

## Joseph Rosati, C.M. (1789-1843)

Pioneer American Bishop<sup>1</sup>

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*Province of USA-Midwest*

“Accordingly, on the day devoted to commemorate the Lord’s Incarnation, [25 March 1823] in the Church of the Ascension at Donaldsonville, amidst a great concourse of people, the following pastors and members of the clergy of the Diocese being present.... I was anointed and consecrated by the Right Rev. Louis William DuBourg.”<sup>2</sup>

With these unadorned words, Joseph Rosati, described how he became the first Vincentian bishop in the United States, as well as the first Italian ordained a bishop in the New World. Who was this confrere raised to the episcopacy far from his homeland, and what is his story?

Born in Sora, a small town then in the kingdom of Naples, on 12 January 1789, he was baptized the next day with the mellifluous names Pietro Luigi Giuseppe Raffaele. Revolution and revolutionary ideas were the order of the day in the closing years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but young Giuseppe turned his thoughts to the Church. At the

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: The writer has drawn on several sources for this notice on Joseph Rosati. Besides the bishop’s own correspondence and biographical notes, copies of which are in the DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, (DRMA) DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, the most significant works are: FREDERICK JOHN EASTERLY, C.M., *The Life of Rt. Rev. Joseph Rosati, C.M.* (Washington, 1942), the basic work; ROSSANA ANNA MARIA CAVACECE, *Il sorano Giuseppe Rosati e il cammino della Chiesa cattolica negli Stati Uniti d’America* (Naples, 1999), for some details of his childhood; GIUSEPPE GUERRA, C.M. - MARIO GUERRA, *Storia dei Missionari Vincenziani nell’Italia Meridionale* (Rome, 2003), and EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M., *Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival* ([Chicago], 2001), for details on the French-Italian conflicts of the 1840s; WILLIAM BARNABY FAHERTY, S.J., “In the Footsteps of Bishop Joseph Rosati. A Review Essay,” *Italian Americana* 1:2 (1975), 280-292; ANNABELLE M. MELVILLE, *Louis William DuBourg*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> (CHARLES L. SOUVAY, C.M.), “Documents from our Archives, Diary of Bishop Rosati,” *St. Louis Catholic Historical Review* 3:4 (October 1921) 320-321.

astonishing age of 12 he received the tonsure, and then began his philosophy studies. His providential participation in a mission preached in Sora by a Vincentian led him to apply for entrance into the Congregation. He began his novitiate in Rome 23 June 1807, and made his vows barely nine months later, 1 April 1808. He and his fellow novices had received a special papal dispensation in view of the occupation of Rome by French troops, and the attendant difficulty of continuing in the Eternal City.

After a visit to his ailing father in Sora, Giuseppe Rosati, C.M., returned to Rome in November to begin his theology at the already ancient house of Montecitorio. His professor of dogmatic theology would have a decisive impact on the rest of his life: Felix DeAndreis (1778-1820), later his superior in the foundation of the American mission. Because of Giuseppe's young age at entry, he finished his theological studies early and was ordained to the priesthood in the Montecitorio chapel, 10 February 1811, at age 22, again with a papal dispensation.

His life as a missionary then began in earnest, despite the presence of occupation troops. For example, he records in his meticulous diary the following for 23 April of the next year: "On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, we left Ponticelli for Poggio Mojano. Just before arriving there, I and my horse fell down a precipice but, thank the Lord, I was uninjured. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the Mission began. I gave the talks and the fervorino [admonition]."<sup>3</sup> Three weeks later he nearly had a similar fall from his horse. His robust constitution and good health would serve him well in the wilds of America five years later.

During the next three years, he was occupied in preaching in Naples and then in other missions in the country areas, a task he often shared with his former professor, DeAndreis. Their frequent contact accounts for a letter that reached Giuseppe, preaching a mission at La Scarpa in mid-September. In it, DeAndreis "told me about the mission of Louisiana in North America, and that, knowing my dispositions, he had included me among the number, but that I had time to withdraw if I wished, and that I should answer him simply yes or no."<sup>4</sup> The generous young missionary — he was 26 — took counsel, prayed, and gave his simple yes, provided his superiors would agree.

