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OUR LADY OF PROMPT SUCCOR: MARIAN DEVOTIONALISM IN NEW ORLEANS

Michael T. Pasquier

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OUR LADY OF PROMPT SUCCOR:
MARIAN DEVOTIONALISM IN NEW ORLEANS

by

Michael T. Pasquier

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Under the direction of

Dr. Rodger Payne

Honors College and Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Louisiana State University

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ABSTRACT

The statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor traveled with a company of Ursuline nuns from France to New Orleans in 1810. Less than a hundred years later, and with a few miracles under her veil, Our Lady of Prompt Succor obtained the first papal coronation of any Marian statue in the United States. Following the unprecedented elevation in status, the devotion to the “Patroness of New Orleans and Louisiana” experienced drastic advances in popularity, culminating in the dedication of a national votive shrine in her honor. However, in recent years, a general de-emphasis and even forgetfulness by area Catholics toward Our Lady prevails, demonstrating the dynamic character of New Orleans Catholicism and the adaptability of worldviews in response to changing cultural stimuli. A brief four-part periodization most clearly expresses the history of the devotion: early foundational period (1808-1815), oral and written formational period (1815-1894), institutional period (1894-1928), and contemporary period (1928-present). By tracing the canonical story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor within the historical context of the Catholic Church in New Orleans, a new twist appears among the already mangled history of a city both haunted and celebrated for its past.

Introduction

The popularity of Marian devotions across all spectrums of Catholic adherence is undeniably attached to the stories behind particular apparitions, statues, and miracles. Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima all boast miraculous tales that tentatively border on fact and fiction, but which consistently capture the attention and dedication of millions. Our Lady of Prompt Succor, while not drawing such high numbers of pilgrims and devotees, similarly relies on the construction of a story to espouse the miracles granted to the city of New Orleans and the surrounding state of Louisiana. Admittedly, these stories are not history book material, and do not lend themselves easily to documentary or physical evidence. Instead, the canonical accounts, factual discrepancies and all, tend to emphasize the more important and personally applicable aspects of the devotion for the believers. Therefore the first object of this thesis is to identify and detail the official story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Secondly, by developing the canonical story as it is told throughout particular time periods, the character of both the individual devotees and the corporate body of believers can be related to Mary's changing role in New Orleans. And thirdly, in combining the canonical story's progression and digression in relation to the involved believers, certain conclusions can be made as to how and why the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor is what it is today.

Today's officially recognized story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor is the product of years of oral tradition finally incorporated into a canonical version. This being so, there are three ways to look at the storytelling progression of New Orleans' Marian devotion: the popular story told by the actors themselves that instigated the initial traditions, the later interpretations and revisions of the original story by subsequent followers, and the final story officially recognized by the Catholic Church. The initial tradition phase is the most difficult to track or pinpoint, due

primarily to the long time differentiations and the dynamic nature of oral tradition. Phase two, the dissemination and interpretation of the original oral tradition, marks the first effort by the Ursuline nuns to gather the oral story's loose ends and record the favored version. The story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor enters phase three with the canonical construction and acceptance of the devotional tale by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, at one time taking the Ursuline account of phase two and ultimately tailoring it to the liking of the church proper. Now, after two hundred years of tweaking, tampering, embellishing, and eliminating, the canonically accepted story is best described in the simple pamphlets and handouts scattered in the backs of churches in and around New Orleans, and most prominently at the Votive Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor located at the Ursuline Convent and Academy. It is from these most accessible sources that the basic recounting of the story will be taken and from which a foundation will be laid for further investigation into the story's progression over time.

In an effort to track the story's two hundred year progression, it is imperative to construct a periodization of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor: the early foundational period (1808-1815), oral and written formational period (1815-1894), institutional period (1894-1928), and contemporary period (1928-present). The early foundational period includes the initial tradition phase of the narrative progression, thus containing the origin of the devotion and the two major miracles associated with Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The oral and written formational period bears the second phase of the story's progress over time, the dissemination and interpretation of the devotion by second and third generation nuns. With the papal proclamation for the coronation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in 1894, the third period of institutionalism begins and phase three of narration develops into a canonically accepted account. The contemporary period following the opening of the Votive Shrine in 1928

proliferates the same official story, yet at the same time instigating a downturn in devotional activity by the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

The available and applicable sources on Our Lady of Prompt Succor vary, depending upon the specific devotional period and narrative phase in question. Few documents shed any light on the first fifty years of the devotion. The sources that do exist are primarily housed at the Ursuline Archives on the campus of the Ursuline Academy in New Orleans, the oldest all-female secondary school in the United States. Most of the early primary sources are handwritten manuscripts in French, and they are broken into two collections: the “Obituaries” and the three-volume “Private Archives.” The “Obituaries” include brief biographies of every Ursuline nun to die in the convent from 1728 to 1835, as well as the first relation of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor.¹ However, devotional coverage is slight, appearing only in the 1822 obituary of Sr. St. Michel, the originator of the devotion.² The lack of documentation during the devotion’s origin period demonstrates the difficulty in uncovering the intentions of the foundational figures of the cult of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

Phase two of the narrative progression, the interpretation and revision, does not receive any documentation until the first papal pronouncement on Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the first effort by the Ursulines to record the main tenets of the devotion. In 1851 Pope Pius IX sanctioned the feast day of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, thereby proving the existence and recognition of a common account by no later than the mid-nineteenth century.³ In the 1870s, the “Private Archives” were written. Mention of the devotion came not from first-hand participants, but from followers and interpreters of a story that had been only encountered orally prior to that

¹ Obituary Ursuline Convent (Obituaries), 1728-1835, UANO.

² Francois Agatha Gensoul (Sr. St. Michel) Obituary, May 1822, Obituaries, 53-57, UANO.

³ “Victoire emportée sur les Anglais,” footnote, 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:123, UANO. The full papal proclamation is not available in the Private Archives. However, it is cited in full by J. A. Hogan, *The Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Prompt Succor* (New Orleans: J. G. Hauser, 1907).

time. Since their production, the “Private Archives” have become the fundamental source of information for every commentary on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The “Private Archives” embody the second period of the devotion in developing an oral and written account based on the origin story passed on from the actors of the first period.

Because the “Private Archives” represent the earliest and most comprehensive account of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, it is necessary to analyze how the devotion is stipulated in the documents, and then attempt to tell why the story was written so. The contents of the “Private Archives” can also be compared with the later retelling of the canonical story. But, before such a venture, there needs to be a discussion on the three volumes themselves, for there is some confusion as to the exact date of their production. The oldest of the three volumes was produced by 1878, making it the most vital to this thesis.⁴ The other two volumes were produced after the first, and their contents are simply repetitions of the original. The Ursulines copied the second of the three volumes almost verbatim with the first around 1915.⁵ The latest volume, while it does receive at least a different form from the original, was written well after the establishment of a canonical story, most probably during the 1920s.⁶

The first concrete evidence for an official version of the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor by church officials occurred in 1894 when Archbishop Francis Janssens visited Pope Leo XIII in Rome and told him of the miraculous account of New Orleans’ statue, thus the opening of phase three in the storytelling process and the institutional period.⁷ After the papal audience, the Archdiocese of New Orleans celebrated the “Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our

⁴ Private Archives, 1878, vol. 1, UANO.

⁵ Private Archives, ca. 1915, vol. 2, UANO.

⁶ Private Archives, ca. 1920, vol. 3, UANO.

⁷ Archdiocese of New Orleans, Invitation to Solemn Coronation, letter, 1895, UANO.

Lady of Prompt Succor” on 10 November 1895, the first of its kind in the United States.⁸ The *Daily Picayune* reported on the crowning ceremonies with two pages of in-depth coverage and pictures, and therein depicted the canonical story.⁹ It is at this point that the Ursuline nuns lost their role as interpreters of the story, while the archdiocesan officials assumed the responsibility of dissemination. The main tools of the story’s proliferation, then, became secular newspapers and church-sponsored publications, culminating in the issuance of the quarterly journal *The Messenger of the Our Lady of Prompt Succor*.¹⁰ Along with the shift in control came new emphases and de-emphases, new inclusions and subtractions, which bore heavily on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor up to the present time.

After the construction and opening of the Votive Shrine in 1928, the narrators of the contemporary period were privy to both the Ursuline documents and the archdiocesan-approved canonical story. With hindsight and devotional longevity, the story took two distinct paths and a third rather unclear route. The first narrative strain is more devotional in tone and intent, epitomized by the 1950s depiction of Our Lady of Prompt Succor by Gerald Muller.¹¹ Muller’s simple story of Our Lady reads like a children’s book, adding small details and quotes to liven up the plot of the canonical story for a wider audience. His book was later republished in the 1990s and is the most dispersed piece of devotional literature pertaining to Our Lady of Prompt Succor today. The second measure of treatment is less devotional in nature, instead taking an intentional scholarly approach. Sr. Jane Francis Heaney of the Order of St. Ursula wrote a book on the history of the Ursulines in New Orleans, which only includes the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor as an aside to the Battle of New Orleans. A third point of view taken is the

⁸ Leo XIII, “Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” decree, 1894, UANO.

⁹ “Coronation Ceremonies,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), 11 November 1895, pp. 1,8.

¹⁰ *The Messenger of Our Lady of Prompt Succor* (New Orleans: L. Graham Company, Ltd, 1917-ca. 1930).

¹¹ Gerald Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dujarie Press, 1957; reprint, Austin: Brothers of the Holy Cross, Southwest Province, ca. 1995).

completely unknowledgeable or unconcerned person who either has no contact with Our Lady of Prompt Succor or who has chosen to remain indifferent. Most Catholic New Orleanians fall into this category of unintentional or intentional ignorance concerning the Patroness of Louisiana. These three strains of involvement in the contemporary period demonstrate the current state of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in and around the Catholic community of New Orleans.

