

## Seeds of Faith

1700s–1834

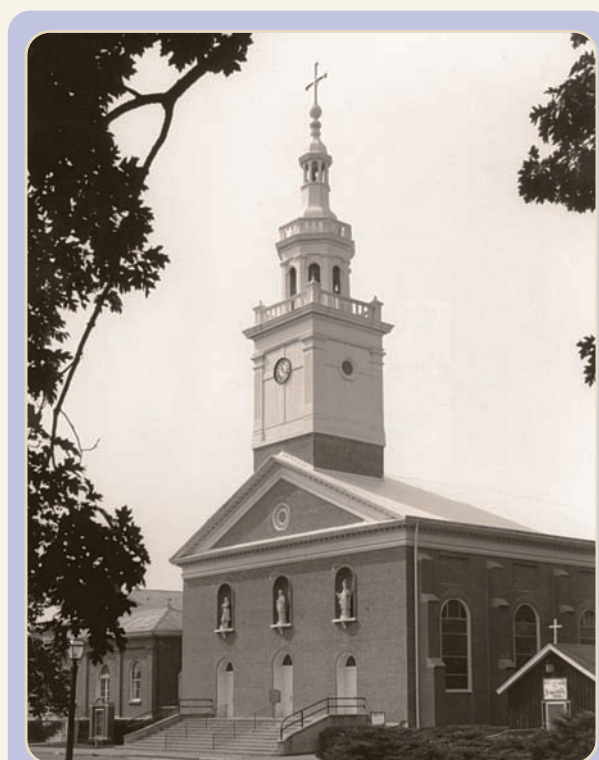
*The seeds of faith that would flourish and grow abundantly in the soil of a new world were first planted in the hearts of European immigrants and missionaries to this rugged land. The Archdiocese of Indianapolis grew out of the Diocese of Vincennes. By the 1730s, Jesuits had ministered among both the Indians and the European immigrants in northern Indiana. As early as the sixteenth century, the Jesuits' teachings had been attacked in Europe. Throughout the eighteenth century attempts to suppress them spread from one European country to another. Opponents included the Jansenists and other heretics. In July 1762, the Jesuits were suppressed in France and French territories, but one was allowed to remain in southern Indiana.*

The lone Jesuit missionary in a vast territory, Father Sebastian Louis Muerin, begged Bishop John Briand of Quebec, who was responsible for this area, to send priests to assist him. The expulsion of the Jesuits had nearly ended the life of the Church in Indiana after only 30 years, although other congregations had some missionaries there.

The earliest church records at Vincennes go back to 1749. The Vincennes garrison had a Recollect chaplain, Father Pacome Legrand, in the early 1740s.

In 1770 Bishop Briand finally sent young Father Pierre Gibault, a priest originally from Montreal, to Vincennes. When he arrived, Father Meurin turned over to him the mission at Kaskaskia. The people there voiced their displeasure when Gibault periodically visited Vincennes through much of a decade.

Catholic laymen figured prominently in maintaining the faith during this era. Étienne Phillibert once begged for a priest for the people of Vincennes, and he himself served as a guardian of the church there for 20 years while missionaries only periodically came to meet the sacramental needs of the French settlers. When he died in April 1786, nearly the whole parish attended his funeral, and he was buried between the holy water font and the door of the church. Records attest to the baptisms and funerals he administered and the marriages he witnessed and indicate that, on at least one occasion, he stood as godfather for a slave who was baptized.



✠ St. Francis Xavier Cathedral at Vincennes  
(Courtesy of Indianapolis Archdiocesan Archives)

When the American Revolution erupted in 1776, Bishop Briand threatened that any of his priests who sided with the rebels could expect to have his priestly faculties suspended and/or to be excommunicated. Nonetheless, in 1778 Gibault appeared at Vincennes in the company of members of George Rogers Clark's army. The delegation convinced the settlers not to oppose the American

taking of the British outpost at Fort Sackville, a feat accomplished without a shot being fired. Historians dispute over whether Gibault, as a man of peace by both profession and temperament, became involved in Clark's plan to conquer Vincennes only because the plan was bloodless.

British officers persuaded Bishop Briand that Gibault was involved in political activity. On June 12 1780, the bishop withdrew Gibault's powers as vicar general and pastor. He could only celebrate Mass and was to come to Quebec without any delay. Apparently the war kept Gibault from ever getting the letter, so he continued acting as vicar general, but knowing he was under suspicion, he did not return to Vincennes until 1784, when he came as resident pastor.

