

Bishop in the Wilderness

by Elizabeth Altham

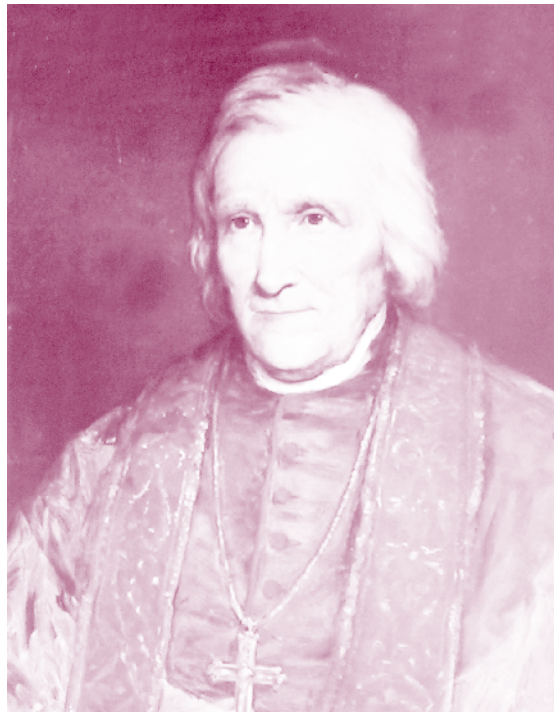
In November 1798, a French Sulpician sailed from Baltimore to Havana. Benedict Joseph Flaget, 35 years old, former professor of dogmatic theology at Nantes, former dean of discipline at Georgetown College, former missionary to the half-apostate French of Indiana, had already survived Indian raids and tended the afflicted and the dying through two outbreaks of smallpox. He had traveled the Ohio River with George Rogers Clark and had twice shaken hands with George Washington. Ever since the day, nine years before, when the Revolution had shattered his placid life at Nantes, Flaget had faced the unknown with faith, and now and then with typical, practical French humor. On this voyage, he studied Spanish.

In Havana, as planned, he met Father Dubourg, a friend and former president of Georgetown and Father Babade, who had produced the good impression on the Cubans that had led to their asking for an establishment of Sulpicians on their island. They began to plan their new college.

But the Archbishop of Havana was old and blind; the administration of his archdiocese was in the hands of two vicars general, brothers, not fond of the French. They decreed that the newcomers would not be allowed to offer Mass in Havana. Babade and Dubourg took ship for Baltimore. Flaget contracted yellow fever, and remained.

Flaget's contemporary biographer, M.J. Spalding, Bishop of Louisville, records little of this illness. We can guess, however, from what he says of

subsequent ones, what this one was like. Flaget would see 86, and would be gravely ill several times. Always his response to serious illness was meditation on the Passion and cheerful resignation.



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He was adopted during the fever by an elderly, aristocratic woman, and, upon his recovery, by the Havana aristocracy in general. One Don Nicholas Calvo installed him in his home as tutor to his son. Flaget agreed to stay on in this capacity, provided his superiors concurred—and provided he was allowed to say Mass. The Archbishop obligingly died at this point, and the canons of the archdiocese instantly granted faculties to Flaget. He began to offer

Mass in the church of the Capuchins, and his homilies drew large crowds—much to his mystification, for he never thought well of himself as a preacher. He spent the next two years tutoring the young Calvo, offering Mass at the Capuchin church and pursuing his own program of study and prayer.

Flaget had learned early a disciplined habit of life. He was the third son of a hard-working peasant family of Auvergne, born shortly after the death of his father. Upon his mother's death a couple of years later, he was adopted by a paternal uncle, a canon of the collegiate church of Billom. Little Benuet (the local patois for the French *Benoit*) worked hard at the school there, and came to believe early on that God was calling him to the priesthood. At seventeen he began his studies of philosophy and theology at the cathedral city of Clermont, earning his keep by tutoring wealthy classmates; later he won a scholarship to the seminary of the Sulpicians there.

