saying that while in America he never received official notice of dismissal.<sup>71</sup>

Having applied for permission to minister in the Cincinnati, Ohio, diocese, Father Gillet was accepted by the bishop of Cincinnati, John Baptist Purcell, who sent him to serve the French-speaking people in Darke and Shelby Counties, a district of farms, forests and swamps. On Christmas Eve 1850 he made first contact with Father Louis Navarron, a humble and dedicated man who had singlehandedly cared for the Catholics of that area for a number of years. Navarron directed Gillet to a hamlet sometimes called Frenchtown, and at other times Champagne, where there was a small log church. As a kind of introduction, within days of his arrival he preached a well-received mission for the people.

About six months after Gillet's arrival, Father Navarron, whose health was not good, was transferred to a new location closer to Cincinnati. Gillet was now responsible for all the Catholics in Darke and Shelby counties. He continued, however, to use Frenchtown as his base of operation, and enlisted the help of the people to enlarge Holy Family Church and also to build a rectory.<sup>72</sup> Farther to the east, in Shelby County, it is certain that he did a certain amount of circuit riding, caring for a community of faithful in Newport (on the Miami-Erie Canal),<sup>73</sup> and very likely at St. Remy Church in a town named Russia.

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serious illness of Superior General Giancamillo Ripoli. Ripoli soon died and Trapanese was shortly thereafter declared superior general by a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. See BOLAND, 393.

<sup>71</sup> In Hafkenschied's diary he said he sent the notice to "Park County, Ohio" whereas Gillet was in Darke County. This may well have caused the expulsion notice to go astray.

<sup>72</sup> Gillet to Bishop Purcell, undated, but internal evidence places the date as May 31, 1850, or early June, UNDA, II-4-k-A.L.S. – This rectory, or priest's residence, in Frenchtown, though much renovated through more than a century and a half, is still standing in 2013.

<sup>73</sup> This is attested by Fielding LUCAS, Jr., ed., *The Catholic Almanac*, Baltimore, 1851 and 1852 editions.

Gillet continued in this area of western Ohio until at least March 1852. His departure, however, leaves one with a rather mysterious set of facts. His last ministry in the Holy Family Church records in Frenchtown indicate that he conducted a funeral there on March 2, 1852. Thereafter all Holy Family records were entered by his priest-successor, Father Arnold Pinkers.<sup>74</sup> However, we also have a letter written by Gillet to Bishop John Baptist Purcell on the following June 21 saying that he had left Frenchtown three weeks before. He added that he was now staying with a private family in Piqua, Ohio, and that soon there was “a long journey” lying before him (to where he does not say). Also, he had to sell his horse, buggy, and some personal items to pay for the journey. Moreover, he had been robbed of “sixty dollars property” and the people of Frenchtown had not paid him all of their promised support. Furthermore, he was “expecting dayly (sic) letters about [his] destination.”<sup>75</sup>

Then, by late summer of 1852 it is clear that Father Gillet was in Fort Wayne, Indiana, only 150 miles north of Piqua, Ohio, from where he had written his June 1852 letter. So it is not likely that this was the “long journey” which he had anticipated. He lived at the Church of St. Augustine in Fort Wayne according to the 1853 *Catholic Almanac*. However a search of sacramental records in what is now the Fort Wayne diocese show that he ministered in the village of Hessen Cassel, Indiana, at St. Joseph Church in mid-September of 1852.<sup>76</sup> Significantly he signed the records as “P. Louis, C.Ss.R.”, (the C.Ss.R. indicating his bonafide Redemptorist status). Seeming he truly thought he was still a Redemptorist even two and one-half years after he had technically been expelled. Probably Gillet was in the Fort Wayne area

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<sup>74</sup> Sacramental records of Holy Family, Frenchtown, now preserved at St. Denis Church, Versailles, Ohio. See also, “History of St. Denis, Versailles” a ms. preserved at St. Denis, Versailles, OH, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Gillet to Archbishop Purcell, June 21, 1852, UNDA, II-4-1-A.L.S. Cincinnati had become an archdiocese on July 19, 1850; hence, Purcell was now an archbishop.

<sup>76</sup> Microfilm records, Fort Wayne Diocesan Archives, 915 Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the reel containing the sacramental records of St. Joseph Church, Hessen Cassel, IN. See baptismal records, s.d. Sept. 11, 1852, and marriage records, s.d. Sept. 16, 1852.

only six months at most, from September until sometime in February 1853.