In terms of structure, the thesis is separated into four chapters based on the trends illuminated by the three phases of the narrative progression and the four periods of devotional involvement. Chapter one includes the early foundational period and the oral and written formational period, in which the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor begins and is proliferated at the discretion of the Ursuline nuns. The second chapter discusses the new devotional trends of the institutional period, noting the shift in narration control and the increased level of devotionalism. Chapter three discusses the lay movement of the contemporary period, whereby a downturn in devotional adherence ensues. The conclusion chapter argues the significance of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, first, by comparing and contrasting the experience of Marian devotionalism in Louisiana with other major cults in Europe and North America, and, second, by distinguishing the exceptional Catholic situation in New Orleans.

Chapter 1: Foundational and Formational Periods, 1808-1894

The devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the first two periods, early foundational (1808-1815) and oral and written formational (1815-1894), was established, proliferated, and controlled by the Ursuline nuns of New Orleans. The main theme of chapter one is the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor as told by the Ursulines during the first eighty-five years of the devotion's existence, which in turn provides insight into the character of and motives behind the actors and narrators. The "Obituaries" are the earliest source of information on and by the participatory nuns of the foundational period, wherein the devotion's three primary events occur: the origin of the statue in 1809-1810, the fire of 1812, and the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.¹ Later Ursulines who heard the oral story from the originators wrote the narrative of the devotion in the 1870s, which was included in the first volume of the "Private Archives."² These first Ursuline documents, combined with the Catholic and civil situation in New Orleans during the nineteenth century, represent the foundation and formation of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor that would later become the first Marian statue officially crowned by the pope in the United States.

Interpretation of the "Obituaries" and the "Private Archives" begins by comparing and contrasting the story prescribed in the Ursuline documents with the canonical version of today. The reason for choosing such a comparison method is because of the accessibility and popularity of today's dispersed literature. Secondly, the story's formation adapted over time allows for the depiction of alterations to the narrative, as well as the changing role of storyteller, first with the Ursulines and then the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The third reason rests on the fact that it was the Ursulines who initially experienced and orally passed on the devotional tale to the

¹ Obituaries, 1728-1835, UANO.

² Ursulines, New Orleans Private Archives, 1878-ca. 1920, vol. 1-3, UANO.

writers of the “Private Archives,” especially regarding the three major miracles attributed to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. These reasons, combined with the understanding that every written portrayal during the institutional and contemporary periods took either directly or indirectly from the Ursuline account, demonstrates the importance of the nineteenth century documents and the necessity to investigate them.

What follows then is the contemporary canonical account of Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s origin tale as portrayed in Gerald Muller’s republished *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, followed by a comparison with the Ursuline “Obituaries” and “Private Archives.”³ During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution forced the Catholic religious of France out of their churches, monasteries, and convents, taking several years for the anti-clerical backlash of the population to subside. Sr. St. Michel spent the Revolution in exile at Pont St. Esprit in the south of France near Marseille. Afterwards she and some fellow Ursuline nuns opened a boarding school with the approval of Bishop Fournier of Montpellier, in hopes of reconstructing the collapsed faith of the French youth.

At the same time, across the Atlantic Ocean and seated along the Mississippi River, the Ursuline nuns in New Orleans suffered from a personnel shortage. Mother St. Andre Madier, with hope almost lost, sent word to her cousin Sr. St. Michel to gather novices and travel to New Orleans. Sr. St. Michel made her request for departure to the bishop of Montpellier, but he denied her appeal personally, deferring final approval to the pope. In turn, Sr. St. Michel wrote a letter to Pope Pius VII in December 1808 making the same request. Before she sent the dispatch, the nun knelt before a statue of Mary and prayed “O most holy Virgin Mary, if you obtain for me a prompt and favorable answer to this letter, I make the promise to have you honored at New

³ Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*. When relating the contemporary canonical story, Muller’s book will always be the source of information, unless otherwise stated.

Orleans under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.”⁴ Such a petition was necessary considering Napoleon’s military operations in France and Italy, which usually prevented any correspondence with the pope. After some delay, Sr. St. Michel mailed the letter in March 1809, and the positive response arrived the following May signed by Cardinal di Pietro, Prefect of the Propaganda.

Preparations for departure commenced, and Sr. St. Michel, remembering her vow to Mary, commissioned an artisan to sculpt a statue to be brought to New Orleans bearing the name Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The final product, blessed by Bishop Fournier, depicted a gold-painted, wooden statue of Mary holding the child Jesus and standing a few feet in height. In the spring of 1810, Sr. St. Michel, seven novices, and the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor set sail for North America, stopping first in Philadelphia and then Baltimore, where they stayed under the care of Bishop John Carroll while New Orleans suffered from a yellow fever epidemic. Finally, on New Year’s Eve 1810, the eight replacements stepped ashore at New Orleans and commenced their new duties at the convent and boarding school. In accordance with her vow, Sr. St. Michel presented Our Lady of Prompt Succor to her sisters and to the city of New Orleans, and thereupon devotion to Mary under her new title flourished.

The first evidence written by an actor in the foundational period on the origin of the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor appears in the 1822 obituary of Sr. St. Michel, who died twelve years after arriving in New Orleans.⁵ The obituary presentation covers the surrounding circumstances of the statue’s origin, all while neither mentioning nor alluding, first, to Sr. St. Michel’s vow to Mary for quick help, or, second, to the construction of the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. In fact, the only reference made to any miraculous intervention is found in a

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ Francois Agatha Gensoul (Sr. St. Michel) Obituary, May 1822, Obituaries, 53-57, UANO. The “Obituaries,” as well as the “Private Archives,” were given page numbers after their original production for research convenience.

footnote whereby the author recognizes the “signal grace of the Lord,” and not the intercession of Mary.⁶ Sr. St. Joseph De la Clotte, also one of the sisters who traveled with the devotional founder to the Crescent City in 1810, wrote the obituary on Sr. St. Michel.⁷ Yet regardless of her personal involvement in the statue’s origination in France and transplantation in New Orleans, Sr. St. Joseph chose not to include Sr. St. Michel’s contact with Mary prior to their immigration together.

The “Private Archives,” written fifty-six years after Sr. St. Michel’s obituary, contain a chapter entitled “Origin of the Devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” wherein the text reveals the same origin story as the 1822 obituary, except this time supplemented with references to Sr. St. Michel’s vow to Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the construction of the statue.⁸ The second volume of the “Private Archives” follows the first volume’s storyline almost verbatim.⁹ Yet, while there is reference made to the vow, there still is not a direct quote attributed to Sr. St. Michel in relation to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Nevertheless, the Ursuline account of the origin story in the “Private Archives” represents the first narrative model that cites Our Lady of Prompt Succor as the name given by Sr. St. Michel to the new statue, from which all subsequent accounts expand and elaborate.

The origin of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, like the beginnings of many Marian devotions, sets the major themes and direction of the devotion that will ultimately affect the narrative tone for every period to follow. And also like other Marian devotions, the major themes include the overcoming of adversity, the power of vow making, and the thrift in heavenly response. Three

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷ It was common Ursuline practice for the mother superior to write the obituaries of her fellow sisters.

⁸ “Origine de la Devotion a Notre Dame de Prompt Secours,” 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:61, UANO.

⁹ Private Archives, ca. 1915, vol. 2, UANO. Volume two, sometimes referred to as the “Annals,” contains French manuscript records from 1727-1915. However, much of its content is copied verbatim from the first volume of the 1878 “Private Archives.”

other sub-themes follow the three major thematic areas, comprising of the high lay female involvement, the integral role of the Ursuline nuns in the devotion, and the status of New Orleans as the devotion's central geographic position. These prevailing themes will later be applied to the various major and minor miracles throughout the history of the devotion.

The first major theme established in the origin story is Mary's role in aiding and guiding the devout through adversity. The Ursuline nuns in France experienced adversity from three entities: the secular world, the male clergy, and geographical obstacles. The first impediment to Sr. St. Michel's wishes was the French Revolution and its effects on the state of the Catholic Church in France, whereby the Ursuline Order was disbanded. True, there are no direct documentary links between the religious dispersion and Our Lady of Prompt Succor, but undoubtedly this experience bore some influence on the Ursuline nuns. In effect, Sr. St. Michel and her fellow sisters were involuntarily stripped of their vows and forced to live in "the world." After the Revolution, when Sr. St. Michel and some Ursuline nuns started a boarding school, work on the debilitated state of youth spirituality and catechism still remained.¹⁰

It was during the early stages of the school's development in Montpellier that Sr. St. Michel received a letter from her cousin requesting her services in New Orleans, at one time challenging the nun to decide between the boarding school in either France or Louisiana, and also forcing her to take the departure decision to the episcopal authority for approval.¹¹ Here lies the second major instance of adversity, related to the bishop of Montpellier's negative response to Sr. St. Michel's plea, mockingly advising her to ask for the pope's permission. Yet, for the first time in history, Sr. St. Michel confronted these new adversarial conditions with the recognition of Mary under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Bishop Fournier knew well

¹⁰ "Origine de la Devotion a Notre Dame de Prompt Secours," 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:61, UANO.

¹¹ Ibid.

the difficulty, if not impossibility, in corresponding with Pope Pius VII while Napoleon maintained control of Italy, and certainly did not expect any papal response.¹² But, as is portrayed in both the “Obituaries” and “Private Archives,” the Ursuline version of the origin story notes the pope’s positive and prompt letter.

One related sub-theme is Mary’s assistance toward the less powerful, predominantly female devotees. Why would a pope, busy with the strictures of military occupation, interest himself with the fancy of a few nuns? Unfortunately, no documents describe how the letter reached the pope’s desk, or why the pope decided to answer in favor of the nuns. Regardless, this first miracle instigated an intimate relationship between the Ursulines and Our Lady of Prompt Succor that persists to this day. The first, most obvious, reason for this permanent inclusion of the nuns is because they were the originators of the devotion. Secondly, they maintained the role of guardian over the tradition throughout the foundational and formational years, therefore controlling the initial content and focus of the narrative. Lastly, the exemplary reputation of the Ursulines in New Orleans influenced the general Catholic population to associate the nuns with Our Lady of Prompt Succor, both females and maternal keepers of spiritual order. In a city like New Orleans, historically depicted as an immoral place, the Ursulines represented the incorruptible and charitable quality of the divisive diocesan power structure and the sinfulness of the laymen and women.

