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Philippine Duchesne
What Is She Saying to Us?

Louise Callan, RSCJ

Philippine Duchesne was a woman of the frontier in the full sense of that term. She could match experiences with any of the pioneer women of history or fiction. In her first decade in America she suffered practically every hardship the frontier offered, except the threat of Indian massacre – poor lodging, keen shortages of food, drinking water, fuel, money, and the loneliness of remote places and a foreign tongue. She saw forest fires at close range and knew the terror of blazing chimneys and dry roof-beams licked with flames. She endured cramped quarters and the privation of all privacy, the vagaries of the Missouri climate, and the crude manners of children reared in rough surroundings and without the slightest training in courtesy. Yet these same children often brought her the best gifts they could offer – wild berries, nuts, honey, fresh eggs, a side of bacon, a pat of butter, a block of home-made soap, a haunch of venison. And Mother Duchesne poured out on them all the treasures of her mind and heart, longing to draw them to know and love the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The last decade of her life was spent at St. Charles. Old, feeble, in poor health – but always busy with work and prayer, sewing for the missions, making altar linens and vestments for mission churches.

Mother Duchesne bore the burden and responsibility of the Society's first missionary venture for twenty-two years, and her position as Superior was one of her hardest trials. It seemed to give her claim in her own eyes to the hardest work, the worst accommodations, the poorest clothes, the most meager nourishment, and the longest hours of prayer – for under the pressure of work and pain, loneliness and failure, she turned always to converse with God. The night hours were ever her favorite time for prayer, when she strengthened her spirit by deep draughts of the Divine. Those who are now reaping the harvest she sowed know the

tremendous power of her inspiration. Her spirit dwells at St. Charles, where she spent the last decade of her holy life in ever deepening seclusion.

Louise Callan, RSCJ, attended Clifton (Cincinnati) and was on the faculty of Maryville; she wrote the official biography of Philippine Duchesne. She died in 1966.