Having completed his seminary studies three years before he was old enough for ordination, Flaget was sent to the seminary at Issy, where he served as sacristan. He learned to love silence, order and solitude, and spent many hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

Soon after his ordination and the assignment to teach at Nantes came the Revolution, and the Terror. All the seminaries were closed. Flaget went to Clermont, to ask his superiors whether he might be of use in the missions of America. He was packed off in short order, under the charge of the superior of the seminary at

Orleans.

They sailed from Bordeaux in January 1792, and the North Atlantic lived up to its reputation. Years later, someone asked Flaget whether he did not fear these dangerous crossings. He shrugged and chuckled.

“Why should we fear more to be food for fishes than food for worms, so long as we are ready?”

Also on board were Father David, another young Sulpician and Flaget’s good friend, and M. Stephen Badin, a secular subdeacon. Their voyage was fairly typical of the period: priests were no longer wanted in France, except as guillotine-fodder, so many came to the States as missionaries.

They reached Baltimore at the end of March. In May, Bishop Carroll sent Flaget to Post Vincennes, Indiana. The settlers there had not seen a priest for three years.

(A year later, Carroll ordained Stephen Badin, the first man to receive Holy Orders in the United States, and dispatched him to Kentucky, a remarkable case of sink-or-swim. Badin came up to the mark, beginning his mission by walking from Baltimore to Pittsburgh. He proved to be an indefatigable apostle.)

Flaget, meanwhile, easily reached Pittsburgh by horse, but the Ohio River was too low for navigation. He remained there nearly six months, studying English, visiting prisoners and assisting the many who lay ill and dying in an outbreak of smallpox. Finally, in November, he set out on a flat-bottomed boat for Louisville.

Louisville at that time consisted of four log cabins. There Flaget met two other French priests, en route to their new stations at Kaskaskias and Prairie du Rocher. Under a tree, he made his confession to one of them; he knew it would be many months, at least, before he would make another.

He probably foresaw then what he later reported: the most difficult hardship of the wilderness priest was the infrequency of confession.

He proceeded by a passing flat-boat to Corn Island, near the Falls of the Ohio. There George Rogers Clark armed one of his own boats, and himself conducted Flaget to Post Vincennes. They arrived a few days before Christmas.

Of his congregation of seven hundred, twelve came to Christmas Communion. The church was of logs, open to the weather, neglected. The altar was of boards, badly put together. Since the last priest was recalled to Quebec, in October 1789,

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the community had been managed by a lay “guardian,” who performed baptisms, read the Mass prayers on Sundays and witnessed marriages.

Most of the inhabitants of Vincennes were hunters and trappers, as the original French Canadian settlers had been. Their clothing was largely of animal skins. They planted few crops and made no provision for the education of their children. Flaget began at once to repair the church, and to hold classes in reading, arithmetic and religion. Soon he had a children’s choir, and a cadre of altar boys, dressed in white from his own supply of linen. Wherever he went in the town, he was accompanied by an honor guard of small boys. As the months went by, both children and adults came to Mass and to confession in rapidly growing numbers.

Flaget persuaded the men to build looms and to plant grain and vegetables. He purchased a house and some land with a view to establishing a school in which boys might learn useful trades. One thing only did he

ask for himself: once or twice a year, an armed escort to Kaskaskias or Prairie du Rocher, so that he might go to confession. The danger was quite real. Shortly after one of these trips, two Indians were arraigned in Kaskaskias for the murder of a white man. They gave as evidence of their innocence a report of having observed “the Blackgown,” Flaget, passing quite close to them in the wilderness, his escort small enough that they and their companions could easily have killed them all.

Smallpox broke out in Vincennes and virulently among the Miami Indians. Flaget was tireless in his visits to the sick and the dying, and baptized eight or nine Miamis on their deathbeds.

