Felix DeAndreis, C.M., and Life on the American Frontier 1816-1820

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Giacomo Felice Bartolomeo DeAndreis, to use his full name, was born in Italy in 1778, and died in Saint Louis in 1820, only forty-two. In those few years, he served as a holy Vincentian priest, teaching in a seminary, preaching parish missions, and ministering principally to clergy in Rome. Almost by chance, or rather, by God’s providence, Felix was invited to lead a band of Vincentians to America to do the same thing, teaching, preaching and ministering.

Several aspects of his life are interesting. In the first place, he was the founding superior of the American Vincentian mission in the Western Hemisphere. The pioneer Vincentian missioners thus looked to him for guidance and inspirational leadership in this new venture. Secondly, he had a high reputation for sanctity. Rose Philippine Duchesne, herself a canonized saint, often described him as one. Benedict Joseph Flaget, bishop of Bardstown and an admirer of Felix, wondered whether he should pray for his soul or pray to him as a saint. The same Bishop Flaget likewise had a reputation for sanctity, and the Church has begun its investigative process for his canonization. Even the mission office in the Roman Curia asked William Dubourg, Felix’s bishop, to open a formal cause for the priest’s beatification if he had sufficient indications of holiness. Indeed, the Congregation of the Mission began the process about a century ago, but it has languished for lack of interest.

Another aspect of his life also is of great interest today. Felix participated in the rough frontier life of the American Midwest, and his letters, along with those of his companions, provide an intimate glimpse into those pioneer years, from 1816 to his death in 1820. It is this third aspect that I would like to emphasize here. I like to think of it as “sights and sounds” of pioneer life.

Collecting biographical materials

Before beginning this part, let me sketch the story of assembling the sources for his biography. The first real work was completed by Felix’s closest companion on the journey, the Italian Vincentian Joseph Rosati (1789-1843), DeAndreis’s successor as superior of the mission, and subsequently the first bishop of Saint Louis. Rosati instructed his confreres to gather up Felix’s writings in view of a biography. The bishop completed his work, but did not live to see it through to its publication in 1861.

The major biography, prepared for his beatification process, was written by Raffaele Ricciardelli, and published, in Italian, in 1923.

Since that time, other articles and notices were written, but the bases for all of this, namely his writings, were not gathered or examined carefully, except by the indefatigable Father Charles-Leon Souvay, later the Vincentian superior general. I began to examine Felix’s correspondence about twenty-five years ago and gradually completed Souvay’s researches.
This lengthy undertaking grew more complex with each discovery. The first one, which predated all my work, was the return of an original letter from Felix written to his former spiritual director in Italy. By some process, this letter had found its way into the files of the Celestin Buhigas, director of the Daughters of Charity in Lebanon. This Vincentian presented it in Paris to Father Stafford Poole, C.M., who in turn gave it to the appropriately-named DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives.

The second major discovery resulted from lengthy analysis of citations from Felix’s correspondence in the Ricciardelli biography. Since I could not find anywhere many of the letters used by the author, I concluded either that they had all disappeared since his 1923 biography or that they were located somewhere else, probably together. Now Ricciardelli had been the postulator, or the official in the Congregation of the Mission responsible for promoting the causes of its candidates for sainthood, and so I wondered whether they might not be in the Vatican. Father William Sheldon, C.M., Ricciardelli’s successor in the 1980s, brought me to the building in Rome housing the offices of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

How we found the letters there is a minor saga in itself. In the first place, Bill Sheldon approached an elderly Italian priest there whose family Bill had hosted in New York, and for whom he had managed to get some major-league baseball tickets. The priest thanked Bill and me for our visit, but claimed he didn’t have the key for the files. But, after we chatted a little, he let us know that, although he didn’t have the official key, he had a duplicate, and would gladly let us in as a personal favor. Unfortunately, very little turned up in those files. Then someone else asked if we had checked in another department, and so we proceeded there, also with little to show.

Finally, we went further up the hierarchy, introduced by the older priest, and the monsignor in charge assured us that he had no De Andreis files in his office; we checked his filing cabinet to be sure. Then he said, “But, surely, you have checked in the Historical Section?” We hadn’t, and so off we went with him. And there they were: twenty volumes, containing two bound archival volumes of letters from Felix DeAndreis, a large number of letters from the other original missionaries written to their provincial and others in Rome, and several of Felix’s copybooks. (The American Vincentians had been founded by the Roman Province and fell under its responsibility until 1835.)

