



Explosion on the Mississippi

From the time she was left in charge of the schools by Mother Theresa in 1848 until her death in 1892, Mother Caroline traveled over 3000 miles every two years. Establishing new missions and visiting schools and orphanages, she traveled from Milwaukee to St. Paul, across the Great Lakes to Ontario and Buffalo, through New York and New Jersey, to Maryland, across to the Mississippi, down to New Orleans, and back up to Milwaukee. Often she traveled on riverboats. In her report of May 31, 1859 to the Louis Mission Society in Bavaria, she recounted a harrowing event during her return from New Orleans.

“It was on June 13, the feast of St. Anthony of Padua, a Sunday morning between five and six o’clock, about 60 miles from Memphis when the boiler exploded. One single bang and a third of the ship was blown to the sky! Almost 200 people lost their lives, were torn to pieces, burned, scalded, crippled or drowned. Among them—O inexplicable destiny—... Reverend Fathers Urbanek ...”¹

Father Urbanek was the Sisters’ chaplain, and occupied the cabin next to Mother Caroline’s. The section of the boat adjoining her cabin was totally blown away.

Caroline continues, “I searched and found nothing; everything was useless. I cannot describe my sorrow and the fearful worry that came over me. Naturally speaking it is inconceivable that I did not lose my presence of mind, even when holding on to the strong cable between fire and water, in order to save my life.”

She goes on to describe how she is picked up by passengers in a wooden lifeboat, which itself was in danger of catching fire from the sparks which leaped from the flaming steamer. She continues, “I was facing the possibility of dying and commended myself to God, when suddenly, by a lucky turning of the ship we saw ourselves saved. Quickly we were at the bank.”

She tells of five little boats bringing 20 severely injured people to the shore... “unfortunate people, to whom we could offer no other comfort than to fan them with a little cloth and to alleviate their parched lips with a little dirty Mississippi water. Thus we had to languish for seven hours under the burning heat of the sun, a time that seemed to me to be eternity.” She kept trying to obtain information about Father Urbanek, but could learn nothing.

(over)

¹ Excerpts are from Letter #23, *The Letters of Mother Caroline Friess*, ed. Barbara Brumleve, 1991.

Eventually, several steamships arrived to pick up the survivors. “So in God’s name, battered in body and soul, I had to return home alone, which I at first thought impossible; but God came to my assistance. I entered the boat that was going homeward and sat down in a corner, giving my tears free reign. It was not long until I was surrounded by a crowd of American ladies, who cried with me. Wondering about my dress, they presented me with clothes, so I could change into dry ones. The generosity of these great American ladies!” She gratefully describes how they offered her clothes, a cabin, a bed, and money which they had collected. She continued, “A Negro slave girl with a noble heart came to me one evening and pressed \$5.00 into my hand. I said to her, ‘No, I will not take any money from a slave.’ She said however, ‘I am a slave, but not poor and you should know that slaves also can do good,’ whereupon she hurried away.” (In later years, recalling the generosity of this girl, Mother Caroline decided to open schools for Negroes as well as German immigrants.)

Back home at the Motherhouse in Milwaukee, the sisters had heard the telegraph reports and read newspaper accounts of the catastrophe. They prayed fervently for her return but had just about given up hope when she arrived unharmed. Though overjoyed at Mother Caroline’s return, all were deeply saddened by the loss of Father Urbanek.

Questions for reflection and sharing:

1. What do you find most striking about this story?
2. What do we learn about Mother Caroline from her account of this tragedy?
3. What meaning might this story have for us today?

Prayer

Prayer response: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Loving God, with confidence, we offer these petitions:

- ❖ In gratitude for Mother Caroline’s survival of this catastrophe, we pray....
- ❖ That we may value our own gift of life and the lives of others, we pray...
- ❖ That we may respond compassionately and generously to people who suffer tragedy and loss, we pray...
- ❖ *Please add your own prayers....* ... we pray....

Concluding Prayer:

Glory to you, Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.