But the Sulpicians who were then administering Georgetown College were short

handed. In April 1795 they appointed Benedict Flaget dean of discipline and professor of geography and French. It was another three-year stint—in term-time and out of it, for he accompanied his students on their vacations. Apparently they became as much attached to him as his trapper boys had been. One of them, Benedict Fenwick, would later serve as Bishop of Boston.

Bishop Carroll’s plan had always been to give the college to the Jesuits as soon as they were strong enough to run it. Finally, in the fall of 1798, the Sulpicians withdrew and Flaget was sent to Havana.

In all of these adventures the theme of Flaget’s life stands out: to turn accidents and the thwarting of plans to God’s good service. The meeting in 1792 with George Rogers Clark would not be the last; nor would the meeting in 1800 with Louis Philippe, then in exile in Havana. When the future King of France was about to sail for the States, some wealthy Cubans made up a purse for

him and detailed Flaget to deliver it. Years later, the King would remember. While Flaget was apparently being thrown at random over the map of the New World, Providence was laying the foundation for his great work.

Early in 1801, Don Nicholas Calvo proposed that Flaget accompany his son on a tour of Europe. Flaget worried about the plan. "Those who travel much," he quoted Thomas á Kempis, "are rarely sanctified. As often as I have been among men, I have returned less than a man." Indeed, the first families of Havana had continued to invite Flaget to dinners, while accepting the fact that he nearly always declined, preferring study and contemplation.

The habit of obedience came to his rescue. He referred Don Nicholas' proposal to his superiors and put the matter out of his mind, pending their verdict. This is an obvious pattern in his life. At turning point after turning point, he awaited the decision of his superiors, confident (with one notable exception) that he could not go wrong by obeying, always keeping to his usual discipline of prayer and study.

Don Nicholas settled the question by dying in May. Flaget grieved. He wrote to his older brother, by now a parish priest in a temporarily calmer France:

Providence, the designs of which I cannot too much admire, has interposed to fill my days with bitterness. The death of my own father could not have caused me greater grief. He lived but 42 years; but, in my opinion, these were worth an age.

Flaget gathered 23 young Cubans

for the college at Baltimore, and took leave of Havana.

He was very glad to return to the college. He sometimes said that he regarded his years of formation and early study at the houses of Clermont and Issy as the happiest of his life. He loved the silent service of the altar; the hours of self-forgetful adoration. He was at home in an ordered, established ecclesiastical environment—precisely because



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Life at the college in Maryland was similar. He enjoyed the company of the students, and became attached to them. He had time for reading, for contemplation, for retreats. The Society of the Jesuit faculty was at that time suppressed, but they carried out their exercises in private. Flaget much admired their seriousness and valued their conversation.

For eight years he stayed there. The log churches of the Indiana missions, the piety of his trapper boys, the smallpox, the grandeur of the frontier, the lively color of Havana,

receded in memory. He was on familiar ground: the classroom and the sacristy.

But Bishop Carroll was growing old, and very weary. With the exception of Louisiana, which was still subject to the Archbishop of Havana, he bore responsibility for all of the United States. He proposed to the Holy See four new bishoprics: Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Bardstown, Kentucky. The first three would be relatively local, although enormous by modern standards. The last, Bardstown, would have official charge over Kentucky and Tennessee, but for the foreseeable future would include also Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. (By an informal request of the Bishop of New Orleans, it would end up including Missouri as well.) For the first ordinary of Bardstown, Carroll proposed Benedict Flaget, writing of him to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda:

For several years he was stationed at a place called Post Vincennes, lying between the waters of the Ohio and the lakes of Canada, where, with the greatest industry

and the most hearty good will of all, he labored in promoting piety, until, to my great regret, he was recalled to fill some office in this seminary. He is at least forty years of age, of a tender piety toward God, of most bland manners, and if not profoundly, at least sufficiently imbued with theological knowledge.

In fact, Flaget was 43 when Carroll wrote the above.

