
Spring 1984

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Recommended Citation

Easterly, Frederick J. C.M. (1984) "Felix DeAndreis, C.M.," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol5/iss1/4>

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Felix DeAndreis, C.M.

*Founding Superior of the
Vincentians in the United States*

The attainment of heroic sanctity, required in the Process of Beatification and Canonization, is achieved only by unselfish conformity with the Will of God. Because of human weaknesses the Divine Will is not always discernible with ease; nor is it accomplished with the perfection desired by the heavenly Father. The attainment of that sanctity, however, is not measured by the perfection of human acts, but rather by the truthfulness and sincerity with which these acts are motivated.

The life of the Venerable Felix DeAndreis, C.M. is an example of a life filled with seeming contradictions but which, upon closer scrutiny, reveals a conformity to God's Providence which influenced not only his life but the destiny of lives of others and the future of the Church and the Congregation of the Mission in the United States of America.

Little information is available about the formative years of Felix's life except that he was born on December 12, 1778, at Demonte, a small village in the Diocese of Cuneo in the Province of Piedmont. His father was a notary; his brother Joseph was a doctor and his brother Vincent was a lawyer. It is not surprising, therefore, that the young Felix obtained an education that qualified him to pursue advanced studies in Philosophy, history, the languages, science, mathematics and music. Such a background assured the young student a secular professional career like that of his father and brothers. But the Providence of God was beckoning in the direction of a vocation to the priesthood. He had contemplated this call as early as his fifteenth or sixteenth year. About this time,

he approached Father Michael Laugeri, the superior of the Turin Province of the Congregation of the Mission, requesting admission to the Company founded by St. Vincent de Paul. The superior was acquainted with the intellectual endowments of Felix and advised him that:

As Vincentians, the employments of our missionaries are far different from those to which you have hitherto devoted yourself in accordance with your natural inclination; the principal object of our institute is to instruct the poor in the country, and form good laborers for the vineyard of the Lord; its duties, therefore, do not require brilliancy of thought . . . but serious study, and discourses without pomp and ornament. How difficult it would be for a young man like yourself to become accustomed to such things.

Undaunted by the response to his request, Felix willingly accepted the recommendation of Father Laugeri to delay his admission to the seminary for one year during which time he would pray, meditate and devote himself to a life devoid of the intellectual pursuits which seemed to be a source of vanity. In this way he could perceive with greater certainty the Divine determination of his future life. Concerning this period of determination, Felix submitted to the Divine Will when he wrote:

I entered into myself and endeavored to correct whatever I knew to be reprehensible in my conduct . . . and I traced out a plan of more serious life, having resolved to become a missionary, in order to atone for my sins, give glory to God, work out my own salvation, and by the aid of Divine Grace promote that of others; such was my intention, and I acknowledge it to be from Thee alone, O my God.

The statement not only summarized his life, it strengthened his submission to the Divine Will. One year later he entered the Congregation of the Mission on November 1, 1797 at Mondavi with the full approbation of Father Laugeri who, now, was convinced of Felix's vocation.

His seminary studies were a source of satisfaction to him although they were pursued under great difficulties. (Napoleon's confrontation with Pope Pius VII disrupted the affairs of the Church). Because of the prescriptions of the French Government which Napoleon Bonaparte imposed on Italy and the Vatican, Felix's ecclesiastical studies were interrupted when the Vincentian house at Piedmont was suppressed. He returned to his home in February 1799; in December of that same year he was able to resume his studies in Turin. When this latter seminary was also suppressed, the young seminarian entered the Collegio Alberoni, the Vincentian seminary at Piacenza. It was here that Felix developed a priestly spirit enriched by the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard, St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom; his spiritual life was fortified by the writings of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila; his Vincentian spirit was strengthened by the study of the life of St. Vincent de Paul and the exemplary example of his Confreres who were his teachers and instructors. With this background, Felix was ordained to the priesthood on August 14, 1802.