Felix DeAndreis must certainly have reported that Louis William Dubourg, a Sulpician recently named Bishop of Louisiana, and now in Rome, was unwilling to be ordained without guarantees of some priests for his vast diocese, as large as the whole of western Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> "Memoria," entry for 23 April 1812.

<sup>4</sup> "Memoria," entry for 5 September 1815.

By God's providence, Dubourg, lodging at Montecitorio, had been captivated by the preaching and reputation of DeAndreis. Despite the reluctance of the Roman Province to lose one of its leading confreres to a new and distant mission, the bishop-elect secured their support, not without significant pressure from Vatican authorities, including Pius VII.

Rosati bade his farewells and with several other candidates left by sea from Rome to Genoa, and then to France where they spent several weeks in Bordeaux in final preparations for the Atlantic crossing. DeAndreis and the others left Rome two months later, traveling overland. The pioneer Vincentians left Bordeaux together on 13 June 1816, survived a hurricane and the danger of being becalmed, and arrived in Baltimore on 26 July. From there they went by coach or on foot to Pittsburgh, and then down the Ohio River to Louisville and Bardstown, where they were to spend nearly two years in pastoral preparation. During this time, Joseph (he regularly used this form of his name once he arrived in America), experienced firsthand ministry among both immigrants and the native Indians. DeAndreis described him as making good progress in English.

Since their superior was already in Missouri, it was Rosati who led the rest of the confreres and seminarians by boat down the Ohio River to the Mississippi, entering his future diocese for the first time on 27 September 1818. He reached the Barrens settlement, later called Perryville, 2 October, there to continue building St. Mary's Seminary, the motherhouse of the Congregation in North America. Winters were harsh for the Italian members, as was the lack of their traditional food and drink, but they gradually grew accustomed to the uncivilized frontier.

His surviving correspondence from this period gives us a detailed insight into his busy life: teaching, building, preaching, ministering to the parishioners and celebrating the sacraments. The greatest crisis of his young life was the death of his superior, Felix DeAndreis. He had seen his friend only occasionally during their Missouri years, and was absent when he died in St. Louis, 15 October 1820. One can only imagine the emotion as he welcomed his remains at the Barrens a few days later. He wrote his brother Nicola: "You cannot appreciate how afflicted we are by this dreadful event. It was not so for him since he was a saint, and lived and died as a saint. The span of his apostolic life was brief, especially in these lands, but full of blessings nonetheless. The bishop, the diocese, and our Congregation have lost a great support."<sup>5</sup> As a dutiful disciple, Rosati gathered what

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Rosati to Nicola Rosati, from the Barrens, 15 (?) October 1820; original in Archives of the Procurator General, Rome. Typescript in DRMA.

testimony he could and wrote the first biography of his companion, later published in several languages.

With the loss of Fr. DeAndreis, Joseph Rosati became the superior of the American Vincentian mission, still part of the Roman Province. Between the years 1820 and 1823, he continued the task of building up the Church and the Congregation of the Mission throughout the diocese. He lamented the fact that several of his confreres were living alone in small parishes and hoped that, with the arrival of new vocations either from St. Mary's Seminary or directly from Europe, the Vincentians would once again resume community life.

Bishop Dubourg came to rely more and more heavily on "my dear superior" as he occasionally called him, and, as DeAndreis had predicted, he proposed Joseph Rosati for the episcopacy. He did so on the heels of an appointment in 1822 as vicar apostolic of the territories of Mississippi and Alabama, a post that both Rosati and the bishop declined. The following year, Dubourg proposed him as his coadjutor, while allowing him to remain superior of the Vincentians. In recognition of difficult communications with his provincial superiors in Rome, he was granted the faculties of a Visitor, although the American Province had not yet been established.

Since the Holy See made it clear that it would not allow a second refusal, the bishop-elect proceeded with plans for his ordination. He decided on the Church of the Ascension in Donaldsonville, because of its more convenient location between the two population centers of New Orleans to the south and St. Louis to the north.