In regards to Pius VII’s involvement, it is important to note that the pope did not send the letter to Sr. St. Michel, but rather Cardinal di Pietro, Prefect of Propaganda, signed the letter.¹³ It can be assumed that the pope approved of the Ursuline plea for immigration upon

¹² Margaret M. O’Dwyer, *The Papacy in the Age of Napoleon and the Restoration: Pius VII, 1800-1823* (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, Inc., 1895): 103.

¹³ Letter of Pius VII to Mother St. Michel Olivier, 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:143, UANO. The original 1809 letter does not exist, making the “Private Archives” version a reproduction.

recommendation by the cardinal of propaganda. However, the possibility remains that even the religious prefect may not have specifically admitted the nuns' passage. Like many large bureaucracies, the letter may have passed across the cardinal's desk in a stack of like requests already sorted and approved by lesser authorities. Yet regardless of what happened, the story is most often told in a way that cites the pope as validating the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Confusion over the intent of the letter exchange between Sr. St. Michel and Pius VII, however, still persists. Neither the nun's nor the pope's letter refers directly to Our Lady of Prompt Succor or permission to begin the devotion under that title.¹⁴

Approval for the title Our Lady of Prompt Succor, then, comes through the reciprocal exchange of favors between Sr. St. Michel and Mary via the vow. The vow made by the nun, while not quoted in any Ursuline document of the foundational or formational periods, is generally described as an urgent request for quick help in exchange for the proliferation of devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in New Orleans, never once mentioning any attempt by the Ursulines to spread the newly named Mary to other Catholics while in France. This first vow effectively places New Orleans as the center of devotion, and the Ursulines as the originators, keepers, and tellers.

The key idea of the first vow made to Mary by Sr. St. Michel in 1808 is "prompt succor," or quick help. Moreover, the founding nun considered it necessary to take the main point of her petition and literally name the devotion "Our Lady of Quick Help." By setting the foremost condition for Mary's intercession as speedily forthcoming, Sr. St. Michel demanded quick help from the Mother of God in receiving papal approval, and promised not keep her vow if the necessity for speed were not met. The idea of expecting a quick response from Mary in times of

¹⁴ The earliest source containing the text of the letter exchange is Hogan, *The Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Prompt Succor*: 39.

need is not new to Marian devotionism. But for some reason, Sr. St. Michel found it necessary to be doubly sure of Mary's thrift, thus the added emphasis on quickness became a part of the normal storyline told by the Ursulines, and the idea persists today.

The Ursulines experienced their next period of adversity while attempting to surpass the geographic expanse between the European and North American continents. The trip from France to New Orleans proved long and arduous for the troop of nuns, who stopped first in Philadelphia and then in Baltimore where they remained while New Orleans suffered through an epidemic of yellow fever.¹⁵ After reaching the long anticipated goal of New Orleans, a number of the immigrant nuns died as a result of the unhealthy urban conditions. There are no written documents recording any vows made by Sr. St. Michel or other nuns demanding a quick and successful trip across the Atlantic. Although it is likely that such a request would have been made to Mary, the point is not stressed perhaps because the immediate outcome, an extra long journey and the death of a few nuns, proved less than ideal.

The last point to be made in reference to the origin of Our Lady of Prompt Succor is the status of the immigrant statue, first, in the insular Ursuline convent, and, second, as another member of the Catholic community at large. In one sense, the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was an immigrant just like Sr. St. Michel and the other Ursuline nuns who traveled to New Orleans. However, this idea only goes so far because the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor claimed no place of domicile prior to arriving in New Orleans. No Ursuline records, nor any contemporary documents, assert that the nuns ever intentionally spread the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in France during the foundational period. Only the artist who sculpted the statue and Bishop Fournier encountered the statue while in France. Thus the statue of and

¹⁵ Françoise Agatha Gensoul (Sr. St. Michel) Obituary, May 1822, Obituaries, 55, UANO.

devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor was constructed expressly for the Ursulines and the Catholics of New Orleans, and not the church in France.

Once Our Lady of Prompt Succor arrived in New Orleans, the story then recounts two miracles performed at the bequest of Our Lady of Prompt Succor: the great fire of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Today these two miracles receive more written coverage than any other attribute given the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, so it is no wonder that the documents procured by the Ursulines during the foundational and formational periods detail the more applicable aspects of the particular stories. In comparing the status of the two major miracles with each other, the fire story receives minimal treatment from the Ursulines, making the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans the defining event in the devotion's history. By elevating Mary's intercession at the Battle of New Orleans to the highest level of esteem, the Ursuline nuns set the trend among later writers on Our Lady of Prompt Succor to marginalize Mary's relationship with the fire. Yet, regardless of the emphasis or de-emphasis, the two major miracles best represent the devotional themes and direction established by the origin story. Therefore, it is necessary to present the canonical narrative of each miracle in comparison with the Ursuline documents, dispel the historical confusion constructed around the miracles over time, and explain why these two miracles became the focal point of the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

As the story goes, a fire spread across New Orleans up to the walls of the Ursuline convent in 1812. The Mother Superior, seeing the inevitability of destruction, ordered all of the nuns and students to abandon the building for safety. Sr. St. Anthony, the first Louisiana native to enter the Ursuline Order, disregarded the order and sprang up the stairs holding a small statue resembling Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Sr. St. Michel followed her, and once together the elder

Sr. St. Anthony held the statue to the window facing the flames and prayed aloud, “Our Lady of Prompt Succor, we are lost if you do not come to our aid.”¹⁶ Immediately the wind shifted and turned the fire back over the destroyed city, saving the convent and the remainder of New Orleans. A number of citizens fighting the fire below the window saw the statue and attributed the turning of the fire to the miraculous intercession of Mary, and word soon spread.

Beginning with the “Obituaries,” it becomes clear that the fire miracle does not receive the same level of attention as the Battle of New Orleans, for the simple reason that there is no mention of the fire miracle in the first collection of Ursuline writings. The fire is not covered in the obituary texts of either Sr. St. Michel or Sr. St. Anthony, the two nuns most involved in the 1812 miracle.¹⁷ While Sr. St. Michel held the position of mother superior from 1815 to 1822, she was responsible for writing the obituaries of all the nuns who died during her tenure, and only once did she cite a fire. This citation appears in the obituary of Sr. St. Marie Olivier de Vezin, however, Sr. St. Michel is not at all specific as to the date of occurrence.¹⁸ She simply mentions a fire that threatened the convent and notes no miracle. This lack of reference to the fire miracle can be interpreted in two ways. First, and most extreme, the fire miracle could have never happened. That is to say that the two nuns never held up the statue and asked for Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s intercession. Second, because most of the available obituaries were written after the Battle of New Orleans, the fire miracle could have been overshadowed by the more famous miracle at Chalmette. Yet regardless of the reason behind the poor textual treatment, the only concrete conclusion that can be deduced from the foundational period sources is that the fire miracle was not documented as thoroughly as the battle.

¹⁶ Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, 19.

¹⁷ Francoise Agatha Gensoul (Sr. St. Michel) Obituary, May 1822, Obituaries, 55, UANO; Sr. St. Antoine Obituary, 1820, Obituaries, 52, UANO.

¹⁸ Francoise Olivier de Vezin (Sr. St. Marie) Obituary, June 1820, Obituaries, 50, UANO.

The Ursulines who wrote the “Private Archives” also treated the fire miracle just as haphazardly as the “Obituaries.” The first volume of the “Private Archives” only once discusses the fire miracle, as a footnote squeezed onto the bottom of a page.¹⁹ Nevertheless, despite the marginal coverage given to the fire story, the passage almost mirrors the canonical version of today, except for one instance where Sr. St. Michel asks for Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s intercession instead of Sr. St. Anthony. The Ursuline authors even quote the intercessory plea at the window. Yet regardless of the availed detail, there is no date supplied for the fire or the miracle. Also, the fire story receives another affront by appearing on a page that numerically comes after the story on the 1815 miracle at the Battle of New Orleans. The second volume follows the first in narrating the fire miracle, though for the first time placing the story in the proper text instead of as a footnote. Again the “Private Archives” fail to date the miracle, the only reference to the year 1812 coming in a paragraph explaining the significance of a hurricane and a slave revolt.²⁰ So, in one respect, the Ursuline writers exceeded the coverage of the “Obituaries” on the fire miracle, relating a story that has satisfied all of the subsequent narrators to the present day. In another respect, the Ursuline nuns continued to diminish the importance of the fire miracle, first, by not giving such thorough details as that afforded to the Battle of New Orleans, and, second, by relegating the story to a peripheral status that still prevails today.

Part of the basis for the fire miracle’s secondary coverage is related to three points of confusion found in the retelling of the story since the Ursulines wrote the “Private Archives”: the existence of two statues recognized as Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the similar vows pertaining to each statue, and the specific date of the fire miracle’s occurrence. Reasons for the confusion

¹⁹ Fire Miracle Footnote, 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:127, UANO. It is unclear whether or not the footnote was written into the original text of volume one, or added later.

²⁰ “Changement de la Regle de Paris,” ca. 1915, Private Archives, vol. 2:57, UANO. This brief passage represents the earliest Ursuline source to associate protection from hurricanes with the church in New Orleans.

are wholly understandable considering the time differentiation between the actual occurrences of the activities and the later written narratives by people who only knew of the story through oral tradition. Nevertheless, these misconceptions, built up over time, have subjected the fire miracle to the periphery of the devotional progression. Yet, the fact remains that the fire miracle is available in today's sources on Our Lady of Prompt Succor, therefore by clarifying points made during the foundational and formational periods, a better understanding of the fire miracle's role in the devotion over all periods can be gained.