The priestly ministry to which he was assigned was patterned after the early years of St. Vincent who found a great need to evangelize the people in the country areas of France. Father DeAndreis devoted himself tirelessly to the village places surrounding the city of Piacenza where, because of the political disturbances, the faithful were all but forgotten. His great consolation was to bring to these abandoned people the truths of redemption and salvation; and his instructions were always followed by long periods in the confessional. Not content to serve only the faithful among the laity, he devoted much time to strengthen and fortify the faith, the courage and the perseverance of the clergy during these difficult days of foreign domination by an anti-clerical and anti-religious regime. His sincerity of speech and his wisdom of words touched the lives of every class and condition of people. His services were ever in

demand. But again Providence was determining his future. In between his periods of work with the country people he was called upon, because of his sanctity and intellectual ability, to assist or substitute for the professors at the Collegio Alberoni. This occupation of his time and talents was a preparation for his future work of seminary formation at Rome and the New World.

Father DeAndreis remained at Piacenza from 1802 until 1806, when two events prepared the young priest to recognize once again the path that Divine Providence was indicating. The first of these was the weather conditions in Northern Italy which adversely effected his health. He experienced periods of illness which were accompanied by severe headaches which forced him to curtail his visits to the people and places in the country areas to which he had become fondly attached; and also prevented him from continuing his classes with the seminarians.

This condition resulted in his transfer to Monte Citorio in Rome which was the second event determining his future. His duties at this Vincentian house were associated mostly with the ecclesiastical formation of seminarians who were members of the Congregation of the Mission and students from the Propaganda Fide College which had been forced to suspend operations from 1789 to 1815.

The zeal of Father DeAndreis led him into many related areas associated with one of the purposes and goals as stated by St. Vincent de Paul in the Rules of the Community, namely, "to help ecclesiastics in acquiring the knowledge and virtues necessary for their state." In this situation he was to achieve successes which he had not anticipated in his earlier years. His ambition then was to become a priest in order to become a missionary, possibly in China. The more he became involved in this new ministry, the less unlikely became his missionary dream. And yet Providence continued to guide him.

The work at Monte Citorio involved not only his teaching responsibilities but, whenever the time permitted,

he conducted missions for the poor in the country districts of Castelli Romani. Here he instructed the youth as well as the adults; urged the faithful in the practice of the Eucharist and sacramental confession, a renewal of their spiritual lives which would bring them Christ's redeeming grace of salvation. In addition, he conducted retreats for Bishops and priests alike; preached retreats for Ordinands which were prescribed by Pope Pius VII. And, after the example of St. Vincent's Tuesday Conferences, Felix also at the request of Pope Pius VII gathered the clergy of Rome to discuss with them the duties and obligations of the priesthood.

It was on the occasion of one of these conferences that the Bishop-designate of Louisiana in the United States listened to Father DeAndreis as he spoke with a group of the Roman clergy. The Bishop-designate was Louis William DuBourg who had been named Bishop of Louisiana. In 1815, before accepting the responsibility, he visited Rome for the purpose of obtaining priests and financial assistance. During his visit in Rome he stayed at Monte Citorio where Father DeAndreis was assigned. "How happy I would be," he remarked, "if only I had such preachers in my diocese." Without knowing the desire of Felix to engage in missionary service in a foreign country, the Bishop spoke with the young priest and asked that he accompany him on his return to the United States, primarily to establish a seminary in Louisiana. In a spirit of obedience, Felix was enthusiastic on condition that the assignment be approved by his Vincentian superiors. The proposal was strongly opposed by Father Charles Sicardi, the Vicar General of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome, who protested that the assignment of Father DeAndreis to the United States would do extensive harm to the work of the seminary and the spiritual formation of the clergy in Rome. Not to be deterred, Bishop DuBourg took his plea directly to Pius VII who, after much deliberation, decided in favor of Bishop DuBourg, much to

the delight of Father DeAndreis who saw in this action not his own will but the Will of God.