After the ceremonies there, he visited parishes and communities in lower Louisiana before returning to his work at the Barrens. He resumed his classes as before, but found his workload increasing. To share the burden, he began to rely on two future confrere bishops, Leo Raymond de Neckere and John Mary Odin. The growth of the population in the new territories was explosive, and Bishops Dubourg and Rosati found it impossible to satisfy the demands for clergy and religious, despite their best efforts.

Another concern was the division of the diocese. Distances were enormous and it was next to impossible to travel during certain seasons, although most of the new settlements were on or near the Mississippi or one of its tributaries. The coadjutor had to travel often, more so during Dubourg's absences. To Rosati's surprise, the bishop resigned his see during a visit to Rome, thereby making Rosati the ordinary. In addition, Pope Gregory XVI decreed the division of the diocese, 14 July 1826. To add to his surprise, Rosati discovered that he would eventually be Bishop of New Orleans instead of St. Louis. But he proposed several reasons for reversing

this arrangement, which the Holy See soon accepted, not the least of which would have been his physical separation from the Congregation of the Mission. By a papal brief of 20 March 1827, he was therefore appointed the first Bishop of St. Louis, Missouri.

The influx of population in the many states and territories constituting his diocese brought with it pressing demands for the two traditional resources: men and money. The only seminary in both the new dioceses, New Orleans and St. Louis, was St. Mary's of the Barrens. To help maintain it, Rosati had sought help from Italy. One luckless confrere, Angelo Boccardo, arrived in the port of New Orleans with a bag of money and documents from Italy which he accidentally dropped into the swirling waters. Boccardo became so distressed that he returned at once to Italy, and the disappointed bishop continued the search for funds. Among other things, the seminarians at the Barrens were required either to teach in the lower classes, today's secondary school courses, or to help with other chores. One great undertaking there was the construction of the parish Church of the Assumption. Undoubtedly to the bishop's satisfaction, since he had been ordained a priest there, it was modeled on the Montecitorio house chapel, a plan employed by others for the chapels of the Spanish houses of Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca. The energetic young bishop also had to undertake the construction of a proper cathedral for his see city. This new cathedral, completed in 1834, replaced a ramshackle wooden structure — he described it as “a sort of hay barn”<sup>6</sup> — that had served Dubourg and his vicar-general, DeAndreis. Both of these Rosati buildings exist today as monuments to his leadership.

He invited Jesuits to undertake new ministries in his diocese, and was responsible for their outreach to the Native American populations farther to the west. He invited the Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to begin a hospital in St. Louis, the first Catholic hospital of the west. It opened in 1828. Sisters of St. Joseph came from France to begin a work with the deaf. They arrived in 1837. He continued to support the work of the Sisters of Loretto, whom he had known at the Barrens. He relied on the charity of local Catholics to secure land for the many new parishes he founded, and made numerous appeals to charitable societies in Europe for funds to support his works.

Despite his attachment to the Congregation, his forced absence provoked unrest among the confreres, as is revealed in letters they wrote to their provincial superiors in Italy. At length, John Baptist Tornatore, Rosati's senior by six years, arrived to assume the superiorship of the sole house of the American mission. This left the

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<sup>6</sup> EASTERLY, *Life*, p. 128.

bishop free, at last, to devote himself more completely to his diocese and to the wider American church. One of his concerns was to suggest bishop candidates for new dioceses, a responsibility he took very seriously. During his career, in fact, he was the principal consecrator of six of them, including his confrere, the unfortunate de Neckere, who, already weakened with tuberculosis, would die of yellow fever a scant three years into his ministry as bishop of New Orleans.