The next problem was how to study this treasure trove. I hated to leave the documents where they were, but it was time for lunch, everything was closing, and I certainly couldn’t steal them. We had to chase around the building looking for the proper officials to get permission to borrow them long-term, and so on and on. But within a week, we had the precious volumes, had microfilm copies made, and I set happily to work.

While recounting this story to an Italian Vincentian, I was surprised to learn that he knew of a collection of early letters in the files of the community house in Genoa which, as it happened, contained De Andreis material. And so the process continued, one discovery leading to another. The result has been that the collection prepared for publication contains eighty-six letters, of which eleven were either written to him or about him. More importantly for us, all but
five date from his “American period,” 1816-1820. The letters needed to be transcribed, often from faulty copies, and then translated from Italian or French.

Besides the letters, the forthcoming publication on this topic also contains some historical accounts. Felix wrote two of these. The first is in a small notebook that he probably used during the course of his journeys. It is a miracle that it has survived. He based the second on the first and intended it for circulation. Another set of historical writings are reports of the missions that DeAndreis conducted while still in Italy. Although not directly connected with his American experience, they give valuable context for his observations about life on the frontier.

**Sounds of the American frontier**

Let’s turn now to Felix’s own experiences on the frontier. I think of these as “sights and sounds,” and involve the other senses, in that I am going to present what he saw, heard, tasted, felt and smelled, rather than to analyze, for example, his spiritual thoughts or his observations on other religions.

A few sounds to begin with. In his day, celebrating a high mass was often the norm. The liturgy required a priest for singing his parts, alternating with a choir or at least a soloist, helped sometimes by an organist. While in Bordeaux, Felix described arrangements for the voyage to Baltimore: “The bishop booked the whole ship for us, and spent 7500 francs on it, and as much again for the baggage. He has even furnished a chapel for us to sing mass on feast days. Thus we will observe the feast of Saint Vincent in mid-ocean since we have a good cleric who knows how to play the organ marvelously. We confide in God to begin our conquests by gaining our Protestant captain for the Church.” [Letter 14] Once in Baltimore, he reported: “We chanted mass and vespers on the feast days, to the great satisfaction of the Protestant captain. He showed the most beautiful disposition to convert, yet despite all our efforts and prayers, *nondum venit hora ejus* [“his hour has not yet come”]. On the feast of Saint Vincent in particular, we celebrated with the greatest possible solemnity and adorned the chapel with cloths, veils, mirrors, relics, *Agnus Deis*, ribbons, etc.” [Letter 20]

Drawing, poetry and music were part of his culture, and he often mentioned liturgical music. He lamented one musical fact, however: “My heart weeps when I see that the most beautiful churches and most lovely bells are in the hands of heretics.” [Letter 21] A few lines of an English poem that he wrote in 1819 have survived. They show that, despite his protestations, he wrote English well.

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When soul’s salvation is at stake
   every thing is sweet for God’s sake;
   and when a man has chosen
   for God to be half dead
   has nothing more to dread!
   Let him be burn’d or frozen
   let him be drown’d or slain
   his happiness increases at every pain.
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[Cited by Bozuffi, *Il servo di Dio*, pp. 94-95.]
What we make of the message of this poem is another question. He certainly is reflecting on his condition on the frontier: half-dead, sunburned, frozen, although not drowned or slain. But his fierce dedication, despite the pain, is clear.

Now let’s return to music. At the frontier seminary near Bardstown, Kentucky, where the group spent twenty-one months studying English, pastoral work and their theology, the pioneers were able to enjoy a richer musical life. They assisted at the Corpus Christi procession and heard “English songs,” as Felix wrote. [Letter 37]

They heard more English music at the wild gatherings held by Methodists and others. But it was the general noise that caught Felix’s attention: “Their energetic and noisy preaching is accompanied with shouts of joy and confusion from the whole audience and by manic outpourings. They assemble in the open for several days under many thousand cabins and tents and make a kind of spiritual retreat. These are called Camp Meetings, and they recruit members from other sects. It must be admitted that sometimes those far from the way of salvation do a great good. They move souls from vice and oblige sinners to make their confessions in public meetings.” [“Itinerary. Italy, France, America.”]