Only rather recently (in 2007) has it come to light that in the late winter of 1853 Father Gillet “gave a try” to the contemplative life of a monk. This previously unknown information can be found in a letter preserved in the archives of the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. The author of the letter was Bishop Jean Marie Odin of the Diocese of Texas. After first telling of a letter which he had received from Father Gillet, Odin reported on March 11, 1853, to his friend Bishop Antoine Blanc of New Orleans, Louisiana: “Recently he gave the life of the Trappists a try, but he could not bear up under their regimen.”<sup>77</sup> Odin was seeking Blanc’s opinion of Gillet, saying that, after finding the Trappist “regimen” too difficult, Gillet was thinking of working somewhere in the huge expanse of Texas, in the mid-southwestern United States. (No evidence has surfaced to indicate whether Blanc recommended Gillet or not, nor that Gillet ever went to Texas). As for the “Trappists,” they were almost surely those at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, fifty miles south of Louisville, Kentucky, where the former Redemptorist, Father Simon Sänderl, had been accepted and was soon to make his profession of vows.<sup>78</sup>

Gillet next sought ministry in the Archdiocese of New York. At least this can be gleaned from a letter of Bernard Hafkenschied to Archbishop John J. Hughes dated May 8, 1853. The Redemptorist vice-provincial warns Hughes that, although expelled, Gillet continues to present himself as a Redemptorist. Hafkenschied claims Gillet does this in bad faith. Yet, he has no objection to “his being incorporated” into the New York diocese. More importantly the American superior says, “Did he (Gillet) receive [his expulsion notice] I cannot decide.” This is contrary

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<sup>77</sup> Bishop Jean Marie Odin to Archbishop Antoine Blanc, March 11, 1853, UNDA, VI-I-e-A.L.S.

<sup>78</sup> It can be noted that there were other Trappists in North America, but at distant locations in Nova Scotia and Iowa, and Gillet had no connections with either group. Moreover, a search in the archival records of Gethsemani yielded no mention of Gillet’s brief stay, but an archivist in 2008 explained that record keeping was not as precise in those years as it was later on.

to what Hafkenschaid would formally avow two years later to his Redemptorist Superior General Nicholas Mauron, "It is impossible that Gillet was ignorant of his formal exclusion from the Congregation." No evidence has been found that Gillet was ever accepted for ministry in New York.<sup>79</sup>

The last place within the United States where Father Gillet sought to serve was in the diocese of Albany, New York. He had written such a request to Albany's Bishop John McCloskey, who in turn wrote to Archbishop Purcell in Cincinnati on May 23, 1853, asking Purcell's opinion.<sup>80</sup> It is apparent that nothing came of Gillet's request to exercise priestly ministry in the Albany diocese.

However, he was soon welcomed across the border in Canada, into the diocese of Kingston, Ontario. In his own words, "I accepted the offer of the Bishop of Kingston. He appointed me Head of his seminary and teacher of theology. I held the post for nearly a year."<sup>81</sup> In 2007 permission was granted the author of this article to search the Kingston archdiocesan archives for any evidence of Gillet's presence. After hours of searching, in a financial account book of Regiopolis (Seminary) College there appeared a notice from February 1854 of payment having been made to Father Gillet: 12 pounds, 10 shillings, and no pence. The entry was confirmed as being the handwriting of Bishop Patrick Phelan, Administrator of the diocese. Later, in the baptismal registry of Kingston's Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, and recorded in the unmistakable handwriting and signature of Father Gillet, it was found that he had baptized two children, one in October, and another in November, 1853.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Hafkenschaid to Bishop John J. Hughes, May 8, 1853, handwritten copy in RAPP, Gillet, *Personalia*; and Gillet to Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, as in our FN 46 above.

<sup>80</sup> Bishop John McCloskey to Archbishop John B. Purcell, May 23, 1853, UNDA, II-4-1-A.L.S.

<sup>81</sup> Gillet to Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, as in our FN 46 above.

<sup>82</sup> In the Public Library of Kingston a volume was discovered which spoke, sadly, of the old seminary records of Regiopolis College, stating that they "...were lost or destroyed, apparently around 1890, when alterations were being made to the old building." See Lt. Col. L.J. FLYNN, *At School in Kingston 1850-1973*, Tercentenary Project Kingston, Ontario 1973, 23-25. Hence no academic records exist from the one year of Gillet's stay.