The most well known statue is that which Sr. St. Michel brought to New Orleans in 1810, painted in gold and standing a few feet in height. This statue, too large and cumbersome to be held up to a window by an elderly nun, was not involved in the fire miracle. The second statue, significantly smaller in size, is known today as "Sweetheart."²¹ Twelve inches tall, the statue bears some resemblance to the larger golden statue in that both depict Mary holding the child Jesus who is in turn grasping an orbis. The fire-related statue arrived in New Orleans with Sr. St. Felicite Alzas in 1785.²² Sr. St. Felicite resided at the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans for fifty years until her death in 1835; therefore she would have experienced the early devotional development to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. At the base of the statuette is the inscription: "Pont St. Esprit, France, 1735;" and it is there that Sr. St. Felicite supposedly found the statue in the convent attic.²³ The Sweetheart statue receives no coverage in the obituary of any Ursuline nun, including Sr. St. Felicite. The first mention of the "petite statue de la Ste. Vierge" appears in the 1878 footnote on the fire miracle, and included is an apparently insignificant yet quite revealing

²¹ Sr. Eugenia O'Laughlin, "Sweetheart," pamphlet, OMI Missions, ca. 1960, UANO. The only canonical source that specifically details the history of the Sweetheart statue is this four-page pamphlet written in the contemporary period.

²² Françoise Alzas (Sr. St. Felicite) Obituary, October 1835, Obituaries, 77-83, UANO.

²³ "Coronation Ceremonies," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), 11 November 1895.

sentence on the status accorded to Sweetheart.²⁴ Before the fire miracle, the little statue stood in the dining room of the convent. After the miracle, the statuette was moved to the choir room and placed under the personal care of a nun. This tiny piece of documentary evidence shows that at least the Ursulines gave some recognition and reward to Our Lady of Prompt Succor after her role in the fire miracle, and duly rewarded the miraculous statue for the intercession. However, this also demonstrates the Ursulines' insular treatment of the Sweetheart statue and fire miracle, as opposed to the grand display given to the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans.²⁵

The second point of confusion concerning the fire miracle is the strangely similar vows made by both Sr. St. Felicite in 1785 and Sr. St. Michel in 1808. According to the canonical version accepted today, Sr. St. Felicite and a band of nuns were trying to receive permission to leave France and join the Ursulines in New Orleans, just as Sr. St. Michel would do in 1808. In response to the dilemma, she found herself compelled to pray on her knees before the small statue: "Good Mother, if you quickly remove the obstacles which lie in the way of my departure for New Orleans, I promise to have you honored there to the utmost of my power."²⁶ Ultimately, Sr. St. Felicite and company landed at New Orleans where the small statue assumed a place of honor above the superior's choir stall. Sr. St. Felicite's vow marks a second point of semblance with Sr. St. Michel's more popular statue, this one equally difficult to justify. Like Sr. St. Felicite before, who promised to have Our Lady's image honored in New Orleans pending a quick response to her plea, Sr. St. Michel made a comparable offer to Mary twenty-three years later by saying, "O Most Holy Virgin, if you obtain a prompt and favorable answer, I promise to

²⁴ Fire Miracle Footnote, 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:127, UANO.

²⁵ Today Sweetheart is located at the Old Ursuline Convent museum in the French Quarter.

²⁶ "Coronation Ceremonies," *Daily Picayune*, 11 November 1895, 8. This represents the first exact quote of Sr. St. Felicite on traveling to New Orleans, some one-hundred-and-ten years later.

have you honored at New Orleans under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.”²⁷ The evident difference between the two petitions is Sr. St. Michel’s specific designation of Mary as Our Lady of Prompt Succor. It appears, then, that there was an attempt to link the two separate origin stories around the same theme of “quick help.” Certainly, it is easier to memorize one story instead of two. Yet regardless of the accuracy of a quote spoken two hundred years ago, both versions reinforce the Ursuline intent to convey Mary as a quick intercessor in times of desperation.

The third persistent problem in the retelling of the fire story is the exact date in which the fire occurred. The year 1812 is the canonically accepted date most associated with the miraculous extinguishing of the New Orleans fire, but like Sr. Joan Marie of the Ursuline Archives once said in an interview, “If you can get all of the fires in New Orleans straight, then let me know.”²⁸ Historically, no fewer than three major fires threatened the city of New Orleans during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and according to believers, the Ursuline convent was saved all three times by Mary’s intercession.²⁹ While all three volumes of the “Private Archives” do mention the fire miracle, they do not give the same story. The earliest written volume does not date anything concerning the fire miracle. The second volume refers to a fire in 1788 that damaged the convent, but when discussing the canonically accepted miracle story, no exact date is given.³⁰ It is not until the institutional period that the specific date of 1812 is attributed to the fire miracle in the *Daily Picayune*. Most likely, the fire miracle lacks a precise date during the foundational and formational periods because the Ursulines simply did

²⁷ Ibid. This also represents the first exact quote given by Sr. St. Michel as a vow to Mary for permission to New Orleans

²⁸ Sr. Joan Marie Aycock, interview by author, New Orleans, LA, 12 December 2000.

²⁹ Ibid., Sr. Joan Marie personally associates each fire miracle with Mary’s intercession; Jane Francis Heaney, *A Century of Pioneering: A History of the Ursuline Nuns in New Orleans, 1727-1827* (Chelsea, Michigan: Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans, 1993): 173-180. The reported dates of fire are 1788, 1794, and 1812.

³⁰ “Heureuse arrivee de la Mere St. Michel,” ca. 1915, Private Archives, vol. 2:54, UANO.

not see the necessity to dwell on the petty details, instead focusing on the more important thematic aspects of the devotion.

Yet somehow, despite the peripheral treatment, the story still maintains a position in today's canonical narrative, due to the consistent portrayal of the main devotional themes of adversity, quick help, Ursuline involvement, and vows. Without question, the threat of being engulfed in flames implies adversity in the plainest sense of the word, and it was the Ursulines who asked for and received the quick help of Mary. In addition to the thematic consistency, the story has remained popular because of the excitement and adventure espoused by the idea of a life-threatening conflagration. Thus, when the devotional themes are combined with the story's plain intrigue, it is no wonder that the fire miracle remained a part of the canonical story, regardless of the peripheral treatment.

In 1815, the citizens of New Orleans faced another tragedy worthy of Our Lady of Prompt Succor's intercession—the Battle of New Orleans. In retelling the story of Our Lady as she relates to the battle, it is important to note that the canonically accepted story of the Archdiocese of New Orleans incorporates historically accurate accounts of the battle with the miraculous legend of Mary's intervention. This combination of history and the supernatural is possible, as opposed to the questionable fire story of 1812, because the Battle of New Orleans is one of the most remembered moments in American history, and thus known by both laypeople of all religious affiliations and historians of all scholarly agendas. Therefore, the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the Battle of New Orleans, as it is officially related in the many pamphlets and sermons in and around New Orleans, takes the miraculous claims and fits them into solid historical facts to form one canonical version.

The canonical account of the second and most heralded miracle of Our Lady of Prompt

Succor starts during the late months of 1814, when General Edward Pakenham of the Royal Army converged on the poorly defended city of New Orleans under the command of the American General Andrew Jackson.³¹ On the eve of fighting, the women, children, and elderly fled in prayer to the Ursuline chapel, fearing the worst for the American soldiers outnumbered five to one. For the first time, the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was transferred from the choir to the main altar, inspiring Sr. St. Marie Olivier de Vezin to make a vow to Our Lady of Prompt Succor promising an annual mass of thanksgiving and singing of the *Te Deum* if she would intercede in favor of the American forces. On the morning of 8 January 1815, while Fr. William Dubourg celebrated mass, a messenger from Jackson entered the chapel and proclaimed victory over the British. In a later letter to Fr. Dubourg, Jackson gave the credit of victory to the “signal interposition of heaven,” and requested a mass of thanksgiving be celebrated at St. Louis Cathedral. Before the mass started, Jackson was crowned with laurels, and afterwards he visited the cloistered Ursuline Convent and personally thanked them for their prayers.³²

The Battle of New Orleans is the most important miracle attributed to Our Lady of Prompt Succor today, but, in view of the documentary evidence of the foundational and formational periods, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the popularity of the battle miracle grew prior to the institutional period. Of the foundational period documents, only in the 1822 obituary on Sr. St. Michel does the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans receive considerable coverage, and only brief treatment in Sr. St. Marie’s obituary. Surprisingly, the obituary on the nun who made the vow during the battle, Sr. St. Marie, only mentions a “guerre,” not once alluding to the role Mary played at the Battle of New Orleans.³³ In the obituary on Sr. St. Michel, the general outline of the story of Our Lady at the battle receives documentary

³¹ Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, 21-32.

³² Andrew Jackson to Rev. William Dubourg, photocopied letter, 19 January 1815, UANO.

³³ Françoise Olivier de Vezin (Sr. St. Marie) Obituary, June 1820, Obituaries, 50, UANO.

treatment in the form of a rather detailed footnote.³⁴ The handwriting on the footnote appears to be the same as the general text, and so keeps the date of origin as 1822. The passage specifically cites the intercession of Our Lady of Prompt Succor as the reason for victory, along with the divine approval of the “God of armies.”³⁵ Lastly, the obituary twice discusses the annual mass of thanksgiving every January after 1815.³⁶ With this first and only written account on the Battle of New Orleans in the foundational period, the Ursulines construct the framework for the 1878 production of the “Private Archives.”

The “Private Archives” represent the primary example of the Ursulines disseminating the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans, however it is puzzling why the convent leaders did not initiate a written version of the miracle until the 1870s, over sixty years after the fact. Volume one of the “Private Archives” incorporates what was presented in the “Obituaries” and then expands the story into a comparable version of the contemporary canonical account. The second volume mirrors the first, except for the insertion of a new paragraph that discusses the annual celebration and singing of the Te Deum every 8 January.³⁷ Because of the rather clear and detailed account given by the Ursulines, the story presented today is nearly identical to the recounting of the 1870s. The retelling of the story since 1878 reflects the central role of the Battle of New Orleans miracle to the devotion as a whole. Undoubtedly, the battle miracle is not the only thing that made Our Lady of Prompt Succor popular, but it is the most remembered, and thus the most important to discuss in order to create a clear picture of the devotion throughout the foundational and formational periods.

