You may have learned from the Paris newspapers that a pestilential fever, with a deadliness heretofore unknown in Louisiana, broke out about the end of August in Shreveport, a commercial city of 10,000, in the extreme northwest of my diocese. There it caused and continues to cause dreadful ravages, the extent of which we will not know until later. That which the newspapers could not tell you, gentlemen, is of the irreparable losses to my diocese and my pain as bishop in seeing fall, in the space of three weeks, five of my priests and among them, the three most eminent members of my clergy...

August Marie Martin, Bishop of Natchitoches, late 1873, to the Central Council of the Propagation of the Faith, Paris.

Archives of Faith

By Liz Hebert
Staff Writer

Father Jean-Marie Jammes tells stories with his hands moving and his eyes dancing.

"You can not imagine how the archivists are," he says in a quick English tinged with the vestiges of a life spent mostly in France. "You must have an appointment and even then you might not be let in."

"The documents - it is their bay-bay," he says taking his hands off the binder in front of him and gesturing towards his chest as though cradling a newborn.

Jammes is talking about a series of trips he has made to the archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon and Paris, France, over the past several years.

These trips, which began as a one-time fact-finding mission, now form the basis of a massive undertaking that will provide not only a unique look at the early history of the Catholic Church throughout America, but also a unique look at the major historical events from the early 1800s on.

The "Jammes Project" officially began in October 1987 and involves the copying of thousands of letters (such as the one above) written by early American bishops to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in France, an organization that provided money to the fledgling American Church.

Jammes, presently serving as the administrator of Sacred Heart Parish in Broussard, has the support of two cardinals, several archbishops and bishops for a total of 19 dioceses throughout the nation in this history project.

His assistant, Marian Barras, librarian of the St. Martinville Public Library, points out that it is a project that many influential American Catholics have tried unsuccessfully in the past.

"Francis Cardinal Spellman, Bishop Fulton Sheen, the University of Notre Dame and Catholic University of Washington D.C. have all tried to get this information together and failed," she said. "It took Father Jammes to turn the charm on the archivists in France for this to happen."

"Not so much on the archivists," Jammes interjects with a laugh, "but on the bishops and the cardinal in Lyon."

This is the way Jammes tells it: in 1986, he went to the Lyon archives of the Propagation of the Faith as a favor for a nun who wanted to find out more about the background of the founding sisters of the American branch of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word.

Archivists in Lyon, though, were not receptive to his request...
Archives

to look at their documents.

"They told me no one can see these archives yet because they are not in order," Jammes explains. "They also told me not to worry, that I should go to Paris and that there they would be able to help me with everything I needed. But when I got to Paris, the archivist said, 'No, no, no. I'm too busy!'"

Jammes started cultivating an acquaintance with French bishops and priests sent here from Lyon, Paris, and Barras have additionally spent time translating selected ones into English. Of those, a few have particularly caught Jammes' fancy. One, written by Archbishop Antoine Blanc of New Orleans on Oct. 20, 1855, details the toll the yellow fever epidemic had taken on the religious community. Few remaining documents to be catalogued, the files of documents stacked, the files of documents written back to France by the early American bishops and priests.

As wealthy and powerful as the American Catholic Church is today, its beginnings were poor and humble and these thousands of letters would inevitably end with a request that money be sent with a request that money be sent. Jammes then adds: "A lot of people are saying that religious leaders are interested in the poor French and the carelessness of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, already more than 11,000 document copies (nearly 25,000 pages) have been forwarded there."

"Now you have this TV program 'Dallas' that is about these wealthy Texans, but in 1891, the Bishop of Natchitoches on Nov. 4, 1961 to look at their documents. The bishop of Natchitoches was informed that another sister of the Sacred Heart based at what is now Shreveport, I., and all 15 had died from yellow fever by the time Blanc had finished his letter."

A postscript attached by Blanc to the end of his four-page letter explains that "Just as I was going to close this letter, I was informed that another sister of the house of the Sacred Heart which had lost 14 died last Friday, that is the 15th in that house!"

Yet another letter, written by Auguste Martin, the Bishop of Natchitoches on Nov. 4, 1861. The bishop of Chicago asked to be made the Bishop of Natchitoches because that was a better and wealthier area.

"If you could accomplish something like this letter, I would be very happy." Almost as an afterthought, Jammes then adds: "A lot of people think I am studying just the past. That's not the important thing. If we don't learn more about the past then we can't prepare for the present and the future. This is what I'm trying to do."

"The North marching in the name of egalitarian and anti-Catholic doctrines: the South calling for the blessing of the bishops and the priests upon its flags..."

As in most of the letters written to the Propagation of the Faith by American bishops, Martin then turns his thoughts to the immediate need at hand, money.

"Here, as in the rest of the Confederacy, we have had to equip, pay expenses for, and feed our soldiers, a heavy burden which will continue to weigh upon us until the end of the war," he writes. "Today more than ever I must count on your charity for which I beg, less for myself than for my poor priests and for our work."

A letter written in 1868 by the Archbishop of Baltimore has also intrigued Jammes, not so much because of its subject matter but because of the writing style. A French secretary has obviously been writing the letter and accurately signs the archbishop's name.

The archbishop, obviously annoyed, takes over the task and begins by apologizing for his own poor French and the carelessness of his secretary. As he continues, though, and begins to passionately beg for money for new bishops in his area, his French becomes markedly better.

"It starts off in poor French and then it is beautiful French," Jammes says, clearly amused by the 1868 bishop.

One of Jammes' favorite letters, though, is one written by Martin, Bishop of Natchitoches in late 1873 (a portion of which begins this story) in reference to the outbreak of yellow fever in the Shreveport area.

"He was very old at the time and yet it is a beautiful letter, not one mistake," Jammes says, clearly impressed by this bishop from the past and the hardships he endured. "If I could accomplish something like this letter, I would be happy."

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