Louis Gillet was to spend about five months more in North America. But definite information on how he was occupied, or where he spent those final months has not been discovered.

*Return to Europe in 1855, and his petition for reinstatement*

Sometime in January 1855 Father Louis Gillet returned to Europe. He was now forty-two years old. His intention was “to hear something definite on his situation” which, presumably, meant his status as a Redemptorist.

First he went to visit his seventy-four year-old mother. Then he went to see the Redemptorists at Liège, among whom was Father Frederick De Held who brought him up to date on Redemptorist events. There was a kind of interregnum at that time, with the election of a new superior general soon to take place.<sup>83</sup> In the meantime, on the advice of the bishop of Liège, Father Gillet agreed to serve for some months as a parish priest near Liège. When the time seemed right, on November 29, 1855, Gillet wrote his petition for readmission into the Redemptorists (as he was now rather sure that he had been dismissed, even though he had received no document as proof). As noted earlier, this petition was addressed to the new superior general, Nicholas Mauron.

Within about five weeks, he received word that his petition had been denied. Mauron had sought the counsel of Bernard Hafkenschied, whom he knew personally, and Hafkenschied wrote a very condemnatory, negative opinion about Father Gillet. The main reason which Mauron ultimately gave (for denial of readmittance), through his consultor Theodore Lelouchier, was that “[Gillet] had knowledge of his exclusion [from the Congregation] and that he had behaved accordingly.” The decision was rendered *in absentia*. Hafkenschied’s condemnation of Gillet as having a “false and lying spirit,” “drinking quantities of brandy,” and being “insolent,”<sup>84</sup> won the day. Of course such condemnation stood in great contrast to what Hafkenschied had once written to St. Louis Archbishop Kenrick, that “I can positively assure

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<sup>83</sup> Gillet to Nicholas Mauron, Nov. 29, 1855, as in our FN 46 above.

<sup>84</sup> Bernard Hafkenschied to Theodore Lelouchier, as in FN 59 above.

your Episcopal Grace, that...Father Lewis [sic]...by no means can be charged with any fault as would render any bishop unwilling to receive him into his diocese.”<sup>85</sup>

*A new life, 1856-1858: parish priest in France and a sea voyage*

Upon receipt of the decision of Superior General Mauron, Father Louis Gillet accepted that his life as a Redemptorist was over. He then turned to Bishop Paul de Garsignies in the diocese of Soissons-Laon, France, who was in need of French-speaking clergy. Garsignies assigned him to the care of two small villages, Bièvres and Chérêt, in a farming district some eighty-five miles northeast of Paris. He remained there until the beginning of 1858. Other than relatively few records of his ministry in these places, there is only one other certain detail about this time of his life, namely, his preaching during the Lenten season at the stately Cathedral of Notre Dame in Laon. The commentary on his preaching is that he spoke “with startling and eloquent success.”<sup>86</sup>

After leaving the Soissons-Laon diocese, Gillet, for whatever reason, went on an extended sea voyage. In 1891 he wrote succinctly of that trip, “...then I left for South America, passing through Africa, ...a voyage of four entire months on the ocean.”<sup>87</sup> What prompted this trip no one knows. Conjecture may prompt that his long voyage was a kind of discernment and preparation for what was his next step in life.

*A novice at Sénanque, and then a move to Fontfroide, near Spain*

At the end of his voyage, having returned northward, he disembarked at the French seaport of Lorient and then traveled some six-hundred miles to southeastern France, to Avignon. Here

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<sup>85</sup> Bernard Hafkenschied to Archbishop [Peter Richard Kenrick], as in FN 62 above.

<sup>86</sup> Father Marie-Symphorien GAILLEMIN, C.I.C., “*Relatio circa vitam P. Gillet*,” as found in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 101.

<sup>87</sup> “*Notice sur l’origine de la Congrégation...*,” p. 5, to be found in translation as “Historical Account of the Origin of the Congregation of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary...” in Sister Maria ALMA, C.I.M., *The Reverend Louis Florent Gillet, His Life, Letters and Conferences*, Dolphin, Philadelphia 1946, 131ff; this brief citation, p. 138. The Original French of this document is in the IHM Archives Immaculata.

he met with Archbishop Jean-Marie Debelay who urged him to go where God was calling him. Shortly thereafter he was received as a novice into a very new branch of the Cistercian Order at Sénanque, not far from Avignon.<sup>88</sup> This group, as he had learned, was “a little less austere than the Trappists,” and, because he was accepted immediately, it may be argued that he had some kind of previous contact with these Cistercians.