The events before the battle, and how the Catholic population of New Orleans responded

³⁴ Francoise Agatha Gensoul (Sr. St. Michel) Obituary, March 1822, Obituaries, 57, UANO.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Attaque des Anglais,” ca. 1915, Private Archives, vol. 2:58, UANO.

to the ensuing threat, provide a historical perspective into the religious and domestic attitudes on the invasion, and not just a soldier's perception. Regardless that the Battle of New Orleans was fought by men, many of them Catholic New Orleanians, the Ursuline account in the "Private Archives" never describes the devotion of any American soldier to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The focus, instead, is placed on the Ursuline nuns and laywomen of the city, excepting Fr. Dubourg. It was the women who fled to the convent chapel to pray for a miracle, and the Ursuline nuns who eagerly allowed for such a gathering.³⁸ It cannot be forgotten, however, that the Ursuline nuns at the time were cloistered and not visibly participatory in public masses. Therefore, there was an evident split between the Catholic laypeople, the diocesan clergy, and the Ursuline nuns, in how they encountered the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the foundational period.

During episodes of Catholic turmoil throughout New Orleans history, the Ursuline chapel in the French Quarter often assumed the role of diocesan seat, making it wholly understandable that the citizens of New Orleans relied upon Ursuline support and guidance in such a time of distress.³⁹ The Ursuline chapel was on an equal level with the St. Louis Cathedral in terms of charitable and authoritative contributions to the community. Also demonstrative of the highly attended masses at the Ursuline Chapel is the historical fact that it was there that citizens of New Orleans, along with the apostolic authority of Fr. Dubourg, gathered during the Battle of New Orleans, and not the cathedral.⁴⁰ More practical proof for diocesan involvement at the chapel is that it was located in the French Quarter only a few blocks away from the cathedral, thus just as

³⁸ "Victoire emportee sur les Anglais par l'intercession de Notre Dame de Prompt Secours," 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:123, UANO.

³⁹ Heaney, *Century of Pioneering*, 226-227

⁴⁰ There are no available records, other than the Ursuline documents, to prove or disprove that the Cathedral was not a site of prayer and vigil during the Battle of New Orleans. Yet considering that Fr. Dubourg spent the eve and morning of the battle at the Ursuline Chapel, it is at least plausible to assume that the convent was the highest attended service in the city.

easily accessible for the general public. The wide use and recognition of the chapel is also related to the benevolent reputation maintained by the Ursulines in the eyes of citizens regardless of social or economic status. Therefore, three possible reasons explain why the Ursuline chapel was selected as the site of community prayer in the face of the British invasion: the good reputation of the Ursulines, the house of the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, or a combination of both. The easy answer, but also the more correct one, combines both the lay trust in the Ursulines and the association with Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

The transfer of the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor from the choir stall to above the main altar of the chapel and the vow made by Sr. St. Marie also answers why the Ursuline chapel was selected as the site of prayer. The movement of the statue from an area scarcely visited by people other than the Ursulines, to a position intended to elicit the recognition due a miraculous Marian statue, physically demonstrates the more public and higher status accorded Our Lady of Prompt Succor by the time of the Battle of New Orleans. The statue never before received such recognizable treatment from the Ursuline nuns, much less the general public. But in the case of the battle, the Ursulines, with the resounding approval of the Catholic women of the city, chose Our Lady of Prompt Succor as the intercessor capable of overcoming a hopeless obstacle. Fr. Dubourg, it appears in the context clues, maintained little influence over the decision of the city's women devotees, submitting to the notions of the predominantly female congregation. Therefore, the physical placement of Our Lady of Prompt Succor above the main altar represents the power of the nuns and laywomen over the devotional proceedings of a diocesan sponsored event and the newly infused power believed to be in the intercession of Our Lady.⁴¹

The vow made to Our Lady of Prompt Succor by Sr. St. Marie also occurred the night before the last British assault, and therein the same devotional themes prescribed during the

⁴¹ "Victoire emportee sur les Anglais," 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:123, UANO.

origin tale continue along with some nuances. No Ursuline documents during the foundational or formational periods offer a version of the exact quote given by Sr. St. Marie. Nevertheless, the “Private Archives” do infer the basic tenets of the vow made “in the name of the Community,” namely, if Our Lady of Prompt Succor sends victory to the “American army” then there will be sung a mass of thanksgiving annually in her name.⁴² The theme of adversity is present in the situation, as is thrift of response. The difference comes in the definition and role of “community,” and the particular reference to Americans instead of Catholics, New Orleanians, or other more precise ethnic and religious groupings. “Community” can mean one of three things to Sr. St. Marie; either the word refers to the Ursuline community, the larger community of believers present at the chapel and throughout New Orleans, or the whole Catholic community of believers throughout the United States and the world. Yet regardless of which Catholic community the mother superior vowed, it begs the question of why the vow was made in behalf of an “American” victory, a title not completely accepted by a citizenry just admitted to the United States in 1812.

In reading and interpreting the “Obituaries” and “Private Archives,” it appears that the citizens of New Orleans were the recipients of Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s intercession at the Battle of New Orleans, and not the whole of the United States. The Ursulines did not originally intend to use the devotion as a tool of outreach either to Catholics outside Louisiana or to the general American public. South Louisiana is, to a certain extent, a Catholic island in a Protestant land, and New Orleans by itself takes that unique status to an even higher level of distinction. Both the “Obituaries” and “Private Archives” cite the defending army as American, yet when making reference to the intercession of Mary, only the city and devotees of New Orleans receive comment. The most concrete evidence for the Ursuline choice not to widely promote the

⁴² Ibid.

devotion outside south Louisiana rests in that they waited over sixty years to write the story into an accessible form. True, there must have been oral tradition, but such a form of communication does not lend itself to widespread dissemination. In reading the documentary evidence, the Ursulines did not include other Catholics, or much less non-Catholic citizens of the United States, into the fold of New Orleans' very own devotion. Such a catalyst necessary for increasing devotional participation beyond the cultural borders of south Louisiana did not avail itself until the Ursulines, with the support of the archdiocese, promoted Our Lady of Prompt Succor to the pope in the 1890s.

On the morning of 8 January, Fr. Dubourg, the Apostolic Vicar under the Archbishop of Quebec, celebrated a mass asking for God and Mary's favor.⁴³ This historical incident offers an opportunity to discuss the relationship between the male church authority and the Ursulines. Since Sr. St. Michel had brought the statue to the convent in 1810 and through the two major miracles, the Catholic Church in New Orleans suffered from an authority struggle between the popularly and self appointed leader of the church, Pere Antoine, and the ecclesiastically denoted successor, Fr. Dubourg. History books show that the Ursuline nuns were the only good that the church had to offer to the city at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ The nuns managed a charity hospital, an orphanage, and a school for white, black, and Indian children. So because of the public's high regard for the nuns, compared to the questionable intent of the church officials, the Ursulines implicitly held a relatively high degree of authority in the church during the first phase of the devotion. The word "implicitly" is used to describe the Ursulines' power because, like the good nuns that they were, they of course would have intentionally appeared to be acting under whoever was officially recognized by the apostolate, and thus Fr. Dubourg's liturgical role

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Heaney, *Century of Pioneering*, 226-227.

on the morning of 15 January. Not surprisingly, when considering the general discontent over the split church leadership, Fr. Dubourg would ultimately leave within the same year of 1815 for St. Louis, Missouri, to wait for the situation in New Orleans to solve itself.⁴⁵

Insight into the relationship between the Ursuline nuns and the rest of the Catholic lay community comes by discussing how Sr. St. Marie handled the vow she made to Our Lady of Prompt Succor the night before the battle.⁴⁶ Until the Battle of New Orleans, the Ursuline nuns remained the predominant devotees to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Yes, the canonical story says that word spread throughout the city after the fire miracle of 1812, and assuming this reported devotional proliferation did occur, there still was no public veneration on the scale of the post-battle recognition. Yet after the Americans defeated the British, only Sr. St. Marie knew about the vow made in behalf of the citizens of New Orleans, for the simple fact that she personally made it. After news of victory reached the chapel during mass, the cloistered nuns were the first to receive word of the vow from their mother superior. Then there must have been some intermediary body to transfer the news of Mary's acceptance of the vow to the women of the congregation. This would have been the job of the male clergy, most likely Fr. Dubourg himself. The Ursuline nuns, therefore, acted as the first instigators of the battle miracle. Considering the import placed on the battle miracle, had it not been for the choice to reveal the vow to the general public, there would not have been a continued devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Secondly, because the nuns maintained such an inside role in the miracle, they became the *de facto* keepers of a story blessed by divine assistance, thus giving the Ursulines sanction to guide the story until the institutional period in 1894.

⁴⁵ Joan Marie Aycock, interview by author, 22 May 2000, UANO; Fr. DuBourg willed his heart to the Ursulines of New Orleans, where it is now kept in a small chest at the Old Ursuline Convent in the French Quarter.

⁴⁶ "Victoire emportee sur les Anglais," 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:123, UANO.