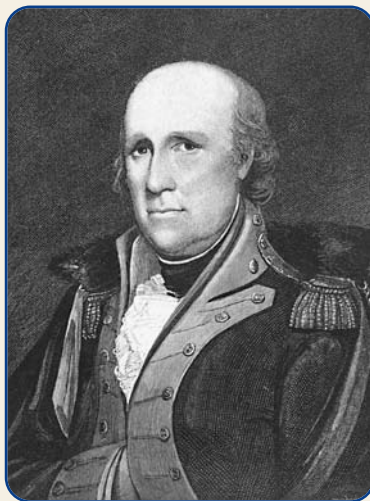
Shortly before his return, hostilities against white people increased among the Indians who had become suspicious when agents of Congress made three treaties with several Indian tribes in order to open most of what is now Ohio to white settlers. In addition to frequent attacks by Indians, the people of Vincennes also had to contend with a virulent epidemic of an unidentified fatal disease.

Although weary of missionary life, Gibault gave up hope of returning to Canada, and eventually became pastor of the parish at New Madrid (now in Missouri), which was then under Spanish control. Spain financed Catholic activities, including St. Isidore Church, founded in 1789 and now known as Immaculate

Conception. Gibault built the church and died in the rectory on August 16, 1802, at age 65.

Besides long hours on horseback or foot over rugged terrain, frequent epidemics, parishioners who spoke different languages, shortages of books, unreliable

⌘ **Father Pierre Gibault**  
(Photo: The Criterion Press, Inc.)

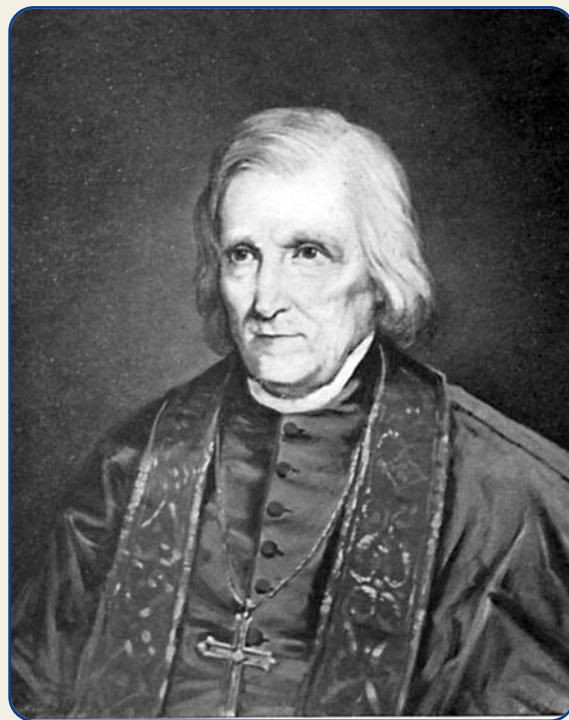


⌘ **George Rogers Clark**  
(Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society)

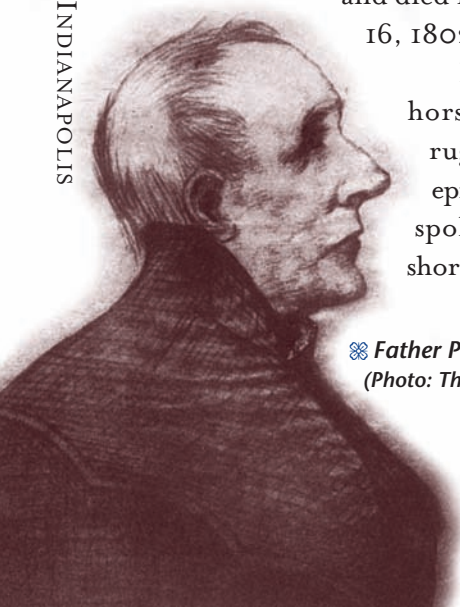
mail service and the lack of most of the conveniences of their homelands, frontier missionaries faced two more problems. One was a shortage of money to live on or to establish churches and schools. Some parishioners were more interested in getting rich themselves than in supporting the Church and its works. Others could barely eke out a frugal living for themselves. The second problem was the fierce prejudice that existed among various ethnic groups. Some of every nationality always seemed to mistrust anyone

of another nationality.

Just as the United States government had come fully into being in 1789 when George Washington was inaugurated as president, so that same year the government of the Catholic Church in the new nation also came into being when Pope Pius VI created the Diocese of Baltimore and named John Carroll its first bishop.