As a Cistercian novice, Louis Florent Gillet took on a new name; for the rest of his days he was to be known as *Père Marie-Célestin*. He remained at Sénanque for one year and a few days. Then, after his profession of religious vows on September 8, 1859, two days later he made his way to the Abbey of Fontfroide, which was located in western France, only seventy-five miles north of the Spanish border.

His new home at Fontfroide was actually a collection of buildings dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It was situated on twelve-hundred acres of land, most of it uncultivated. Conditions were difficult, hard labor was the order of the day. As a small accommodation to the forty-six year-old Father Marie-Célestin Gillet, he was assigned to bring the food cart to the fields for the noon meal. Only after a few years did things begin physically to improve when the order was growing and a number of younger monks were being sent to Fontfroide.<sup>89</sup>

*Living and dying at Hautecombe monastery, Savoy region of France*

In May 1864 Father Marie-Célestin experienced another major change in his life. He was chosen to be among the founding group who moved into the historic monastery of Hautecombe, whose existence could be traced back to the year 1137. Overlooking Lake Bourget in the Savoy region of southeastern France, this beautifully located monastery had known a turbulent history

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> These details are from Sister R. Kelly, *No Greater Service*, 189, 191, quoting the biography of Edouard CAPELLE, *Un moine, le père Jean, abbé de Fontfroide*, Victor Retaux, Paris 1903, 173. This outstanding priest, *Le Père Jean [Leonard]*, was superior of Fontfroide during Gillet's stay there.

during the region's revolutions and power-grabs by various political entities. For a time the monastery even served as a pottery factory. But its church was also well-known as the burial place of Counts and Dukes of the Family of Savoy, and the 1815 Treaty of Vienna finally restored Hautecombe to that noble family. With Vatican approval and that of King Victor Emmanuel II (whose lineage was of the Family of Savoy), an 1862 decree then handed over Hautecombe to Gillet's order of Cistercians.<sup>90</sup>

Between 1864 and 1891, Gillet served his monastery as Secretary, Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Novice Master (twice), Sub-prior, and Prior. During these years he was allowed to make several trips outside the monastery.<sup>91</sup>

One of these trips was in 1866 to visit his mother in Louvain, Belgium, and this instance deserves special mention. While in Louvain he met a priest who was from Monroe, Michigan, in the United States of America. The priest spoke of the community of women religious in Monroe and said that it has spread far and wide. Gillet was surprised, but in his own words written later in 1891 he remarked, "Thinking [they] were all Americans, and did not know me, I remained in silence." It is clear that Father Marie-Célestin Gillet did not fully grasp the identity of this priest whom he had met. He was none other than Father Edward Joos whom Bishop Lefevere had appointed as diocesan director of the Sisters whom Gillet had begun in 1845. Perhaps his confusion was compounded by the fact that in 1847 the Sisters had changed their name from *Sisters of Providence*, to *Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Anonymous, *The Abbé of Hautecombe, Savoy-France*, Hautecombe, Monastery Publication, St. Pierre de Curtille: Fondation d'Hautecombe, n.d., 2-4. See also, *The New Britannica Encyclopedia, Micropedia*, Vol. VIII, 15th ed., Benton, Chicago, etc., 1974, 930-932, s.v. "Savoy," and "House of Savoy."

<sup>91</sup> Cistercian Father Marie-Symphorien Gaillemain to Mother Mary de Chantal Hayes, I.H.M., December [no day], 1892, original in IHM Archives Immaculata; translation found in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 99-104. – Other details are from Marie-Célestin Gillet to "Very Reverend Mother" [M. de Chantal Hayes, I.H.M.], Feb. 9, 1891, and to Sister Clotilde Rouillot, May 4, 1891; originals in IHM Archives Immaculata.

<sup>92</sup> Father Marie-Célestin Gillet to "Very Reverend Mother [de Chantal Hayes]", Feb. 9, 1891. Original in IHM Archives Immaculata.