Under the direction of Bishop DuBourg, Father DeAndreis prepared for the long journey to America. Among these preparations was the selection of Father Joseph Rosati, C.M. as his colleague in this new venture. Rosati had been a student of DeAndreis at Monte Citorio. Young Rosati, on one occasion, expressed his admiration of his Confrere and teacher in the words of the disciples of Christ on their way to Emmaus — “Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us . . . and explained the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32)

The new missionaries, DeAndreis and Rosati, were joined by a group of Vincentian priests and Brothers, diocesan priests and seminarians, thirteen in all, who also accepted the invitation of Bishop DuBourg. They travelled to Bordeaux where, on June 12, 1816, they boarded an American brig, the *Ranger*, for the long and treacherous sea voyage. Rosati wrote that despite poor accomodations and, at times, unfavorable weather the ship resembled a floating seminary. DeAndreis prepared a regular schedule of exercises to be observed on ship-board. At a stated time a signal was given for rising; a half hour later meditation was held in common. This was followed by Mass provided the sea was calm enough to allow Mass to be said. During the day, at definite times, the breviary was recited in common; they also had conferences, the reading of the *New Testament*, and spiritual reading. The seminarians were obliged to devote a portion of each day to the study of theology; while all, both priests and seminarians, studied English.

The missionaries, after more than thirty days at sea, arrived at Baltimore on July 25. They were received with warm hospitality by the Sulpician priests at St. Mary's Seminary. Bishop DuBourg had served at this seminary until his appointment as the Administrator of Louisiana in 1812.

Before leaving Bordeaux, with Providence again leading the way, Father DeAndreis learned from Bishop DuBourg that, because of disturbances in New Orleans, the missionaries would settle in the village of St. Louis in Missouri instead of Louisiana. The change necessitated altered travelling plans which would take them overland from Baltimore to Pittsburgh, then down the Ohio river by flat boat to Louisville, Kentucky, whence they would travel the short distance to St. Thomas Seminary, Bardstown, Kentucky. Here they were welcomed on November 22, by Benedict Joseph Flaget, Bishop of Bardstown.

Despite the anxious desire of Father DeAndreis and his companions to reach St. Louis as quickly as possible, their ambitions were not fulfilled until one year later. Bishop Flaget explained that plans would have to be made for a residence in St. Louis accommodated to the needs of the Community. Furthermore, the people would have to be prepared for the coming of the missionaries and later the arrival of Bishop DuBourg. Until now this news had not been communicated to the Catholics at St. Louis who possessed only a dilapidated church building and a most inadequate residence.

While at St. Thomas Seminary, Father DeAndreis taught theology each day and also attended English classes taught to the new-comers by a member of the Seminary faculty. A good deal of DeAndreis' time was spent in translating his sermons into English; he had already translated them into French. Later he began to preach in English and hear confessions. From time to time he devoted his efforts toward a knowledge of the Indian language in view of evangelizing the American natives west of the Mississippi river. He succeeded in translating the *Pater Noster* into Indian and had hoped to do the same with the catechism. As a matter of fact, he had begun this when, at the end of September 1817, he received the welcome news that Bishop DuBourg and a group of

twenty-nine priests and seminarians would arrive shortly to labor for souls in Louisiana.

At the request of Bishop DuBourg, the Bishop of Bardstown, accompanied by DeAndreis and Rosati, departed for St. Louis for the purpose of determining the dispositions of the people toward the new Bishop, and also to prepare for the establishment of the mission. After a hazardous journey of nine days, they arrived on October 11, 1817 at Kaskaskia, Illinois, about sixty miles from St. Louis. As they descended the hills on the east side of the village they forgot all their experiences in the midst of their great joy at seeing a cross surmounting the church steeple and hearing the *Angelus* ring out as the sun set beyond the hills toward the west. Here, for the first time, the travellers had the opportunity of offering Holy Mass since they left Bardstown. The village was almost entirely Catholic and, in years gone by, had been the center of the Jesuit missions among the Indians. It had become a settlement of French Catholics; they had no resident pastor but were visited every Sunday by Father Donatien Olivier who said Mass for them. Father Olivier resided at Prairie du Rocher, about fifteen miles away.