Once he arrived in Missouri, the reality of rough frontier life really dawned on him. In the grandly designated “cathedral” in Saint Louis, not much better than a barn, they celebrated a regular round of liturgical festivities. DeAndreis described the Holy Week celebrations of 1818, to Joseph Rosati, still in Kentucky: “In the evening there was vocal and instrumental music, to sing the \textit{Stabat Mater} and the song \textit{Au sang qu’un Dieu va répandre} [“To the blood which a God will shed”].” [Letter 46] He participated in a solemn Te Deum, with bell ringing, to commemorate the beginning of the process toward statehood for Missouri. [Letter 78]

But the privations of Missouri life took a toll on our missionary. His comments about music, written to Rosati in English, are especially instructive. “Sundays are for me almost intolerable for the burden of preaching always many times, and singing without interruption the whole time of Mass and Vespers because there is no body who can sing, at least without me, there is no organ, no pian-forte to give me a respite; therefore I long after your arrival that I may be released from such a burden unfit to my shoulders and the Divine Worship may be performed more decently.” [Letter 52]

A curious incident occurred during a visit he made to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart at Florissant, Missouri. Their journal records that, accompanied by Bishop Dubourg, on 9 October 1819, Felix listened to a canticle composed by Louis Barat, brother of the founder of the Sisters, Madeleine Sophie Barat. “The song enkindled in him the fire of the love of God, and of His holy Mother. We saw him get pale, then redden, tremble and then finally, as it were, get lost in God and it seems \textit{sic} to us like St. John of the Cross who was lost in ecstasy when he heard a song on the love of God sung by St. Teresa and her companions. That evening we went to the chapel to sing for the third time this same song.” [“Journal of the Society of the Sacred Heart,” entry for 9 October 1819.] Regrettably, we have only the text of this canticle, not the melody.

\textbf{Sights on the American frontier}
These are some of the sounds. What did he see? For forty-four days, he and his group were at sea. Unwittingly, they sailed directly into a hurricane and came close to shipwreck. Yet, he loved being at sea, at least on the good days. His young missioners marveled at the dolphins [Letter 19] and the flying fish. “Among the other fish, we admired the fish that flew like birds. One evening one of them flew onto the table in our room. We ate it and it was excellent. It was shaped something like a small cod, with wings of scales spread out enough to let it fly from wave to wave.” [“Itinerary. Italy. France. America.”]

He and his confreres drifted slowly on flatboats down the Ohio River valley from Pittsburgh to Louisville. “There is not, I think, in the world a longer river whose banks are more diversified with the beautiful scenery that presented itself day after day. From time to time we went ashore on one side or the other of this enormous river, about fifty times the length of the Tiber. We would walk about among the thick forests, where no human had ever walked, except for Indians, nor human voice ever heard. Joyfully we made the echoes repeat for the first time the sweet names of Jesus and Mary, and the canticles of the Lord.” [“Itinerary. Italy. France. America.”] He encountered other marvels in the deep Kentucky woods. “We found flocks of parrots and other beautifully colored birds. Their song, however, is not worth much, and so on, but there were many things of this type.” [“Itinerary. Italy. France. America.”]

As the reality of the American mission sunk in, the pioneer Vincentians understood that they would be working among Indians. I have described elsewhere how this work developed, but I would like here simply to sample some of Felix’s reactions and descriptions of Native Americans. Like many of his compatriots, he was both attracted and repelled by them. “Their appearance is frightful, and one feels almost inclined to doubt if their reasoning powers are fully developed.” [Letter 43] In this same letter, written in early 1818 to his superior in Rome, the missioner mentioned “practices too horrible to relate,” by which they sought to please the “Lord of Life.” On the other hand, he admired the beautifully worked skins that they wore [Letter 66], and mentioned their feathers, moccasins and silver ornaments [Letter 76] and the vermilion they used as face paint [Letter 66].

He was very aware of how whiskey was ruining them. “One of them came into the house one day. He was one of the most handsome men that I have ever seen, tall and large, fat and happy. I received him charitably and showed him the [catechetical] pictures one after the other. He looked at everything and was showing his admiration by his actions when he chanced to see above a window an empty bottle. When he spied it, my man went into an ecstasy. He started to scream whiskey, whiskey, whiskey!” [Letter 76]

**Food and drink**

Although Felix did not drink whiskey, since the American clergy had sworn it off as a pastoral necessity, he would have liked a little wine, which he needed for his stomach. He mentioned its lack several times [Letters 20, 21, 22]. Instead, the missioners sometimes drank beer. In fact, one charitable benefactor in Pittsburgh provided the band of pioneers with enough beer for their trip downriver to Louisville. [Letter 27]

