

Mother Caroline: Steamboat Explosion

Facilitator Directions

Materials needed:

Letter 20 to Sisters, June 17, 1858

Report 23 to the Central Council of the Louis Mission Society, May 31, 1859.

Taken from *The Letters of Mother Caroline Friess, School Sisters of Notre Dame*, edited by Barbara Brumleve, SSND, 1991.

The FACILITATOR introduces this topic by saying: Mother Caroline, the American foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, was an intrepid traveler. Her journeys to visit sisters were made in stagecoaches, wagons, steamboats, trains, and on foot. Her lunch basket and small suitcase were her constant companions. She would take the list of all School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Directory, with her. She fondly called it her favorite prayer book.

On a return trip from New Orleans she was traveling on the Mississippi by steamboat, *Pennsylvania*. On June 13, 1858, near Memphis, there was a terrible explosion on the *Pennsylvania*. Memories of this event touched her deeply.

The FACILITATOR may want to pause and ask: Has anyone ever experienced a serious accident while traveling? Invite comments and ask if the memories seemed to become more vivid with the passing of time...

After sharing, The FACILITATOR returns to Mother Caroline by saying: We have two accounts of this incident from Mother Caroline. Let's read the first account in Letter 20, which was written just four days after the event. After reading concludes The FACILITATOR says: Take a few minutes and circle any words that give clues to Mother Caroline's emotional state as she was writing this letter. The FACILITATOR invites comments. After participants have shared The FACILITATOR continues. There are many unanswered questions for me in this letter. How did Mother Caroline survive this ordeal? Did someone help her? What happened to Fr. Urbanek? Was she rescued by a passing steamboat?

The FACILITATOR distributes Report 23 and says: As you'll notice from the date on this Report to the Louis Mission Society almost one year later, she gives more detail about this tragic incident. Let's read it together and once again circle words that give us clues to Mother Caroline's emotional state at the time of the writing. After reading the report and taking a few minutes The FACILITATOR continues: What new information do we receive in this report that was not in the original letter? Do you sense her anguish in never having regained the body of Fr. Urbanek? Does this report tell us something about her relationship with the Louis Mission Society? (This was a German charitable organization under the sponsorship of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, specifically for helping German immigrants. The King and this society were an essential part of the financial support given to Mother Caroline for her work in America.)

After discussion, The FACILITATOR says: As we try to read the heart of Mother Caroline, imagine that she was sharing this with you and you were her spiritual director. What would you advise her to do in order to heal? Invite comments. The FACILITATOR continues: Between June 13, 1858 and June 13, 1860, Mother Caroline continued opening missions, traveling, and responding to the responsibilities of her role. These included Elm Grove, (Erlenhain, WI) St. Mary's, La Crosse WI, Richmond, VA, Holy Redeemer, New York City, Belleville, IL, Quincy, IL, Ft. Madison, IA, Keokuk, IA, Washington, MO, St. Charles, MO, Trenton, NJ, Louisville, KY, Tacony, PA, St. Joseph's, Milwaukee, WI. The FACILITATOR concludes: Perhaps Mother Caroline found her best medicine for healing in being busy, in continuing the work God had given her to do... If appropriate, The FACILITATOR may add: Would anyone care to share how you have dealt with loss or some tragedy? Why not have a conversation with the person next to you... After several minutes, The FACILITATOR says: Mother Caroline's experience of loss can tell us something about our own ways of dealing with grief. As we conclude this discussion, let's take a few minutes to pray.

Final Prayer: Listen to a favorite piece of music reminding participants that music can be healing.