⌘ **Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget, the first Bishop of Bardstown** (Courtesy of Archives of the Archdiocese of Louisville)



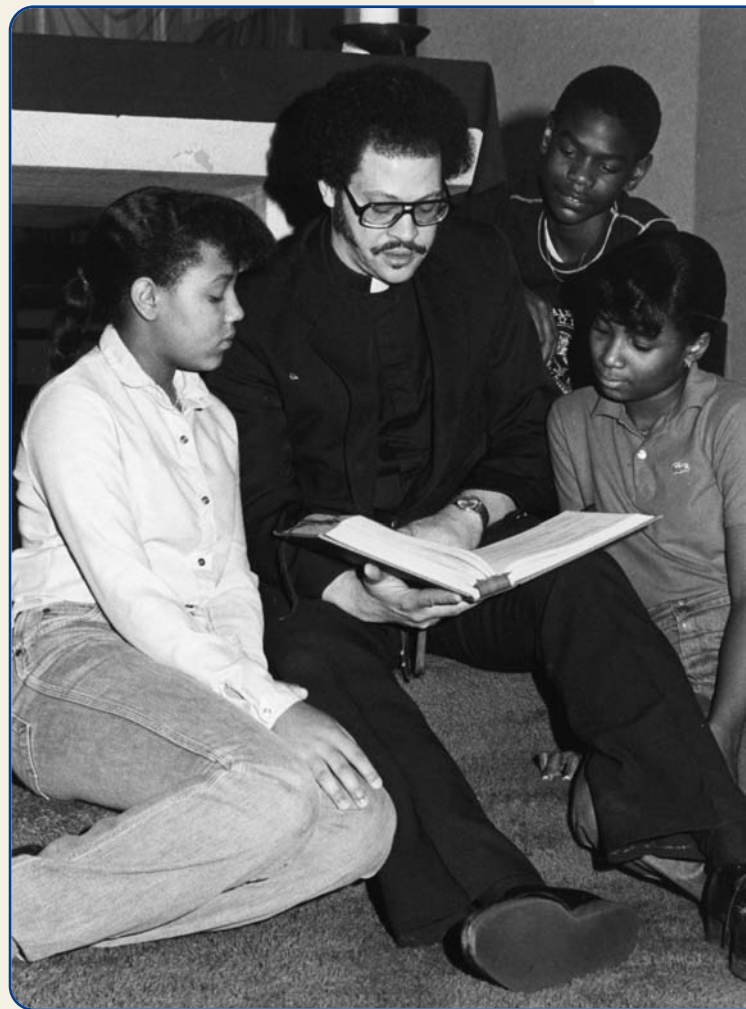
As part of the Northwest Territory, Indiana was now under Bishop Carroll's jurisdiction, and Vincennes Catholics turned to him around 1791 to ask for a priest to succeed Father Gibault. The bishop assured them that a priest "who would win all hearts" was on his way. That priest was young Father Benedict Joseph Flaget, born November 7, 1763, in the French province of Auvergne. The boy's father had died before he was born, and his mother died while he was still a baby. Raised by his father's sister and his father's brother Benedict, who was a priest, Benedict Joseph soon followed in his uncle's footsteps to the seminary and later joined the Society of St. Sulpice.

Ordained in 1787, he taught theology for four years. In 1791 France's revolutionary government closed the seminary at Angers, and Father Flaget soon sought advice from his superior, Father Jacques-André Emery, on what to do next. Emery advised him to follow the other Sulpicians already in Baltimore.

Flaget reached Baltimore in March 1792. In May, he was on his way to Vincennes. From Baltimore, he traveled by wagon to Pittsburgh, learning English from the driver as he went. The water level in the Ohio River was too low for boats to embark from Pittsburgh, so he spent his time caring for victims of a smallpox epidemic and helping several soldiers condemned to death by court martial to prepare themselves to die.

Finally, in November, Father Flaget boarded a boat for Louisville. He had just turned 29 when he reached Vincennes and his first parish, St. Francis Xavier, on December 21, 1792, and set about repairing the deteriorating church and decorating the altar for Christmas. When, despite all his preparation, a scant dozen parishioners received Communion that day, he was disappointed. However, the town was nearly under siege because of growing conflict with the Indians, the citizens had not seen a priest for more than three years, and Father Flaget had been there only three days.

In less than a month, the pastor found himself again tending smallpox victims. The worst was over by the end of February, but the epidemic dragged on until the end of the year. Although the young missionary did escape smallpox, in October he was stricken by a fever that forced him to turn over some of his pastoral duties to a layman, Pierre Mallet.