Another trip outside of his Hautecombe monastery by Father Marie-Célestin involved his own sibling, Anne-Catherine. In 1866 she had left the Sisters of Charity in St. Trond, Belgium, in order to become a contemplative Cistercian. And her new Cistercian Community, in which she took the name of Sister Marie-Célestine, was “the women’s branch” of her brother’s “less austere” Cistercian Order. It had been founded in 1865 in southern France by the same monk who had begun the men’s group, namely, Père Marie-Bernard Barnoin. When it came time for her simple profession of Cistercian vows in 1868, her brother came to the convent in the town of Mane in order to preach for the occasion and then remained to conduct a retreat for the entire community.<sup>93</sup>

From April 1875 until October 1876 Gillet was again with his sister’s community of Cistercian nuns, this time at their new convent of Notre Dame de Prés in Reillane. He had received permission to serve as their chaplain for a period of eighteen months. This must have been a special joy for the two Gillet siblings since they had never had an extended experience of knowing one another as adults. Sadly, in less than a year after Father Gillet had served as the Cistercian nuns’ chaplain, Sister Marie-Célestine died of cancer, in late August 1877.<sup>94</sup>

Once back at Hautecombe, Gillet was appointed to serve as novice master; fifteen months later he was elected to be Sub-prior of the monastery. In office as Sub-prior for only five months, he was then elected at age sixty-five to succeed the Prior when the latter died. His term of office was marked with the pressure brought on by officials of France’s Third Republic which was intent on destroying religious congregations. Heavy taxes were placed on monasteries and convents and other measures were taken to impede the acceptance of new members.<sup>95</sup> In addition,

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<sup>93</sup> Annals of the Monastery of Notre-Dame des Prés, under date of February 19, 1868. Excerpts from these Annals are in copied form in the IHM Archives, Immaculata.

<sup>94</sup> Letter of Father Marie-Symphorien Gaillemain to Mother M. de Chantal Hayes, as in our FN 91 above; also Father Marie-Célestin Gillet to “Rev. Mother” of the Sisters of Charity of St. Trond, Belgium; a copy of the original is found in French, and an English translation, IHM Archives, Immaculata.

<sup>95</sup> Marie-Célestin Gillet to Sister Clotilde Rouillot, Dec. 20, 1891. Original in IHM Archives Immaculata.

a year after becoming Prior, Gillet suffered the loss of his mother who died in Namur, Belgium, at the age of ninety-eight.<sup>96</sup> After serving five years as Prior, he was again asked to serve as novice master in 1883 and remained in that role until 1889. It was during this time that Father Gillet conducted “numerous retreats of the [diocesan] clergy” at the Hautecombe monastery. About these retreats it was remarked, “It can truly be said that the direction of these retreats was, during his last years, his work of predilection.”<sup>97</sup>

*In early 1891, renewed contact with the sisters he founded*

In forty-four years Father Gillet had no personal contact with the women religious he had begun (along with Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin) in Monroe, Michigan. How this contact was reestablished is a story which some would say was filled with marvelous convergence. Believers would say it was the working of God’s Providence. The basic details follow, starting in the region of Moselle in northeastern France.

As the Franco-Prussian war loomed to the east of Moselle, a convent of the Visitation Sisters had to close, its members scattered. But, before their dispersion, the former superior of that convent, Sister Clotilde Rouillot, promised her friend Sister Stanislaus that they would somehow faithfully manage to write one another. But, as Sister Clotilde fled from France, she carried with her a unique secret. Before she left France, she had gone to confession to St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, and the Curé, without knowing any of her background, told her about her future life. He had said that she would go to America, join another group of women religious who wore a blue habit, and they would be dedicated to *Marie Immaculée*.

And so it took place that Clotilde decided to take refuge in 1868 at her brother’s home in America. She came in contact with and was received into the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters in Pennsylvania...whose habit was blue. Meanwhile her friend

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Letter of Very Rev. Marie-Symphorien Gaillemine to IHM Sisters, West Chester, Pennsylvania, December [no day specified], 1892. Original in IHM Archives, Immaculata, PA. See also J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 102.

Sister Stanislaus found her way to southern France and was received into the group of Cistercians nuns among whom was Father Gillet's sister.<sup>98</sup>

The two former Visitation Sisters, Clotilde and Stanislaus, as they had promised, wrote regularly to one another as some twenty years passed, with the name "*Père Gillet*" occasionally appearing in the letters from Sister Stanislaus. But it was not until May 1889 that those involved began to suspect that the true identity of this Cistercian "*Père Gillet*" in France – was the same as the "Father Louis Gillet" who had founded Sister Clotilde's American community in Monroe, Michigan.<sup>99</sup>

And here enters another Providential item of the story. Sister Clotilde's nephew in France (named *Père Césaire*) had entered the same Cistercians as Father Louis/Célestin Gillet. Sometime in January 1891 Sister Clotilde in Pennsylvania sent a packet to *Père Césaire*, her nephew, which contained a letter along with the December 25, 1890, issue of the *Michigan Catholic*<sup>100</sup>; this issue commemorated the 1845 founding in Monroe, Michigan, of the IHM Sisters community by "Father Louis." Clotilde requested that her nephew *Père Césaire* forward the packet to Hautecombe and to *Père Célestin Gillet*.