Finally, on October 15, 1817, the travellers started out on the last leg of their journey and two days later they arrived at St. Louis. Thus ended a long journey that had begun from Rome in October 1815 and came to a happy conclusion in October 1817. At his earliest convenience Bishop Flaget called a meeting of the Catholic families to discuss the question of receiving the new Bishop and the missionaries. At first, the people were disinclined to accept a Bishop and clergy they had never met. After several meetings the people changed their original ideas and consented to contribute both their labor and their money to do whatever was necessary to make the Bishop's coming among them a happy one. DeAndreis was overjoyed at the prospects of working with people who manifested such a holy enthusiasm. When Bishop Flaget returned to

Bardstown, he requested Father DeAndreis to remain at Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, a village south of St. Louis, where he would act as pastor in place of Father Henry Pratte who would go to St. Louis to oversee the repair work to the rectory and the church. Here was the first outlet for the ardent zeal of Felix DeAndreis — that zeal which caused him to follow the inspirations of Divine Providence causing him to break all natural bonds of relatives and friends in Italy and the opportunity for material advancement and success in his native country.

Though his stay at Ste. Genevieve only lasted less than three months, the new pastor continued the noble work of Father Pratte. On Holy Days he celebrated two Masses and preached; during the week he busied himself instructing the children, hearing confessions, and visiting the sick. This he did until he was finally re-united in St. Louis with Bishop DuBourg who arrived there on January 6, 1818.

With the installation of Bishop DuBourg in the episcopal city, the work of Father DeAndreis increased in enthusiasm and intensity. As Vicar General of the Diocese he had to bear, together with Bishop DuBourg, the cares and responsibilities of this far-flung diocese. Very often, for long periods at a time, he had to carry on alone while the Bishop was away on visitations or fulfilling other duties. As Vicar General and pastor of the Pro-Cathedral, he strove to win souls to the Church and draw back those who had fallen from the Church because of lack of priests to guide them.

To meet the priestly needs of the Diocese and of the Congregation of the Mission, a seminary was essential. The primary purpose of the Vincentian missionaries who came to the United States was stated in the contract between Bishop DuBourg and the Vincentians — “to promote and carry out as soon as possible, the erection of a seminary, which, aided by the moderate pension required of the seminarists, need not be long delayed.” Nor was it delayed. When Father Rosati, together with twenty priests

and seminarians, left Bardstown in September 1818, they settled in Perryville, Missouri, on a property donated by the people for a parish church and a seminary. Father DeAndreis established the seminary and appointed his trusted Confreere and colleague, Father Rosati, as the rector of St. Mary of the Barrens Seminary, the present seminary of the Vincentian Fathers in the American Province of the Midwest, which in later years gave rise to Kenrick Diocesan Seminary in St. Louis.

On December 3 in that same year, DeAndreis began the first novitiate of the Vincentians in the United States, on the feast of St. Francis Xavier, the special patron of the American Vincentian mission. The Novitiate included two priests and a seminarian who had accompanied DeAndreis on the journey from Europe.

Out of these activities on the part of Felix DeAndreis arose the eminent Archdiocese of St. Louis which dominated the history of the Church in Mid-America; he laid the foundation of a seminary system resulting in hundreds of Bishops and thousands of priests over the years; and he launched a program of Vincentian activities which has grown from a single mission into a net-work of five American Provinces serving from the east to the west coast.

When Felix DeAndreis died on October 15, 1820, less than two years after his arrival in St. Louis, his life fulfilled the phrase "many things in a short time." In his book *Sanctity in America*, Cardinal Amletto Giovanni Cicognani, the former Apostolic Delegate to the United States, wrote of the Venerable Felix DeAndreis in these words:

His labors were indefatigable even up to his death . . . his spirit inspires the training of young ecclesiastics who are to continue in the twentieth century the work he began in the early part of the nineteenth. Father DeAndreis was not only a pioneer of Catholic education in the West but also in very truth a zealous apostle of the infant Church in the United States.

Rev. Frederick J. Easterly, C.M.