✂ *Into the twenty-first century, priests like Father Clarence Waldon continued to teach the parish children just as Father Flaget had taught at his first mission. (Courtesy of Archives of the Archdiocese of Louisville)*

After Father Flaget recovered, he held classes in reading, writing and catechism for the children. He bought a house as a place to teach the men agriculture, because their dependence on hunting and fur trading kept them poor. He also bought looms to teach weaving, one of the main industries of his native Auvergne. Making his home with Francesco Vigo, a merchant who had begged the bishop for a priest, Flaget supported himself partially by teaching a few Americans.

The absence of fellow priests must have been a heavy burden for this young priest, for he offered to give his entire time to ministering among the Indians if another priest would come to care for the parish and be his companion. Instead, in spring 1795, Father Flaget was



⌘ *How Father Rivet would have welcomed this 1955 class of more than 60 first communicants at St. Francis de Sales, Indianapolis! (Courtesy of Archives of Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg)*

summoned back to Baltimore. He so dreaded parting with his people that he set off, accompanied by a few parishioners as though he were going to visit other priests. Only when his companions had returned did people learn he was gone permanently.

After Flaget's departure, the parish of St. Francis Xavier did not have to wait long for a new pastor. Father Jean François Rivet soon arrived, with a commission from the U. S. Secretary of War to be a missionary to convert and civilize the Indians. A letter from Rivet tells of the discouraging challenges facing missionaries to the Indians. Rivet found the language unconquerable and the culture incomprehensible. Some Indians did convert to Catholicism, but very few.

As for the white people, Father Rivet wrote that, of more than 300 possible

communicants, a year after his coming, only 88 went to confession and only 42 received Communion (in an undetermined time). Apparently most of his parishioners looked on Sunday Mass as a matter of choice, rather than of obligation or commitment. Nor were the adults seriously solicitous for their children's education in the faith. Rivet counted 100 eligible for the instructions he offered; only 40 attended regularly. Often the children pleaded to attend, but their parents saw them as laborers needed to tend the farms or help with other chores. Rivet chided not only negligent parents, but slave masters and mistresses for not tending to the spiritual upbringing of their slaves. With the passage of time, the pastor's efforts in this regard did pay off, for by 1802, he reported holding catechism classes four times a week.

Another source of concern for priests serving the high-spirited settlers at Vincennes was their enthusiasm for dancing. Dances were usually accompanied by such excessive consumption of alcohol that they sometime ended up resembling pagan orgies. Father Rivet also requested permission to say the blessing at nuptial Masses in French instead of Latin. Bishop Carroll consented because he himself believed that the liturgy should be in the vernacular throughout America.

Innovations, however, did little to resolve the issues.

Discussing the similar disillusionment of other missionaries, one historian points out that some of them had never been parish priests. Many came from very devout families and had gone on to teach the young sons of equally devout families. It was not so much that the missionaries disliked the people. Indeed, the most stalwart learned to love their parishioners and were able to witness deep piety and steadfast devotion among both Europeans and their Indian converts. Unfortunately, some of these men were not prepared to till such rough soil. Used to the grand cathedrals of Europe, they found themselves in dilapidated log churches with no fellow priests for miles to give them support or guidance and parishioners with very few ways to support themselves, much less the growing Church.

In 1808 Pope Pius VII cut out of the diocese of Baltimore four new sees and elevated Baltimore to the rank of a metropolitan archdiocese. Bardstown, the first diocese of the West, covered the states of Kentucky and Tennessee and all the area that had originally comprised the Northwest Territory. As bishop over that vast territory, the pope named Benedict Joseph Flaget.

Flaget was dismayed at the thought of being a bishop, and the vast diocese, larger than his native France, made him even more fearful. He had, after all, only a little more than two years'