The Cardinal Prefect endorsed Carroll's recommendation. The Bulls of Benedict Flaget were dated April 8, 1808; they reached Baltimore in September. Rumor had picked Father

David for Bardstown; he and Flaget met on the steps of the seminary, and David gave his friend the news.

“They told me,” said David, “that I was to be the Bishop of Bardstown. I did not believe it; but I determined that, should this happen, I would invite you to accompany me. Now, the case being happily reversed, I tender to you my services without reserve.”

“I thank you, my good friend,” said Flaget, “and I accept your offer, in the event that it should please God not to suffer this chalice to pass away from me.”

For Flaget knew what the rest of his life would be. He remembered the log churches, the tiptoeing around the Indian scouting parties, the hundreds of marriages and lay baptisms he had validated, the general ignorance and disorder. This was the end of a peaceful existence in a peaceful institution, the end of daily discourse among other scholars. For the first several years at least, it was the end of solemn Mass offered with great attention to rubric and decorum in an august and dignified setting.

Indeed, his first episcopal palace would be a log cabin near Bardstown, twelve feet by twelve feet. His first seminarians would sleep in the loft.

For the first and only time in his life Flaget protested an order, not because he dreaded hardship, but because he was utterly persuaded he was unworthy. With the reluctant permission of Dubourg, he fled to France and sought out his old superior, Father Emery, hoping he would support his wish to decline the appointment.

Emery met him with stern words: “My Lord, you should already be in your diocese.”

Flaget returned to America.

To prepare himself for his consecration he engaged in a retreat of forty days beginning in September 1810. On November 4, the Feast

of St. Charles Borromeo, he was consecrated by Archbishop Carroll in the cathedral at Baltimore.

He had collected four priests and three seminarians to help the beginning of his outpost, but he had no money with which to travel to Bardstown. He wrote to friends in France:

I was compelled to accept the appointment, whether I would or not. I had not a cent at my disposal. The Pope and the cardinals, who were dispersed by the revolution, were not able to make me the slightest present; and Archbishop Carroll, though he had been Bishop for more than sixteen years, was still poorer

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than myself, for he had debts, and I owed nothing.... It was only six months afterwards, that, through a subscription made by my friends in Baltimore, I was enabled to reach Bardstown.”

The new Bishop and his friends left Baltimore in May 1811, retracing the route he had taken to Pittsburgh nineteen years before. The trip down the Ohio in a flat-boat from Pittsburgh took two weeks. Father David wrote to a friend in France:

The boat on which we descended the Ohio became the cradle of our seminary, and of the church of Kentucky. Our cabin was chapel, dormitory, study room and refectory. An altar was erected on the boxes, and ornamented so far as circumstances would allow. The Bishop prescribed a regulation which fixed all the exercises, and in which each had its proper time. On Sunday, after prayer, everyone went to confession; then the priests said Mass,

and the others went to communion. After an agreeable navigation, we arrived at Louisville.

The people of Bardstown sent a carriage to Louisville for their new bishop, and horses for his priests and seminarians. In many places, however, the roads were so bad that Flaget had to leave the carriage and walk. One of the seminarians gave him his horse and walked by his side.

Close to Bardstown the road improved and the Bishop rode again in his carriage. He wrote to his brother in France a few days later:

I was not the more exalted for all this; the idea that I was henceforward to speak, to write and to act as Bishop cast me into a profound sadness.... At the distance of half a league from town, an ecclesiastic of my diocese [probably Stephen Badin], accompanied by the principal inhabitants, came out to meet me. So soon as they had perceived me, they dismounted to receive my benediction. I gave it to them, but with how trembling a hand, and how heavy a heart! In entering the town, I devoted myself to all the guardian angels who reside therein, and I prayed to God, with all my heart, to make me die a thousand times, should I not become an instrument of His glory. O, my dear brother, have compassion on me!