On several occasions he commented on the food, not from any lack of mortification but probably to arouse the charity of readers in Italy. The band of Vincentians made do with “roast
meat with a little bit of cornbread and water, [but] no wine, no vinegar or oil, no soup, etc.” [Letter 33] They drank sassafras tea or coffee morning and evening [Letters 28, 31], but often found the coffee moldy [Letter 64]. To supplement the meals of bacon or salted pork, they also ate creamed corn, fruits and vegetables, which are satisfying enough, but eating on mission journeys was another matter. “We often have to sleep fully dressed on the ground, and also sometimes out under the sky, tying our horse to a tree and using the saddle as a pillow. We eat badly, sometimes a little lard and a dab of honey on some badly baked cornbread with a little bad water. This is a gift that we have to pay a steep price for to refresh ourselves after a long trip made while fasting, freezing to death, etc.” [Letter 48] Sugar was expensive, although another sweetener, honey, was occasionally available. [Letter 48]

A charitable friend, Madame Fournier, sister of Bishop Dubourg, wrote of sending him some chocolate, which she double-wrapped in tin. She asked Felix to tell him whether this gift made it safely to Saint Louis. [Letter 71] Regrettably, Felix’s answer has not been preserved.

**Touch and smell**

We’ve been thinking about sounds, sights and even tastes. Now is the moment to talk about two other senses: touch and smell. From the very first days of their American adventure, the missionaries experienced summer’s heat and humidity. “We sweat horribly, in a way unheard of in Europe.” [Letter 20] He repeated this observation several times. Similarly, he suffered from the cold. The winter of 1818 afflicted him terribly. “. . . [T]he cold is so intense that I have never experienced anything like it. We cannot remain very far from the fire, though we often put on one coat over another. The cold is so piercing that it seems to reach the brain, and nearly makes us faint. I have sometimes found nothing but ice in the chalice while at the altar, and had some difficulty in melting it by means of a fire that had to be brought to the altar.” [Letter 43]

Felix does not come across in his writings as being fastidious, but occasional comments do escape from his pen. In this excerpt from a letter, he describes his Sunday experience: “Here the poor missionaries receive after their preaching neither warm cakes, nor barley tea, nor wine and not even the leisure time to change clothes. Instead, drenched with sweat, they have to chant mass or baptize or go to visit the sick or engage in [public] controversy. We need to be angels here. . . .” [Letter 62] In one sharp passage he describes Indian women: “The women are more dreadful than the men but they go about dressed and completely covered. They are all of an olive or bronze colored skin, nauseatingly filthy.” [Letter 76]

His relationship to the descendants of African blacks, whether slave or free, was less conflicted. Indeed, he was known for his charity toward them and did what he could to try to educate them in the Catholic faith. “It is the slaves who give us the greatest consolation. They are always anxious to be instructed and make their first communion, which many people, even the elderly, have not yet done.” [Letter 51] Despite this, he found himself forced to accept slavery, at least as a temporary phenomenon, citing the classical aphorism “necessity knows no law.” [Letter 76]

**Adaptations to the American frontier**

Adaptation to foreign mission life is difficult, as we can appreciate, but Felix gradually came to terms with conditions. He and his companions needed, in particular, to adapt their Italian
clothing to America. At their embarkation in Bordeaux, they changed their styles. “On 12 June, dressed in civilian clothes, with a cravat and a round hat, the normal garb of clergy in America, we embarked on the Garonne in a sloop.” [“Itinerary. Italy. France. America.”] “Here we cannot appear in public except in secular clothes, a tie and a round hat. We wear the cassock only at home, since it has been observed that some people came from distances to see, as they said, a Roman priest dressed like a woman.” [Letter 31] He described jokingly for his brother in Italy how he was dressing: “You should see me on horseback, wearing a round hat, a tie at my neck, a colored cape, dressed like seculars in my colored trousers and boots. You would take me for a fop. We have to dress this way at least outside the house, otherwise we would be pointed out and ridiculed, and so good-bye ministry.” [Letter 76]

It would be good to know what he looked like, but the sources are few. The only authentic portrait, hanging in the Collegio Leoniano in Rome, was painted after his death. It was probably based on an engraving made in St. Louis. However, one unnamed eye-witness describes him preaching: “While he was still in Kentucky at the Seminary of Saint Thomas, where [he had] to preach on Sundays in English, he found there a very great occasion of humbling himself fearlessly in the sight of the faithful, because he used to preach only in the presence of clerics. He would go up to the altar with his notebook, and since he was nearsighted he kept his notebook for the entire time of his discourses almost glued to his face, with his notebook in one hand and with the other making gestures in a very unusual fashion.” [Notices VI, 1801-1847, Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, p. 438.] Philippine Duchesne remarked to the same Louis Barat, mentioned above: “[He] would be better off for music and drawing than for English. Monsieur D’Andreis cannot grasp its pronunciation, even though he studied it in Rome.” [Duchesne to Barat, from Florissant (?), (no day, no month) 1820, French; in Sacred Heart archives, Rome, Duchesne letters]