When the packet arrived, the elderly Gillet was puzzled. And then the truth dawned. In his return-letter he said, "I began to understand... I little thought that far away across the ocean there was still some remembrance of me... and that the little grain which I planted long ago, has produced a great tree under whose shadow numberless souls have been sheltered, have been saved!"<sup>101</sup>

In the same letter he was able to confirm that the story of the founding as told in the *Michigan Catholic* was accurate, and he began to reminisce about the first members of the Congregation, marveling that Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin was still

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<sup>98</sup> See Sister Maria ALMA, C.I.M., *Louis Florent Gillet*, as in our FN 87 above, 105-106.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107

<sup>100</sup> Marie-Célestin Gillet to "Very Reverend Mother [de Chantal Hayes]," Feb. 9, 1991, original in IHM Archives Immaculata.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

alive, aged eighty-one. He believed that the existence of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters in the Church of the United States was God's work, while their "...remarkable expansion [was] a striking miracle and their life a lasting Apostleship."<sup>102</sup>

Not long after reestablishing contact with the IHM Sisters, *Père Célestin* acceded to their request to compose a history of their 1845 foundation in Michigan. It took him several months to complete the beautiful work, a treasured heritage-piece of the Sisters to this day. Although he gave it a long title in its original French, in English its reference is often simply "The Historical Account." In the final section of this account he spoke tenderly of his affection for the Sisters and asked a remembrance of him as his death approached. He signed it not "Father" – but "Brother [*Frère*] Marie-Célestin."<sup>103</sup>

#### *Father Gillet's final days*

When his "reunion" with the IHM Sisters took place in 1891, he was just past his seventy-eighth birthday and was the oldest among his congregation of Cistercians. He had been a Cistercian for over thirty-one years. Soon his health began to deteriorate and he was often confined to his room, especially in the winter. He was delighted in receiving letters from the sisters in America, but for some reason in a ten-month period no letters reached him, which puzzled him. In January 1892 he wrote that he believed his end was near. However, he survived into autumn when he wrote to Sister Clotilde about how the French government continued its harsh treatment of religious: "...everything opposes vocations, the military law, the infidel education offered to the young, the hatred of everything religious... God alone knows where it will end! ...How happy you are in the free land of America." But on a lighter note he remarked how he rejoiced to receive the updated, and finely bound, edition of the Constitutions of the Sisters, remarking how they were clearly based on the Rule of St. Alphonsus de Liguori and the Redemptorists.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> See our FN 42 above for a full reference of this "Historical Account."

<sup>104</sup> Père Célestin-Marie to Sister Clotilde, Sept. [no day], 1892, original



His final letter to the Sisters was composed on November 4, 1892, just ten days before his death, in which he said he was sending “my last Adieu,” begging them to remember “your father in Jesus Christ.”<sup>105</sup>

Death came on November 14. His burial was the next day in Hautecombe’s abbey cemetery, attended by friends, penitents, and many priests.<sup>106</sup>

#### *Homecoming to Monroe, Michigan*

The life story of Father Louis/Marie-Célestin Gillet would be incomplete if left simply with his funeral and burial. For he had the privilege of “a second burial,” or, perhaps, better to call it a *Homecoming*. This part of the story revolves around a very determined historian among the IHM Sisters in Monroe, Michigan, named Sister Rosalita Kelly. One day in 1926 she had the brilliant idea of writing to the Hautecombe monastery to see if any “personal effects” of Father Gillet remained, and she asked if the monks might donate these items. She had in mind any manuscripts, photographs of places he frequented in the monastery, articles he used—and, especially, a photograph of his grave. The first answer received from Cistercian Father Bernard Girardy was in some ways disappointing, for, as he pointed out Gillet had been deceased thirty-four years. (Later, however, Girardy did find and send many personal items owned or used by Gillet). As for a photo of the gravesite, he said he wanted first to give the grave a tidy appearance; then he would take a photograph and send it to Michigan. The encouraging aspect of Girardy’s letter was that its tone was quite cordial.<sup>107</sup>

Encouraged by this letter, Sister Rosalita pushed onward. With her superior’s permission, in July 1926, she dared to ask Father Girardy if the Monroe IHM Sisters might have *the remains of Father Gillet* – back in Monroe!