It is very clear from other things he wrote that he did not believe himself in need of compassion because of the poverty of his new diocese, but because he was now responsible before God for its souls.

In Kentucky there were about a thousand families in thirty congregations, ten with churches or chapels already built; and six more under construction. Tennessee was slightly behind; Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and

Michigan were even more thoroughgoing wilderness. These were slight differences of degree, for it was all still untamed. Robert Penn Warren wrote of the Kentucky of the time:

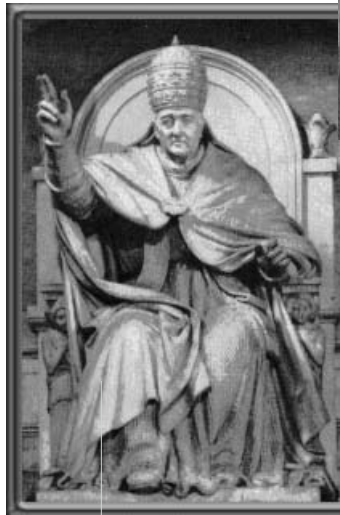
[T]he leather hunting shirt and the broadcloth coat mixed at burgoo, barbecue, market or hustings, and a man might wear both the coonskin cap and the two-story beaver in his time. It was a violent and lonely land, and when night came on, the loneliness was equal for the big brick house with the white portico overlooking a meadow or the log hut set at the head of a cove in the knobs. Eastward, cutting off the past, rose the wall of the mountains, and westward the wilderness stretched away forever with its terror and promise....

Squire Beaumont... served as a magistrate, sitting with a black coat and riding whip behind a table in the Beartooth Tavern to take his jorum and dispense justice.... Aging men with broken black teeth and hairy faces who had little love for the corn patch or mill, who knew all the hints of weather and lifted the head like a hound when the breeze changed or faltered, loved to lie in the sun in front of their tumbled-down cabins, with a jug of whisky at hand, while their leather-faced wives fetched wood or hoed in the field. —*World Enough and Time*, 1950

It was quite a diocese for the new Bishop. He had eight priests: the four he had brought from Baltimore, and four already there. Father David he appointed superior of his seminary. In the first five years, the number of seminarians grew from three to fifteen. Father Badin wrote of them later:

They made bricks and cut wood to build the church of St. Thomas, the seminary and the convent of Nazareth. The poverty of our infant establishments compelled them to spend their recreation in labor.... Nothing could be more frugal than their table, which is also that of the Bishop.

In the early years, Flaget seldom took time to record his efforts. In the summer of 1812, however, he calculated that in the first four months of that year he had ridden eight hundred miles on horseback.



From the top - Bishop Carroll, Pope Gregory XVI, and George Rogers Clark



Before the beginning of 1815, he had visited all the congregations of Kentucky.

He would have done it sooner, but Archbishop Carroll called a Provincial Council in August 1812. Flaget went through Ohio this time, visiting the very patchy settlements of Catholics there. He stopped at a log cabin between Lancaster and Somerset. When he told the German farmer he had come from Kentucky, the man exclaimed, "I have been a long time thinking of Kentucky, with my wife! They say there are churches and priests there. Wife! We must go thither; it is thirteen years since we

saw a priest or a church, and our poor children (too)."

But Flaget interrupted him: "No, my children. Stay where you are. I am your bishop. I will endeavor to send you a priest." The man informed him that there were two other Catholic families in the neighborhood; the Bishop offered Mass at one of their houses, and learned that they had purchased 320 acres for a church and its support. Flaget recorded in his journal that he had great hopes for the Church in Ohio, on account of the diligence of the Germans, and their love of good music.

Reaching Baltimore, he learned that the Council had been postponed. A letter had been sent to him, but had arrived at Bardstown after his departure. Spalding speculates that the Council was postponed because the Pope was at the time in prison, and it would have seemed rather rude to hold an official meeting.