Health

We have described here some of the sights and sounds that greeted the Vincentians in America, along with a sample of smells (usually disagreeable), tastes and even hygiene, and brief comments about his appearance. Here, it would be good to conclude with another sort of experience, health. The journey on the sea made everyone seasick, Felix less than others, if we are to believe him. [Letter 21] Fear of the unknown and nostalgia afflicted some, leading two of them to abandon the mission soon after they arrived in Baltimore. But cramped conditions and uncertainties served only to stiffen the missionary resolve of the others. Insects, particularly mosquitoes and bedbugs, were a constant source of suffering. Felix is especially eloquent on the subject of ticks: “It is like a little scorpion, which gets completely under the skin and makes you see stars. People have told me that someone died for not having been able to pull out the insect from the delicate part where it was hidden.” [Letter 70a]

One of the young group, Joseph Caretti, already sickly, died at the beginning of the mission in Saint Louis, 3 December 1818. On the other hand, Joseph Rosati prospered. Felix described him: “He is young, robust, holy, disinterested, full of zeal and talents, and has caused more seasoned missionaries to be amazed at his preaching in English.” [Letter 48] Father DeAndreis, however, was not blessed with good health. He had suffered, probably for many years, from colitis. His letters often reveal what he generally spoke of as his stomach problems. Bishop Dubourg offered a curious observation: “Mr. De Andreis is a little indisposed: his
flatulent habits frequently distress him.” [Dubourg to Rosati, from Saint Louis, 22 April 1818. Original in St. Louis Archdiocesan Archives, Dubourg papers.]

Felix had spells of other serious illnesses as well. In 1819, he was so near death that he received the sacrament of the anointing of the sick and Holy Communion from the hands of the distraught William Dubourg. “Before the bishop administered the sacred host to me, he addressed me, in English, interrupted at each word with weeping (my heart was bursting). He ordered me through the full weight of his authority as my bishop to ask God to grant me another period of life. At this unexpected announcement of such an order, which I did not expect, I experienced a certain repugnance to act, since I have always preferred to put myself completely in God’s hands and have done this without ever asking for anything. But after such an order, I immediately obeyed. From then on I suddenly began to improve.” [Letter 64]

His suffering had been increased through the use of the medicines of the day. “Blistering agents and mustard plasters, seven or eight bloodlettings, mercury pills, purges, etc., all, so to speak, worked together to crucify my body, already badly treated by the force of the illness.” The “mercury pills,” mercurous chloride or calomel, were, as we know now, extremely toxic. “The mercury had so affected my mouth, my gums, my tongue and my palate that every kind of food became unbearable, both because of the pain and sufferings in taking any food, and because of the little relish I had in tasting any. To judge by the way I felt, I would say that an infinity of needles had been placed around my gums. They pricked them constantly and caused a constant flow of disgusting saliva.” [Letter 63] Philippine Duchesne received the same treatment, and her descriptions match those of Felix.

And this was more than a year before he died! By 1820, however, his condition had deteriorated. His death was probably hastened by typhoid. The continuing mercury treatment certainly didn’t help and, thanks to his chronic intestinal weakness, his system collapsed. On 15 October of that year, he died in Saint Louis. His reputation was solid and he was widely admired. His brief life on the American frontier had put him into contact with many of the leading personalities, particularly in the Church. He labored for Native Americans, black slaves and some wild and uncouth Americans, natives and immigrants alike. He preached in English and French. He exhausted himself in teaching seminarians, visiting the sick and afflicted, and in supporting the privations of life on the frontier.

My hope is that this brief exposé of sights and sounds, along with a dose of other experiences, will help us appreciate the enormous contributions made by our ancestors in taming the wild land that they found here in the United States. They arrived with heads full of hopes and ideas, hearing music, writing poetry, experiencing unimagined beauty, but they also had to confront unimagined ugliness and depravity, the dregs of life. We should thank the Creator for preparing the way for us through the dedication of such marvelous heroes like Giacomo Felice Bartolomeo DeAndreis.

NOTES:
This lecture, slightly revised from the original given at DePaul University on 13 January 2004, announced the forthcoming publication of the author’s Frontier Missionary, Felix De Andreis, Vincentian Studies Institute Monographs, 3. Chicago, Vincentian Studies Institute, 2005.
References in square brackets are to that publication, or to other studies on De Andreis, as listed in its bibliography.