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in IHM Archives, Immaculata, PA.

<sup>105</sup> This letter of Nov. 4, 1892 was addressed not just to Sister Clotilde, but to “My very dear Sisters in Our Lord.” Original in IHM Archives Immaculata.

<sup>106</sup> Father Marie-Symphorien GAILLEMIN, C.I.C., “*Relatio circa vitam P. Gillet*,” as found in J. WUEST, *Annales Supplementum*, Pars II, 101.

<sup>107</sup> Bernard Girardy to Mother Domitilla [Donahue], Apr. 26, 1926, Archives IHM Monroe, RG 1:10:04, Box 4.

As it turned out, Father Girardy was facing, as Gillet had faced, problematic relationships between monasteries and the French government officials. He said he would try to get the necessary permits for an exhumation, but that he had to *be prudent, very prudent*. There was also a civil law about respecting the next of kin; moreover, Girardy said that *perhaps there were no remains, given soil conditions and the fact that monks were typically buried in soft pine boxes*.<sup>108</sup>

Undaunted, Sister Rosalita built a strong argument that, as Gillet lacked any relatives (which was true), his “next of kin” were 1200 IHM Sisters. Father Girardy’s approach with the French government involved a bit of a subterfuge. He waited until another elderly Cistercian died, and then gave orders to his workmen to exhume Gillet’s remains carefully and put them in another container. Then the workmen were to prepare the same spot for the burial of the recently deceased; thus the government officials would never know of the cunning “substitution.”<sup>109</sup>

A surprise came next: Father Gillet had been buried, providentially, not in soft pinewood, but in a hardwood casket (it was chestnut!). Under Girardy’s direction, some trustworthy colleagues carefully removed Gillet’s remains and then put them in the smaller container ready for shipment to Monroe, Michigan, U.S.A. All of this had been executed in stages. One of the final steps was then taken, owing to the genius of Sister Rosalita Kelly. She succeeded in having both the French Ambassador to the United States, and the American Ambassador to France come to an agreement that the IHM Sisters were truly Gillet’s “next of kin.”<sup>110</sup>

On Sunday, March 10, 1929, a group of IHM Sisters met their founder’s remains at the Monroe rail station. Not long af-

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<sup>108</sup> Bernard Girardy to Mother Domitilla [Donahue], June 28, 1927, Archives IHM, Monroe, RG 1.10:4, Box 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> These details can be found in a monograph by Sister Rosalita KELLY entitled “*Exaltavit Humiles.*” [The Latin means, “(God) has raised up the lowly.”] – in IHM Archives Monroe, Gillet papers, Box 4, Series 10, 11, 12. – The American Ambassador to France was Myron T. Herrick (1829-1929), well beloved in France because he had not fled his post during World War I, as other envoys did. Herrick’s opposite number as French Ambassador to the U.S.A. was the famous poet/dramatist Paul Claudel.

terwards these remains were reburied, and they lie today beneath the marble altar in the beautiful Gillet Memorial Chapel on the property of the Monroe IHM Motherhouse. A solemn Dedication and Consecration of this Chapel took place on August 2, 1929, in the presence of a large gathering of IHM Sisters, their friends and benefactors. Significant among those participating was a delegation of Redemptorists from St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>111</sup>

There had been a final, thoughtful gesture on the part of the kindly old monk of Hautecombe, Father Bernard Girardy. Along with Father Gillet's remains, Girardy included the heart-shaped metal grave marker from Gillet's resting place in France. With its bit of rust and dents it is now displayed in the Memorial Chapel, still a herald and sign of Gillet's missionary love that stretched from the shores of Lake Erie in Michigan to the shores of Savoy's Lake Bourget. And back again!

#### CONCLUSION

The life of Father Louis Gillet offers a reflection on several aspects of Redemptorist history in the nineteenth century. He entered Redemptorist life only fourteen years after the death of St. Clement Hofbauer, at a time when this religious congregation was entering the first stages of its worldwide expansion. Many members, both superiors and subjects faced baffling new circumstances, with attendant pressures. Once in America, all Redemptorists (including Gillet) and the people he served were parties to a burgeoning "immigrant nation," as the Europe they left behind exploded in successive revolutions. In short, the times were troubled.