Of course, after the smoke settled over the Chalmette battlefield and the realization of salvation set in, the citizens of New Orleans found it necessary to celebrate. As is recounted in the canonical story of the Battle of New Orleans, Jackson attributed victory to the will of God, and asked Fr. Dubourg that there be a mass of thanksgiving at the St. Louis Cathedral.⁴⁷ However, neither Jackson nor his letter receives any mention in the texts of the “Obituaries” or “Private Archives.” The Ursuline nuns disregard the general’s involvement in the battle and his assertion for divine intervention. In response to the claim made by today’s canonical version that Jackson visited the Ursulines after the battle to thank them for their prayers, no foundational or formational period sources prove that such a meeting occurred.⁴⁸ Therefore, instead of portraying Jackson as savior of the city, the reason rests primarily on the vow made by an Ursuline nun and the divine response from Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

After researching, translating, and interpreting the foundational and formational period sources prior to 1894, it is still impossible to know the precise extent to which the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor grew in popularity in and around New Orleans. The three major miracles of the origin, fire, and battle obviously served as validation for some Catholics to devote themselves to the new Mary. Assuming Sr. St. Marie kept her vow promising an annual mass of thanksgiving in behalf of Our Lady, then the devotion would have spread some. However, while it is not disputed that the diocese did celebrate an annual mass of thanksgiving at the St. Louis Cathedral, none of the Ursuline sources acknowledge a mass specifically held for Our Lady of Prompt Succor in either the Ursuline Chapel or the cathedral. Nevertheless, proof of devotional proliferation during its first forty years of existence came in 1851 when Pope Pius

⁴⁷ Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29-30.

IX officially authorized a liturgical feast day for every 8 January.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the Ursuline Archives do not keep a copy of the Latin or English translation of the papal document. The only documentary reference to Pius IX's action during the formational period appears in the first volume of the "Private Archives" as a single sentence footnote to a section on the Battle of New Orleans. In the footnote, the Ursulines explain that they celebrated an unofficial feast day on an unspecified Sunday in January. Nevertheless, Bishop Blanc sang the special mass on 8 January, thus representing the first episcopal acknowledgment of the devotion since Dubourg in 1815.⁵⁰

Following the 1851 papal permission for a feast day, the canonical story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor received no new literary notice by the archdiocese until the 1894 coronation proclamation, thus making it difficult to ascertain the true level of devotional adherence for the first eighty-five years of the cult's existence in Louisiana. Only four specific moments in the devotional life of Our Lady in New Orleans received documentary treatment by the Ursulines: the origin, fire, battle, and feast day. Yet, considering the fact that both the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Holy See recognized the potential for devotional expansion in 1894, the number and fervor of the devotees must have increased after the Battle of New Orleans as the story was transmitted orally for over two generations. In 1878 the Ursulines incorporated the oral story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor into the "Private Archives." But, like the contemporary Ursuline archivist once noted, the "Private Archives" are just that—private—thus eliminating the possibility that the 1878 document affected any large portion of the Catholic population in New Orleans.

⁴⁹ "Victoire emportee sur les Anglais," footnote, 1878, Private Archives, vol. 1:123, UANO.

⁵⁰ Hogan, *Pilgrimage*, 67-68. This publication contains a translation of the letter sent by the Secretary of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to Archbishop Blanc.

Chapter 2: Institutional Period, 1894-1928

In 1894, Archbishop Francis Janssens of New Orleans was granted an audience with Pope Leo XIII, to whom he presented the devotion and miracles of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Consequently, Leo XIII agreed to a solemn coronation of the golden statue at the Ursuline Chapel, thus ending the formational period and beginning the institutional period (1894-1928). The archdiocesan attitude toward the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in the institutional period shifts from passive approval to enthusiastic support, and the role of the Ursuline nuns changes with this ecclesiastical alteration. The evident modification of devotional influence between the Archdiocese of New Orleans and Ursulines is demonstrated by the activities surrounding the coronation mass of 1895, new literary coverage by both religious and secular authorship, and the fundraising and construction of a votive shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in 1928. Therefore, the primary objective of chapter two is to explain why the archdiocese assumed the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor into the fold of canonical authority, as well as the response made by the Ursulines to such a takeover. In so doing, the story told by the Ursulines in the foundational and formational periods encountered some adjustments by the new clerical power holders of the institutional period, which assist in uncovering the reasons behind their actions.

The sources of the institutional period diverge from those in the foundational and formational periods. The reason for the differentiation rests on the fact that the Archdiocese of New Orleans assumed control over the tone and direction of the devotional story, in spite of the Ursulines' involvement for the previous eighty years. By 1894, the canonical story of the Ursulines was established and immutable, and the rest of the institutional account is a chronological retelling of the papal and archdiocesan activities surrounding the devotion. The

authors represented in the institutional period assumed one of two positions: the religious voice of the church or the secular voice of public newspapers. Strangely enough, the two areas of authorship correlated in both the retelling of the miraculous stories and contemporary coverage of the story as it happened during the period. The voice of the Ursulines, however, experienced an intentional restraint by the male church officials, though the image of Ursuline association was still used as a means of continuing to validate the story.

The first documentary evidence for an ending to the formational period and a beginning to the institutional period are two 21 June 1894 papal decrees, the first, granting confraternal status to the devotion, and the second, allowing for the coronation of the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.¹ In the first, Leo XIII introduced indulgences to the Confraternity of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, later erected by Janssens on the 1895 feast day. In 1897, this confraternity would be raised to the rank of archconfraternity.² The allowance for confraternal status demonstrated Leo XIII's belief in Our Lady of Prompt Succor as a potentially unifying force in the American Catholic Church. The positive effects, however, can be read in two different ways. The first way is to look at the direct result of the confraternity on increasing the exposure and number of devotees to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. However, there is no way to deduce how instrumental the organization was in gathering new followers. The confraternity would have introduced some previously uninvolved Catholics to the devotion, but it may have also acted as a simple registry of those already devoted. Yet regardless of how influential the construction of the confraternity was on the number of followers, the papal decree, in itself, demonstrated the growing involvement of the male church hierarchy in acquiring control over the devotion.

¹ There does not exist an original or copy of the papal decree for a confraternity to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The first piece of documentary evidence for a confraternity appears in an 1895 archdiocesan letter announcing the pope's approval for a coronation of the statue; Pope Leo XIII, "Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor," decree, 1894, UANO.

² Gerald Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*.

The other papal decree of 1894 announced the “Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” delegating Janssens to crown the statue in the name of the pope.³ According to the proclamation text, the Ursuline Mother Superior, Sr. St. Ignace Gardette, was the first to ask Pope Leo XIII for an official coronation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. However, Leo XIII did not make a final decision until Janssens seconded the Ursuline recommendation during a visit to Rome. Next, the pope referred the devotional promulgation to the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of Faith for a second opinion. After a special delegation of the Sacred Congregation approved the crowning, Rome named Janssens as the implementer of the decree “mandat[ing] that there be a solemn coronation of the Our Lady of Prompt Succor statue and that it be exposed for public veneration in the aforesaid [Ursuline] chapel.”⁴

The papal decree, supplemented by the archdiocesan response to the announcement, distinguishes three characters or groups of characters involved in the crowning: the Ursulines, Janssens, and Leo XIII.⁵ The roles played by each define the power-holding positions for the remainder of the institutional period. The Ursuline nuns, recognizing the positive role that the archbishop played in proliferating their devotional creation, never questioned their imposed background role in the promotion of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, but rather embraced the new position. The archbishop, for the first time in the devotion’s history, exerted his power to promulgate the devotion. After this initial involvement, the archdiocesan leader never released power for the remainder of the institutional period. The pope assumed a rather indifferent stand

³ Leo XIII, “Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” decree, 1894, UANO.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Archdiocese of New Orleans, Invitation to Solemn Coronation, letter, 1895, UANO. Within the archdiocesan letter is an English translation of the papal decree for the coronation.

on Our Lady of Prompt Succor, placing few, if any, realistic expectations on the devotion's effects.

The last documented action made by the Ursulines, while still power-holders over the devotion, appears in the 1894 coronation decree. "The Mother Superior of the Sisters of St. Ursula of her monastery eagerly asked from the Holy See that he issue a decree that the Blessed Virgin's statue be crowned."⁶ Oddly enough, this act of devotional outreach marks the first concerted effort by the Ursulines to promote Our Lady of Prompt Succor beyond the realm of Louisiana. The reasons why the Ursulines took such an unprecedented step, though vested in historical fact, nevertheless remain theoretical.⁷ The simplest reason states that the Ursulines just decided to expand the devotion, without any ulterior motives. Another probable catalyst springs from the knowledge that, almost simultaneously with Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe flourished throughout Mexico and into the United States. Seeing the successes of this other devotion may have augmented the boundaries of proliferation for the Ursulines. A third theory demonstrates that the Ursulines, recognizing their falling status as the most charitable religious order in the city, saw the good benefits associated with any sort of papal approval in keeping their exemplary reputation in the archdiocese. The last two reasons for the Ursuline request to Rome shed a rather self-interested shadow over the order. However, as a more positive interpretation, the Ursulines may have recognized the possibility for devotional growth, modeled their actions on practical methods known to be effective, and asked the pope to act accordingly.

The Ursulines won the anticipated recognition of the pope, along with the necessity for archdiocesan intervention, but the nuns probably did not foresee the clergy's dominance over

⁶ Leo XIII, "Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor," decree, 1894, UANO.

⁷ None of these theories exist in any available documents.

Our Lady of Prompt Succor for the remainder of the institutional period. While visiting Rome in 1894, Janssens asked Leo XIII to crown the New Orleans statue. Annemarie Kasteel's biography of Janssens offers one reason for the Dutch prelate's actions by describing his personal devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as well as his friendship with Sr. St. Ignace of the Ursuline Convent.⁸ Another argument for Janssens' interest in the devotion points, once again, to a selfish motive on the part of the archbishop. By supporting the Ursuline request, Janssens could position himself to appear on the side of the nuns, while at the same time demonstrating that without his intervention nothing would have come of the petition. In effect, Ursuline power would appear subjugated to and reliant on that of the archdiocese. As to the question of whether or not Janssens' word was integral to the promulgation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, again there is no documentary evidence to prove or disprove. Nevertheless, the 1894 coronation decree demonstrates the shift in power holding-status over the devotion from the Ursulines to the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Still, some other reasons must be given to why Janssens interested himself in the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor; the answer can be assumed from the texts of the two papal decrees issued by Leo XIII, and supplemented by the Archdiocese of New Orleans' dispersal of a letter prior to the coronation ceremony. The papal decree alludes to an announcement made by Janssens before Leo XIII's involvement, whereby the archbishop named Our Lady of Prompt Succor as the "Patroness of Louisiana."⁹ The significance of this proclamation comes from the fact that no saint or Marian devotion attained such a status by such an authority in the state of Louisiana before or since. Also, in response to the new confraternal

⁸ AnneMarie Kasteel, *Francis Janssens, 1843-1897: A Dutch-American Prelate* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1992): 266.