Joseph Rosati also took part in the first four Provincial Councils of the Church in America. These predecessors of the meetings of today's National Conference of Catholic Bishops began in October 1829. The bishop profited from the first Council to visit along the way Bishop Joseph Flaget, who had welcomed DeAndreis and himself with their band of seminarians to Bardstown 13 years before. Because of his gift for languages, the other Council fathers deputed him to write the official letter in Latin to Pius VIII. This significant letter summarizes the accomplishments of all the bishops, including Rosati. "Six ecclesiastical seminaries, the hope of our churches, have already been established, and are governed in holy discipline by pious and learned priests; nine colleges under ecclesiastical control, the glory of the Catholic name, have been erected in different States to train boys and young men in piety, arts and the higher branches of science; three of these have been chartered as universities by the legislatures; 33 monasteries and houses of religious women... houses of religious of the Order of Preachers and the Society of Jesus, of secular priests of the Congregation of the Mission, and of St. Sulpice, from which, as centers, priests are sent out to missions...."<sup>7</sup>

A second Provincial Council took place, likewise in Baltimore, the first American see, in 1833, at which the Fathers named Bishops Rosati and Fenwick of Boston to prepare a complete edition of the *Rituale* for use in the United States. This work would continue through many editions, and it demonstrates Rosati's attention to detail.

In 1835, the General Assembly of the Congregation, meeting in Paris, determined to erect the American Province, the first such outside Europe in the history of the Community. John Mary Odin attended this Assembly as a representative of the Americans and discussed with the newly elected Superior General, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, the situation of St. Mary's of the Barrens, the American *berceau*. Because it was both a secular college and a theological seminary, Nozo's council decreed the suppression of the college. Since he had not been consulted in advance, Rosati was surprised but not defeated. He wrote to John Timon, the newly named

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

American provincial: "I shall make my observations to the Superior General on the decrees, communicate them to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda and to our Holy Father the Pope himself; and rather than place myself in a state of war against those who ought to be my first helpers for more lawful combats, I shall ask our Holy Father to accept my resignation and grant me the grace of spending the rest of my life in retirement to prepare for death."<sup>8</sup> (The bishop, it should not be forgotten, was only 46 years old.) He did as he determined, and at length Nozo rescinded the suppression of this important apostolate.

This college for young men at the Barrens was joined by another for young women, under the direction of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. Under the leadership of Philippine Duchesne, to be canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1988, the school began with orphan girls and gradually grew in importance. The Jesuits had their college in the see city. The bishop invited the Sisters of the Visitation from Baltimore to enter his diocese, which they did in 1833, to provide an education for girls. Continuing in the same vein, he would encourage the founder of the Brothers of St. Francis Xavier (the Xaverian Brothers) in his ministry. He would send the Brothers to the diocese after the bishop's departure. Rosati likewise encouraged the Viatorian Brothers to come to the diocese. They did so, however, only in 1842. In these and other ways, this frontier bishop encouraged Catholic education and left behind him an education system second only to that of Baltimore.

When Rosati left for the Fourth Provincial Council of Baltimore, scheduled for 1840, he could not have known that he was leaving his diocese for the last time. Before departing, he held a diocesan synod, the first for St. Louis, which helped to regulate ecclesiastical discipline in his vast territory. Among the concerns reflected in the decrees were those governing the liturgy. He then turned his attention to the Provincial Council and to a business trip to Europe. On this his first return since leaving in 1816, he was planning to recruit men and raise money, as well as to handle other administrative matters involving the Holy See.

He enjoyed for the first time the hospitality of the new Maison-Mère in Paris, just in time for the feast of St. Vincent, 19 July. He discussed with the Superior General, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, a possible union of the American Sisters of Charity with the Daughters of Charity; this would take place ten years later. Little did Rosati realize that in a few years' time, he would be negotiating with the same Nozo about a much more sensitive topic, the latter's resignation as Superior General.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

The bishop's travels took him to Lyons, where he made financial appeals, and then at last to his native Italy. He received an unusually warm welcome from the Pope. "As soon as [the Pope] saw me, he got up and came toward me and, not giving me the time to make the usual triple genuflections, he embraced me and kept me long between his arms and addressed to me the most affectionate words."<sup>9</sup> Later, he visited his surviving family in Sora, particularly his brother Nicola, who, like his distinguished brother, preserved their extensive correspondence. With characteristic humility, Giuseppe closed the description of his hometown reception: "In the evening, the street on which my house is located was lighted, there was a volley of cannon shot, musicians played, etc. All this for a poor American bishop."<sup>10</sup>

