

A LETTER FROM  
MOTHER CECILE OF THE HOLY CROSS  
TO THE SUPERIOR OF SISTERS OF DIEPPE  
1639

My dearest Mother,

May the peace and love of Our Lord be with you!

Some time ago, I have written you a letter, while on board the ship, at a distance of about one hundred and fifty leagues (375 miles) from Dieppe, as the fishermen would say. I'm now wondering if you have received that letter. Thank God, we have been preserved from the danger I have spoken to you about, but let me tell you that since, we have encountered many other hardships.

Life on board is really not easy. We have numerous difficulties to cope with. Many passengers complain about the food. But we don't. We ate so well taken care of, especially while on board Mr Bontemps' ship. He gave order that we get everything we ask for. So, food for us is the least thing we have to worry about. I have experienced it. Cod fish without butter is a lot better than a great variety of meats. Often, it has come to my mind that it is much more different to bear the inconveniences encountered on the sea then to just hear about them. Sometimes, we come so close to death. How astonishing! The first lesson I have been taught by Rev. Father Le Jeune sounded so true to me. He explained that the hardships we encounter in Canada are the ones within ourselves that we have brought from France, our native country. This, I experience day in and day out.

We have had such a big storm which lasted fifteen days, with only little breaks, now and then. So much so, that during the whole week before the Rogation days, including Ascension Day, it was impossible for us to hear Mass or to receive Holy Communion. The same thing happened on Pentecost Day. Our vessels was so much shaken that we

could not stay standing up, nor make a single step without leaning on something, nor stay sitting down without holding on tight to something. Otherwise, one would simply find herself rolling, from one side to the other of the room. When it came time to eat, we had to sit down on the floor and get three or four together, to hold the pot, so that it would not turn over. Most of us have been so sick including Madame de la Peltrie who even stopped thinking about Canada which she used to call "my dear country". All she could hope for was that the tempest stop and that calm be restored. And it did. All of a sudden, the storm was over and each one of us recovered health. Another discomfort aboard the ship is the bad smell coming from dirt and coal-tar wherever you may be.

On Holy Trinity Day, at around ten o'clock in the morning, as we were saying the Prayer of "None" from our Great Office Book, we heard cries coming from a sailor. Nevertheless, we kept on praying until Rev. Father Vimont came down to our room saying "We are dead, if Our Lord doesn't have mercy on us; we are at about 10 feet from a giant block of ice as big as a town." He got on his knees and so did we. He prayed using the words Saint-Francis-Xavier had once spoken out, while facing such a danger: "Jesus, my Redeemer, have mercy on us!" This being done, he said to us: "I'm going to see the sailors. Then, I'll come back here to give you absolution. We have a half hour left."

I hadn't been afraid till I heard the priest crying out: "We are dead!" Then, before I had time to get prepared, Mister Bontemps rushed into our room, saying "We are saved! A miracle happened!" He pointed out to us the huge block of ice that was now behind our ship. We couldn't see the top of it, so thick was the fog which lasted a long time. So much so, that we faced a second danger, nearing a piece of land that we couldn't see because of the thick fog. It is because of your prayers that we have been saved. One and only one man, the captain, who was holding the wheel, upon seeing the ship bumping right into the giant ice block, turned the steering-wheel so quickly

and with so much strength that it escaped the iceberg. It seemed to us impossible that a human being could have done such a thing. Finally, we arrived at Tadoussac, on July 20th, the three vessels together. You can imagine the joy we felt.

The next day, we came out of the admiral into the Saint-Jacques, the only vessel out of the three, going forward Quebec. Mister Ançot was the Commander. The space we had was so small that we had to sit very close to one another around the chest that served four times a day to say Mass. The Saint-Jacques was our home until July 29th. Then, finally, we got out of it because of the strong winds that did not favor us at all. We got into another boat heading for Quebec. On this embarkation we found a very tiny room full of cod fish, on which we had to pile up. We were as close to one another as loaves of bread in an oven. Some of us could just not stand the situation. The suffocating heat and the bad smell, coming from the fish, had us switch from the room to the deck where it was pouring rain, day and night. In the afternoon of Saint Ignatius' Feast Day we should have been on shore. But, it was impossible for us to do so, because of the weather. It rained during five to six hours without stopping. And since I was one of those that just couldn't stand staying in the room, I was crouched by the others that suffered from the same thing. We became soaked to the skin so much so that our tunic took a few days to dry up, after our arrival in Quebec. I did find it very hard to be so dirty in front of people that were so honorable. Reverend Father Vimont, seeing us soaken wet, asked the one in charge of the boat to let us come on shore before arriving to Quebec, so that we may get near a fire to dry a part of our clothes. This being done, a hut resembling that of the Indians, was arranged so that we could rest. A blanket on the soil served as a bed. I did sleep well that first night. The next morning, we got to the boat and arrived at Quebec around eight o'clock in the morning. It was on the feast of Saint-Pierre-aux-Liens.

As soon as Mr the Governor noticed our embarkation, he send two men in an indian boat to check who we were. Once reassured, he send

someone else with a long-tapestry-boat so that we embark and get safe and sound on the shore in Quebec. He himself, accompanied by his Lieutenant, Mr de Lisle, came to meet us. As soon as we touched the ground we fell on our knees, and Rev. Father Vimont made a prayer for us. Then, we went straight to church where we sang the Te Deum, heard Holy Mass and received Communion. Next, we went to Mr the Governor's house to greet him and have dinner. Afterwards, someone led us to the house loaned by the Men of the Company to Madame de la Peltrie. It is situated near the big river and consists of two rooms quite large, a basement and an attic. There is no place else, in the whole world, where you can have such a beautiful view. Without even having to come out of our room, we can see the vessels arriving and staying in front of our house until it is time for them to leave. We have a fence made out of posts; it's as high as a small wall. The joints not being that well done, makes it possible for one to see through the fence, here and there.

The next day, we were brought at Sillery, the place where quite a few indians live; christians as well as the ones preparing to be baptized. There also is the Father's house. The church resembles a little Indian Parish. It's about a league and a half from Quebec.

We have gone out, to go to Holy Mass, Friday and Saturday; but since then, we stayed home.

I still would have so many more things to tell you about, if I had time. But, I must put an end to this letter.

Good-bye, my dearest Mother.

Sr Cecile of the Holy Cross