On his return trip, Flaget stopped to lecture a couple of congregations in Kentucky who had declined to contribute funds for the regular support of their pastors. He did so forcefully, threatening them with excommunication. The evening of his arrival back at his "palace," he wrote in his journal:

Recreation with the seminarians. I love to be in the midst of them. I reproach myself with not being sufficiently grave in their company.

In 1814, Flaget visited Indiana and Missouri. The latter had not originally been part of his jurisdiction, belonging rather to the Diocese of New Orleans; but his old friend Father Dubourg had been assigned as interim administrator of New Orleans, and asked him to lend a hand. The Bishop reached Vincennes in May, and was enthusiastically received by his former congregation.

He stayed there two weeks, teaching the children, hearing confessions and attending to the temporal affairs of the parish. He preached in English and French and confirmed 86 people. These two weeks are quite typical of his visits to parishes in his diocese until the mid-1840s.

In June he started for the Mississippi escorted by a company of French Rangers who amused themselves in the crossing of Illinois by hunting deer and turkey. "These vast plains," Flaget wrote in his journal, "seem destined by the Creator for the rearing of millions of sheep." At Cahokias he found an orderly congregation with a surplus of \$200. He heard confessions and confirmed 118 people. The parishioners accompanied him to the Mississippi.

His first visit to St. Louis appears to have been a complete lead balloon. The people were caught up in the Fourth of July festivities and few turned up to hear him. A few fashionable ladies annoyed him by their ostentatious presentation of an ornate miter and crook.

There, however, he heard a first rumor of the downfall of Napoleon, and resolved to have a solemn *Te Deum* sung upon his return to Kentucky. He also renewed his acquaintance with George Rogers Clark, now Governor of Missouri. Clark invited Flaget to his house and asked him to baptize three of his children, as well as an orphan he had adopted. Flaget stood godfather.

In Florissant he was better received. The people came in procession to receive his blessing led by children bearing banners. For his re-crossing of the Mississippi they loaded his canoe with flowers.

The next thirteen years of Flaget's life fall into a pattern, although to us



St. Joseph Proto-Cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky

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they can hardly seem routine: visits, usually on horseback, to outlying parishes; nights under the stars on frozen prairies and in mosquito-ridden swamps; interludes of instruction and companionship with his seminarians; the importation of teaching sisters from Europe; the foundation of orphanages and schools. Above all, thousands of miles, mostly on horseback, sometimes by riverboat. He occasionally recorded in his journal how many days it had been since he slept in a bed.

In 1816 he began the subscription for the erection of a cathedral in Bardstown. In 1819 the building was completed and consecrated. Flaget was obliged to move into town, leaving the seminary which, although it had grown, was still pleasantly secluded. He noted in his journal that his new residence was "too handsome and too vast for a Bishop."

Once he was compelled to lay an interdict on a parish in Michigan that had defied its pastor. He did not think he could leave it at that, however, and set out to visit and set things right. Spalding writes:

Passing through Dayton and Spring-

field, he had the happiness to say Mass at Urbana on the 24th of May [1818]. Here he was much perplexed on account of his ignorance of the remaining route, which lay through a country thinly settled. He had recourse to prayer, and committed himself and his party to the care of Providence. Fortunately, a young officer, named Gwynn, was going to Detroit, and he kindly offered his services as guide.

(The modern imagination cannot resist the image of the Bishop outside the church in Urbana, asking directions to Detroit so he could go and lift his own interdict.)

Not until 1821 was the first new diocese carved out of Bardstown's original territory. At Flaget's recommendation, Edward Fenwick, an intrepid missionary, was appointed first Bishop of Cincinnati with responsibility for all of Ohio. Two years later Joseph Rosati was appointed Coadjutor of New Orleans for a term of three years after which he would become the first Bishop of St. Louis.

In 1822 Flaget decreed that all the priests of his diocese must make a retreat once each year. Always Flaget made these retreats along with his clergy; his old friend David, now Coadjutor of Bardstown, usually gave them.