⁹ Leo XIII, "Solemn Coronation of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor," decree, 1894, UANO.

privilege, the archdiocesan letter recognized that “since [the establishment of the confraternity], devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor has spread throughout the United States; the Confraternity already counts its members by thousands; and the Ursuline Chapel, where the miraculous statue is venerated, has become a pilgrimage for the devout clients.”¹⁰ This quote demonstrates the insularity of the devotion prior to confraternal status, after which the devotion expanded beyond New Orleans. Whether or not this is an accurate picture of the popularity of the cult, it nevertheless represents the only documentary discussion on the matter.

Most puzzling to the triangular relationship of influence on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor is the third vertex of Pope Leo XIII. The available sources make him appear less than engrossed in the idea of promulgation, which brings into question the significance of such papal recognition. The canonical account illustrates that the pope himself chose to crown the New Orleans statue, but this is only partly true.¹¹ Leo XIII, after receiving the two recommendations from the Ursulines and Janssens, referred the proposal to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith for final approval, the same congregation that would write and promulgate the decree. Therefore, after the initial decision to allow the coronation to proceed, the remaining details were left to the papal bureaucracy, effectively removing Leo XIII from the devotion. One possible piece of evidence for the pope’s lack of interest in the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor comes in a 1903 biography *The Life of Pope Leo XIII: From His Personal Memoirs* by Monsignor Bernard O’Reilly.¹² Within 758 pages, there is no discussion on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in particular, or any other Marian devotions for that matter. Admittedly, a single book cannot possibly contain every

¹⁰ Archdiocese of New Orleans, Invitation to Solemn Coronation, letter, 1895,UANO.

¹¹ For canonical account, see Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, 34.

¹² Bernard O’Reilly, *The Life of Pope Leo XIII: From His Personal Memoirs* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1903). Monsignor Bernard O’Reilly acted as Domestic Prelate and Prothonotary Apostolic to Leo XIII.

word or deed of Leo XIII, but it can provide a picture of what events mattered most to Vatican insiders, and it appears that Our Lady of Prompt Succor was not too significant to people outside south Louisiana.

Yet, regardless of the means by which the Our Lady of Prompt Succor statue received permission for coronation or the importance given to the devotion by the Vatican, Leo XIII must have had some reason for allowing such a sparingly bestowed honor. Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* offers assistance in answering the question of motive, because of Leo XIII's role in the 1904 coronation of the Mount Carmel statue in Harlem, New York.¹³ In his discussion, Orsi explains the three criteria for obtaining a proper coronation: proof of granted favors, popularity of the devotion, and antiquity of the devotion.¹⁴ Our Lady of Prompt Succor, though somewhat loosely, satisfies the three criteria. The proof for favors granted, especially during the fire of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans, is not proof in any legal sense, but rather the words of religious men and women who heard or read of the miraculous tales. As for popularity, no rampant following of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor appeared outside the vicinity of New Orleans. Assuming the Holy See seriously considered the coronation in full compliance with the three criteria, the definition of "popularity" for Rome is a surprisingly small number of adherents. The third criterion of antiquity is ambiguous, and evidently the least important to the pope in choosing a statue worthy of a crown. Leo XIII, when deciding on the coronation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, voided the necessity for antiquity in a cult.¹⁵ In relation to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the word ancient does not exactly befit a devotion of

¹³ Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Ibid. 60-61.

¹⁵ Ibid.

only eighty years. Therefore, because the three criteria were so haphazardly and relatively applied, there must have been some other implicit reasons for Leo XIII's approval.

Orsi continues his discussion on the motive of Leo XIII by highlighting two possible reasons for papal interest: to make a positive diplomatic gesture to the United States and to assert the authority of the Church over "popular devotions."¹⁶ The possibility of making diplomatic headway in a predominantly Protestant country by exulting the rather un-ecumenical doctrine of Mary was not likely. A more probable reason for the papal recognition of the cult of Our Lady of Prompt Succor rests in the fact that New Orleans was a historically Catholic city amidst a country of non-Catholics. Therefore, if anything, the promulgation of the statue further reinforced the Catholic stronghold of the Crescent City. The second assertion pertaining to control over popular devotions brings a certain question to the fore: was Our Lady of Prompt Succor a popular devotion at the time of Leo XIII's involvement? More precisely, was the devotion exceeding liturgical and other privileges granted by the Holy See and the Archdiocese of New Orleans, thus limiting the episcopal bodies to effectively administrate the laypeople? The answer is a simple "no." Prior to the coronation of 1895, the devotion received the approval of various male clergymen, including Fr. Dubourg during the Battle of New Orleans, Pope Pius IX and his allowance for a feast day, Archbishop Janssens' request for a confraternity and coronation, and Leo XIII's granting of Janssens' appeals. The New Orleans devotion simply did not delineate from other precedents set for major Marian devotions. Therefore, because the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor hardly resembled a popular devotion, the pope achieved little headway in better controlling the church in New Orleans beyond what the archbishop already enjoyed.

¹⁶ Ibid., For the purpose of this thesis, "popular devotion" will be defined as a spontaneous Christian movement toward some aspect of faith, holy person, or miraculous event that occurs outside the authoritative realm of ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Orsi discusses one other possibility behind Leo XIII's motive in promulgating the Our Lady of Prompt Succor statue – the Italian immigrant situation in America.¹⁷ Leo XIII deeply concerned himself with the Italian immigrant plight in the United States, and New Orleans claimed a large population of Italians and Sicilians during the latter half of the nineteenth century in estimates of thirty thousand.¹⁸ Conflict over the peripheral treatment of Italian parishioners persisted between some American bishops and the Italian-born pope. However, it appears that Leo XIII held Janssens in good favor in regard to the Italian issue. That is not to say that New Orleans did not exhibit racial prejudices toward Italian immigrants. New Orleans in the 1890s, in fact, experienced an upsurge in outright racism and violence against Italians, culminating in the 1890 murder of eleven Italians suspected in the killing of the police superintendent.¹⁹ With this information in mind, it is possible that Janssens received an audience from the pope, and thus a favorable response to a request for the coronation, in return for increased involvement in the Italian immigrant situation.

The question remains as to why the pope would have suggested the Our Lady of Prompt Succor statue as the unifying symbol of the archdiocese? The short answer is that there is not a good reason for such a decision. First of all, the devotion was French in origin, and a clear majority of past nuns were French nationals.²⁰ Secondly, it was no secret that the Ursuline boarding school catered mostly to the wealthy children of the city and state. Although a share of the enrollment fell to the lesser privileged, the class rolls of the time period show a clear majority

¹⁷ Ibid.; taken from Robert Emmett Curran, *Michael Augustine Corrigan and the Shaping of Conservative Catholicism in America, 1878-1902* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 70-71.

¹⁸ Kasteel, *Francis Janssens*, 326.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Predominant French ancestry is evident in the UANO Obituaries (1728-1835) and the brief biographies on each resident nun prior to 1878 in the Private Archives, vol. 1.

of the female students bearing French surnames.²¹ Because the students at the Ursuline Academy would have encountered Our Lady of Prompt Succor more than any other citizens in New Orleans, thus enabling them to become the cult's prime lay-promoters, the devotion would not have circulated much into the ranks of comparatively poor Italian immigrants. Simply put, there is little evidence to show a realistic opportunity for Italians to access the devotion. Yet despite the difficulty in allotting a specific reason for papal involvement, the fact remains that Leo XIII did indeed allow for recognition of Our Lady of Prompt Succor that was unprecedented in the United States.

With the necessary papal decree in hand, and on the rainy morning of 10 November 1895, Janssens and approximately ten thousand devotees crowded the chapel and grounds of the Ursuline Convent to perform the first crowning of a Marian statue in the United States.²² The day's events called for an open-air ceremony to accommodate the expected number of twenty-five thousand participants, but the rain caused the bulk of the proceedings to be moved into the chapel. Six other bishops were present, including Bishop Meerschaert of Oklahoma, who also participated in the coronation of Our Lady of Guadalupe just weeks before, and who personally experienced a favor from Our Lady of Prompt Succor that received much notoriety in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Also in attendance were many archdiocesan clergymen, representatives from the charitable and educational institutions of the area, "the leading Catholic gentlemen of the city," and "a delegation of ladies from the congress of advanced women."²³ The Ursuline nuns viewed the most important ceremony ever given in the name of Our Lady of

²¹ Student Roster Books, Ursuline Archives, New Orleans. The Ursuline Archives contains a shelf of annual booklets bearing class rosters, a majority of which bear French surnames.

²² "Coronation Ceremonies," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), 11 November 1895, pp. 1,8. Most of the details surrounding the proceedings of 10 November 1895 come in the extensive article in the *Daily Picayune*, precursor to the *Times Picayune*.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 1.

Prompt Succor from the choir room through a grating. The statue itself was moved down from the usual position above the main altar to a small pedestal erected to the right.

The ceremony began at ten o'clock in the morning with an abridged procession around the courtyard, allowing for only half of the outdoor participants to view the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Then, with a twelve-gun salute, the two-hour service formally commenced. Janssens first blessed the two crowns, valued at over eight thousand dollars and fashioned out of donated jewelry, one for Mary and the other for the infant Jesus.²⁴ After the blessing of the crowns, a forty-person choir signaled the beginning of the pontifical high mass. The bishops Janssens, Meerschaert, and Heslin of Natchez each gave homilies. Bishop Heslin opened with remarks in English for the congregants seated in the chapel. Meerschaert went further in offering his words in French to the crowd of people outside in the cold and rain. And, finally, Janssens temporarily transferred the statue out to the courtyard and gave a short speech in English, led the Hail Mary three times, and sang the customary *Te Deum*. At the conclusion of the mass, the individuals who enjoyed an indoor viewing of the ceremony moved on to a great banquet celebrated at St. Ursula's Hall on the convent grounds.