After the false accusations against him, brought on in part by Father Gillet's admitted imprudence, and the spread of subsequent rumors about him, he experienced comparatively few of his previous pastoral successes, not aware that arguably his greatest achievement, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, was flourishing. As Archbishop Joseph Tobin has written, Gillet's life does not present us with "a saccharine tale... a

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

feel-good story.” But it does resemble “what happened to Jesus of Nazareth...seen in his risen glory” and “recognizable by the wounds of his passion.”<sup>112</sup>

It is heartwarming to reflect on Louis Gillet’s words in 1847, written to Pope Pius IX, “I came to North America urged on by no other motive than the salvation of souls.” Likewise, to recall that when expelled from the Redemptorists, he was blessed with the courage and strength to follow a second call to serve, namely, as a Cistercian, among whom he still retained a love of St. Alphonsus Liguori and a strain of his Redemptorist spirit.

In times closer to our own, Redemptorist historians (such as Michael Curley, John Byrne, Carl Hoegerl, and Joseph Oppitz) came to believe that the time was ripe for presenting Father Gillet in a new light, and that a vindication of him should come from us Redemptorists.

#### SUMMARY

The French-speaking Belgian, Louis F. Gillet, was the eighth novice in the history of the Belgian Redemptorists. Professed in 1835, and ordained in 1838, he was trained for parish missions by former companions of St. Clement Hofbauer. Gillet himself preached missions for five years in Belgium and France. Recruited for America in 1843, as other Redemptorists served German immigrants, Gillet labored among French-speaking immigrants in Michigan, founding the Redemptorist house in Monroe, near Detroit. There, in 1845, he was co-founder of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, known today as eminent women religious in the U.S.A. and beyond. Falsely accused of misconduct, Gillet was removed from Michigan in 1847. Painful strife and rumors ensued. Expelled from the Redemptorists in 1850, his appeal for reentry was denied. In 1858 he joined the Sènanque Cister-

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<sup>112</sup> Foreword, Gilbert A. ENDERLE, *I Desire to be Everywhere, Louis Florent Gillet, Frontier Missionary, Founder, and Contemplative Monk*, OSP/IHM Board of Directors, Monroe, MI 2012, p. xi. When Archbishop Tobin wrote this he was the Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Prior to that he was for twelve years the Superior General of the Redemptorists, and in 2012 was appointed the Archbishop of Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A.

cians in France, holding key posts among them, including that of Abbot at the famed Hautecombe Abbey. He died there in 1892, but in 1891, after forty-four years, contact was again established with the Sisters he had begun in America. In 1929 the Sisters returned his remains to Monroe, Michigan, where they lie in a beautiful Memorial Chapel.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Le belge francophone Louis Gillet fut le huitième novice dans l'histoire des Rédemptoristes belges. Profès en 1835 et prêtre en 1838, il fut formé à la vie missionnaire paroissiale par d'anciens disciples de Saint Clément Hofbauer. Lui-même, pendant cinq ans, prêcha des missions en Belgique et en France. Choisi pour partir aux États-Unis en 1843, alors que d'autres Rédemptoristes s'occupaient des émigrés germanophones, Gillet travailla parmi les francophones vivant dans le Michigan, fondant une maison rédemptoriste à Monroe près de Detroit. En 1845 il y fut cofondateur des Sœurs Servantes du Cœur Immaculé de Marie, reconnues de nos jours comme une Congrégation féminine importante aux États-Unis et au-delà. Accusé faussement de méconduite, il fut éloigné du Michigan en 1847. S'en suivirent des frictions et des rumeurs pénibles. Expulsé de la Congrégation des Rédemptoristes en 1850, sa demande d'y être réadmis fut rejetée. En 1858 il rejoignit les Moines Cisterciens de Sénanque en France, y occupa des postes importants, y compris celui de Père Abbé en la fameuse abbaye de Hautecombe en Savoie. Il y mourut en 1892, mais un année auparavant et après quarante-quatre ans de silence, il rétablit le contact avec la Congrégation qu'il avait co-fondée aux États-Unis. En 1929 ces Religieuses ramenèrent sa dépouille mortelle à Monroe Michigan où elle repose à présent dans une belle chapelle-mémorial.