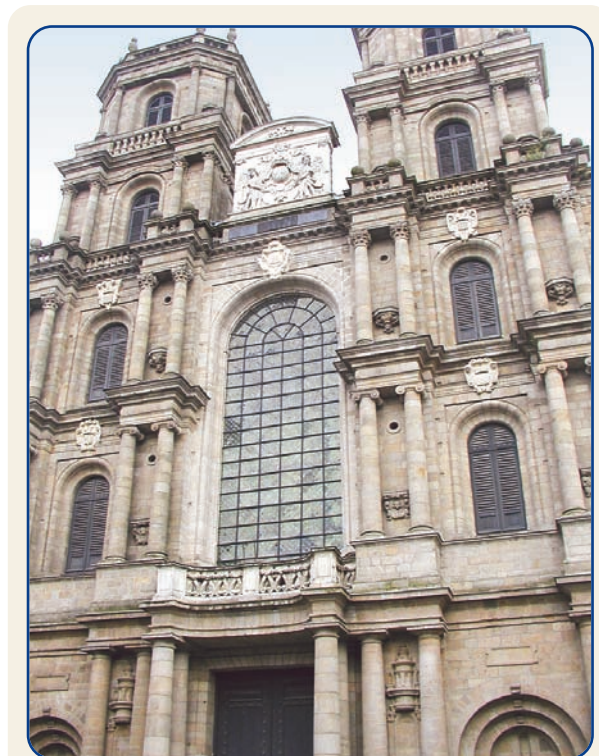


⌘ *Archbishop John Carroll (Portrait by Rembrandt Peale, used with permission, Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust, Inc. Baltimore, MD)*

experience as pastor. He traveled to France to appeal to Father Emery, his Sulpician superior, but was only rebuked for leaving his diocese. He returned to America with six recruits for the missions there. A priest ordained two years earlier, Simon Gabriel Bruté, was one of these.

Chaotic conditions in Europe delayed the documents authorizing Flaget's consecration, which did not reach Baltimore until 1810. He was consecrated on November 4, 1810; however, severe weather and lack of funds kept him from

reaching his diocese. Generous friends funded the trip, and three years after his appointment, the new bishop reached Kentucky and the home of Father Stephen Badin, who as a seminarian had traveled with him to this country and had been the first priest ordained here.



⌘ *The Cathedral at Rennes. (Photo by F.W. Schneider, used by permission)*

On February 3, 1809, Congress divided the Indiana Territory, making its western part a separate Illinois Territory and thus giving Indiana almost the same boundaries it has today. White settlers lost some western Indian lands that territorial Governor William Henry Harrison had gained for them. Harrison continued to antagonize the Indians by trying to get more land from them.

That year, the people of St. Francis Xavier Parish asked Bishop Flaget for a resident priest; he had none to send. He himself was riding 200 miles per month to visit his Kentucky parishes.

By 1813 Americans managed to make the roads around Vincennes safe for travel. By May 1, 1814, Father Donatien Oliver, a missionary friend of Father Rivet from across the Wabash, was at Vincennes. Parishioners made royal preparations to welcome their former pastor, Bishop Flaget, who was making his first episcopal visit, to confer confirmation. When darkness fell on Saturday, May 28, the vigil of Pentecost, without his arrival, the welcoming committee went home. Flaget rode into town 15 minutes later. He was tired from having slept the night before on a "quilt extended over a plank which was very uneven and knotty." After visiting the church, he went to the priest's house where someone caught sight of him and rang the church bell. Then the celebration began. Little children whom Flaget had never met came running to the door, followed by young men to whom he had given their first Communion. He could hear young girls and women arguing about who would get to see him first. Old men on canes came to see the man they had called the "little priest." In a moment, he was surrounded by all his former parishioners.

Flaget later wrote, "After those first effusions of their heart, they got on their knees to ask my blessing which I gave with a full heart. Not at all content with that general blessing, each one of them wanted to receive a particular blessing. To their surprise, in my turn seeing them in detail, I applied their names and even their first names to their faces."

People turned out in large numbers for the bishop's Mass on Sunday. Once again demons-



✂ A sketch of Father Simon Petit Lalumière.  
(Photo: The Criterion Press, Inc.)

trating pastoral concern for his people, he preached in both English and French to the delight of those who did not speak French, including some non-Catholics who attended. This may have been the first time English was spoken from the pulpit of St. Francis Xavier Church.

In 1816 Indiana became a state with Corydon as its capital. In 1821, however, the capital of Indiana was moved to Indianapolis.

Meanwhile Bishop Flaget secured Sister Harriet Gardner and several companions from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, to open St. Clare Convent and Female Academy at Vincennes. In 1830 he ordained Simon Lalumière, a native of Vincennes and the only native priest resident in the state.

Bishop Flaget and Bishop Louis DuBourg of Louisiana had often sought to have Vincennes become the see city of an Indiana diocese. In 1832 Flaget met Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis at Vincennes. The two sent a formal proposal to the Holy See that Dr. Simon Bruté of Emmitsburg be named Bishop of Vincennes. Their suggestion was accepted. Indiana had its first bishop.