In 1829 or 1830, Flaget was attacked by weariness. He wrote to Rome offering his resignation and proposing F.P. Kenrick as his successor. In May 1830 he received the Bulls of Bishop-elect Kenrick—for Philadelphia, not Bardstown. Delivering them to Kenrick, he observed: "Behold here the certificate of the cross you will have to carry!"

In 1833 F. Rese, a Propagandist,

was named first Bishop of Detroit. A year later Flaget's old parish of Vincennes was erected as the see of Indiana; a Dr. Brute was named first Bishop of Vincennes.

Bishops of dioceses outside Europe were obliged to visit Rome once every ten years. Because of his unusually great responsibilities, Flaget was excused this duty until 1835. When he did finally go, he found reason to fear he might never return. Much to his bewilderment, he caught the imaginations of the Italians and the French. The "Bishop of the Wilderness" was in great demand, giving conferences and raising funds for the Propaganda. He begged Gregory XVI to allow him to go home, but the Holy Father refused citing first the good he was doing in stirring up a more lively faith and later the bad weather in the North Atlantic. Flaget wrote to his brother:

It is in vain that they feast me wherever I go.... In vain do I find myself associating with Archbishops and Bishops, with mayors and prefects, with marquises and counts.... In vain do they overwhelm me with polite attentions and compliments, in prose and in verse, treating me as an apostolic man, as the foreign missionary.... If I think but one moment of Billom, all these good eulogies pass over my head like a light breeze.

He had been thinking for some time that his see ought to be moved to Louisville, which had developed into the leading town of Kentucky. He asked Gregory about it, but the Pope referred the question to the Propaganda.

In the end, between the Pope's assignments (including a tour of 46 dioceses in France and Sardinia) and some fundraising for his own diocese, Flaget remained in Europe until the summer of 1839. He was

received cordially by King Louis Philippe who remembered him from Havana, by the Emperor in Vienna and by Metternich. He collected construction funds for his diocese, and a papal blessing for his flock. Gregory particularly asked him to bring his blessing "face to face" to as many of his faithful as he could.

His 77th birthday passed before he reached Bardstown. He spent the next two years in a visitation of his diocese.

"He seemed," Spalding reports,



"to have again put on the vigor of his younger days. He sat erect in the saddle and appeared, after a severe day's ride, to be not much more fatigued than his younger companions." It was Flaget's Indian summer.

Cholera broke out in Louisville and the surrounding area. Flaget did not spare himself in visiting the sick and the dying. He fell ill himself, whether to "*le sieur cholera*" or merely from fatigue, Spalding does not say. He was afflicted more and more often with violent headaches. An old shoulder injury, collected in a fall from a horse many years before, flared up.

Bishop David and Flaget's brother both died in 1841. In the same year, Flaget received the rescript that

authorized him to move his see to Louisville; the timing was left up to him. To move to an even larger, noisier town was the last thing he wished, but it was clearly the correct course.

The Jesuits came to take charge of St. Joseph's College and to open a school for boys in Louisville. The Trappists arrived from France and took possession of their new home at Gethsemani.

On August 15, 1849, the cornerstone of the new cathedral was laid. Flaget was too ill and weary to attend the ceremony, but he observed it from a balcony of his new residence and lifted a hand in benediction.

His memory and eyesight were failing. At first he found it a great cross that he could no longer offer Mass or say the Office; soon, however, he was at peace simply praying Rosaries, often nine or more in a day. He was conscious of his failing memory, and anxious that it might cause inconvenience to those around him.

"I forget everything," he said. "Could I but forget myself, I would be a perfect man."

He received Last Rites on February 11, 1850, gave a final benediction to his clergy and died quietly.

His body was temporarily laid to rest in the convent of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, until the new cathedral was completed and it could be moved there. The coffin was left open for a long time before interment so that the faithful could pass by and touch crucifixes and medals to the body. ✠



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