Another mission then presented itself for this American bishop, now 51 years old and apparently in his prime. The Holy See had been negotiating for years with the government of Haiti to reestablish the hierarchy there. An American bishop, John England, had negotiated for the Holy See with the president of the republic, which extended over both Santo Domingo and Haiti, but by 1836 these came to nothing. President Boyer requested new talks, and Gregory XVI appointed Rosati Apostolic Delegate for this task.<sup>11</sup> He left in 1841 and landed in Philadelphia to ordain to the episcopacy his coadjutor and eventual successor, Peter Richard Kenrick. Arriving in Port-au-Prince a few weeks later, he set to work with great speed. Three main meetings were held to draw up a concordat, signed on 17 February 1842. The details of this document differ greatly from modern ecclesiastical government, but the Apostolic Delegate believed he was getting the best arrangement he could in the face of the disastrous condition of the Haitian Church. Since Haiti had lacked effective Church organization for decades, the civil government had moved into the vacuum and was naturally reluctant to cede any power back to the Church.

Rosati returned to Rome by April of that year, concordat in hand, but the document aroused so much discussion that the Holy See determined to send him back for further negotiations. In any case, Jean-Paul Boyer was overthrown early in 1843, thus putting an end for a time to the bishop's labors. Rosati's concordat, based on that of England, would be ratified only in 1860.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> This was not his first such commission. In 1829-1830, because of persecutions in Mexico, no bishop was able to ordain. The Holy See asked Rosati, the closest resident bishop, to help. Despite lengthy preparations, the mission came to nothing. He did, however, consecrate the holy oils for Mexico during Holy Week of 1829, while pontificating in New Orleans.

As if the bishop did not have enough concerns, the Congregation of the Mission and the Holy See next called on his expertise during these final months of his life to solve major issues confronting the Vincentians. The fundamental issue stemmed from the perceptions of the Italian confreres that the French were dominating the government of the Congregation through a large number of small French or French-directed provinces, and with the seat of government in Paris. Several Italians suggested that the French domination could be overcome by moving the center of the Congregation to Rome and by making the General Assemblies and the General Council more internationally representative. The occasion for opening this discussion, which had been carried on intermittently since the middle of the previous century, was the leave of absence that Jean-Baptiste Nozo had taken, the result of which was an irregular situation for the Congregation. The Holy See asked Rosati to intervene with Nozo, and the two of them met in Rome with a cardinal to look for a solution.

The Holy See then delegated Rosati to chair a meeting between French and Italian Vincentians to try to negotiate a solution to the pressing problems. A solution was reached, generally favoring the French positions, and it was approved by a committee of cardinals. Shortly afterwards, the bishop prepared to leave to return to Haiti, with a stop in Baltimore for another Provincial Council. He got as far as Paris by the beginning of April 1843, where his health grew worse. It is unclear what he was suffering from, but it may have been tuberculosis. After a time of rest, he returned to Italy to regain his health, but the journey weakened him seriously. He died in Rome, 25 September 1843, after a full and strenuous life. He was only 54 years old.

Because the Pope had honored Rosati by appointing him Assistant at the Pontifical Throne, his funeral was conducted with great solemnity. He was buried at Montecitorio, where he remained until the Roman confreres moved to the Collegio Leoniano. From there, in 1954, his remains were returned to the cathedral that he had built in St. Louis.

What kind of a man was this Italian-American confrere? Writing in 1975, a Jesuit historian has aptly summarized his personality and gifts. "Rosati had all the characteristics a missionary bishop should have: organizational ability, zeal, order, discipline, dedication, and bounce. He was in love with his work and a loving associate of all his coworkers. He organized the diocese. He put spirit back into despondent missionaries who would have otherwise returned to Europe. He was appreciative of everything well done."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> FAHERTY, "Footsteps," p. 290.

A more recent appreciation comes from Pope John Paul II, in a homily delivered in St. Louis, 27 January 1999. “In fidelity to Christ’s command to evangelize, the first pastor of this local Church, Bishop Joseph Rosati — who came from the town of Sora, very near Rome — promoted outstanding missionary activity from the beginning. In fact, today we can count 46 different dioceses in the area which Bishop Rosati served.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Homily* (Trans World Dome, 27 January 1999), [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/travels/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/).