Reading the front-page article in the *Daily Picayune* on the coronation ceremonies, dated 11 November 1895, offers an understanding of how the miraculous stories of the origin, fire, and battle stand in relation to the early Ursuline documents, as well as insight into how the Archdiocese of New Orleans used its power over the devotion in the institutional period. The *Daily Picayune*, though a secular publication, nevertheless maintained influence over the coverage of the coronation, a fact even admitted by Janssens when he spoke during the ceremony "I have always been an object of the kindest consideration at the hands of newspaper men. I

²⁴ Receipt, Feeley Jewelry, Providence, R.I., 1895, UANO.

have always found them ready to do what was asked of them and often willing to do much more.”²⁵ If this statement is true, then there is justification in putting this, and other, New Orleans newspaper articles near or at the same level as papal decrees and devotional guides. One thing the article does give, something unavailable in other religious documents, is an honest and detailed account of the coronation as it would be read and understood by the entire city. In effect, the *Daily Picayune* became the de facto instrument of the archdiocese to spread the devotion of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

Upon close inspection of the *Daily Picayune*, most striking to the retrospective reader is the distinction made between the class and gender of the devotees, and their different participatory status and roles. At a superficial glance, parts of the article can be confused for a social column naming the rich and famous of New Orleans.²⁶ Indeed, the author is very blunt in saying that only the well to do received any chance of landing a seat in the chapel. The less fortunate, though not necessarily destitute by any means, were relegated to the cold and wet. Admittedly, the chapel could not hold too many people, and plans were made prior to the bad weather for more outdoor involvement. But when adversity struck, the ceremonial planners failed to inform the outside congregants of the change in venue, and the outdoor devotees bore the poor weather without incident and received marginal respect for their devotion from the proper archdiocesan authorities.

However, while the outdoor devotees received little consideration by the press, details into the status of the indoor crowd abound; these people can be separated and discussed in two ways, religious and gender position. Janssens stood at the top of the religious hierarchy present at the coronation, with six other bishops from neighboring dioceses. The Jesuit participation also

²⁵ “Coronation Ceremonies,” *Daily Picayune*, 11 November 1895, p. 8, col. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 3-4.

received notable coverage from the author, followed by the secular priests of the archdiocese. The male clerics enjoyed various degrees of participation in the mass, while the Ursuline nuns remained behind the grating of the choir, not once contributing in any ceremonial role. For the time period, this conduct was normal and accepted by all parties, however it brings into question how much significance the male church leaders really placed in the hands of the Ursulines. The homiletic texts of the three bishops bear little mention of the Ursuline role in the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and this lack of coverage continues in the text of the article, excepting one brief discussion on the history of the statue at the very end.²⁷

After the excitement of the coronation, there occurred a surge in documentary coverage of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Three distinct, though interconnected, religious groups affiliated themselves with the retelling of the story in the institutional period: the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Ursulines, and the Jesuits. The archdiocese retained ultimate control over the proliferation, while continuing to allow the Ursulines some involvement in the devotion. The Jesuits exhibited a noticeable association with Our Lady of Prompt Succor by becoming the definitive voice of the cult. Two of the three major documentary contributions of the institutional period received Jesuit sponsorship, while the production of the third major source attained publication by the authority of the archdiocese. Yet despite the seemingly complete male religious dominance over the story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the Ursulines managed to remain an integral part of the writing process, a point that aids in the confusion over who really kept the cult in tact. Outwardly, the male clergy drew the path by which the devotion must be taken, and the Ursuline nuns assumed the burden, and privilege, of putting the set

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8, col. 4-7.

guidelines into some demonstrative order, both literarily and in the everyday practice of the devotion at the chapel.

A Jesuit priest, Father J.A. Hogan, wrote the first post-coronation piece of literature on the devotion in 1907 entitled *The Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Prompt Succor*.²⁸ The pocket-sized book discusses the origin story and the Battle of New Orleans rooted in the first volume of the “Private Archives,” while at the same time invested with some new interpretations and emphases. Yet while the origin and battle receive thorough coverage, Hogan barely mentions the fire miracle, thus adding to the trend of the marginalization. Nevertheless, the final product became the definitive representation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor for the institutional period, permanently influencing the main tenets of the devotional tale for propagators and devotees alike.²⁹

Hogan starts by telling “the narrative of the beginning and foundation of the Pilgrimage, as found recorded in the archives of the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans.”³⁰ Indeed, throughout his chapter on the origin of the devotion, Hogan maintains the story’s basic premise of a miraculously quick response from Pius VII while Italy bore the strain of Napoleon’s heavy rule, with minor embellishments that give the tale more of a narrative tone. Using the 1895 *Daily Picayune* article on the coronation, Hogan offers a direct quote of the original vow made by Sr. St. Michel, the one that marks the beginning of the devotion: “O Most Holy Virgin Mary, if you obtain for me a prompt and favorable answer to this letter, I make the promise to have you honored at New Orleans under the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.”³¹ He then stresses the two conditions set by this statement, to which all subsequent vows are to be tested: that the

²⁸ Hogan, *Pilgrimage*.

²⁹ Here it is important to note that Hogan’s book goes well beyond the recitation of the origin and battle miracles, but for the purposes of this thesis, the two miracle stories will receive the majority of coverage.

³⁰ Hogan, *Pilgrimage*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

intercession be prompt and favorable. Because Mary accepted the conditions of the vow, *she* approved, first, of the title of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and, second, of the site of New Orleans as home to the devotion.

Hogan then allots two chapters to discuss Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the Battle of New Orleans. While sometimes clouded with vague circumstance and a reliance on the faith of the reader, Hogan creates the most elaborate argument for the miraculous intercession of Mary at the battle ever written. The effectiveness of Hogan's argument rests in his efforts to combine historical fact with divine detail. In the process, one major theme appears above all others: the "American cause," surpassing even the two primary intercessory conditions of promptness and favorableness. To begin, Hogan cites three points "proving" the miraculous nature of the battle: "first, the danger that threatened New Orleans was great and real; secondly, the city was in a defenseless condition; thirdly, Mary came to the rescue."³² These points being made, Hogan confidently goes on to further enlighten the pilgrim to the "facts."

Historians disregard the role of Our Lady of Prompt Succor at the Battle of New Orleans. Nevertheless, Hogan argues that "an unusual presence of the supernatural seems to have been evident to whoever had the faith to see."³³ One sign of Mary's miraculous hand was the American victory despite the great disproportion in fighting forces. The Americans, 3,200 strong, were primarily comprised of poorly armed and trained militiamen, compared to over 10,000 professional British soldiers.³⁴ Secondly, the confusion of the seasoned British commanders on the morning of 8 January could not have happened without some extraordinary circumstance, not to mention the fortitude and success of the American defenders in the face of such a strong force. Hogan's proof lies in the numbers, and indeed they are astounding by any

³² Ibid., 110.

³³ Ibid., 126.

³⁴ Ibid., 118. These are the numbers chosen by Hogan, but the count varies depending on the source.

measure. After only twenty-five minutes of fighting, the American line counted thirteen casualties, while the British suffered 2,600.

Central to Hogan's book, beyond the raw historical data and the inclusion of miraculous supposition, is an emphasis on Andrew Jackson and his "American" army. Louisiana was barely a part of the United States in 1815, and Jackson was neither a Louisianan nor a Catholic. Regardless, Hogan portrays the British defeat as a victory for America, Jackson being the divinely sent instrument of salvation. "Heaven... made of [Jackson] its vessel of election to carry out its merciful designs... [and] though not a Catholic, he had a strong Christian faith in God."³⁵ As a result, the patriotic Ursuline nuns, along with the Catholic New Orleans population, crowned him as their savior. Perhaps out of political and military necessity, and thus to control the favor of the people, Jackson catered to the Catholic public by sending the first dispatch of victory to the Ursuline chapel while Father William Dubourg celebrated mass. Then by Jackson's insistence, there was celebrated on 23 January a mass of thanksgiving at St. Louis Cathedral, where the citizens recognized the victorious general for his contribution to the safety of the city and crowned him with laurels. Also, "perhaps by inspiration," Jackson personally visited and thanked the Ursulines for their prayers.³⁶ In a letter written to Dubourg just four days after fighting, Jackson admitted the "signal interposition of heaven, in giving success to our arms against the enemy," but he does not admit the intervention of Mary.³⁷ This omission did not matter to Hogan, who seems to recognize two saviors of New Orleans: Our Lady of Prompt Succor and Andrew Jackson.

By placing so much importance on the actions of one Protestant man and an unreligious cause, Hogan created a new interpretation on the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans. The

³⁵ Ibid., 133.

³⁶ Ibid., 134.

³⁷ Ibid., 135.

devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, because of the ecumenical undertones of Americanism and self-determination, becomes more accessible to the layperson, Catholic or non-Catholic. First, Hogan combines the American identity with the person of Mary, a historically divisive subject between Catholics and Protestants, in order to somehow increase devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Second, he discusses the ever-present existence of “bad Catholics” in New Orleans and “the mission of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor... to counteract this impious spirit.”³⁸ Finally in recognition of the declining Catholic laity’s virtue, Hogan tries to counter these devotional deficiencies by fusing Mary with America. Therefore, by promoting the Battle of New Orleans with both the tools of ecumenical patriotism and Catholic solidarity, Hogan achieved an unprecedented degree of devotional involvement in New Orleans.

The archdiocese recognized an upsurge in devotional enthusiasm in New Orleans, due in large part to Hogan’s *Pilgrimage*, and began a drive to construct a votive shrine in honor of New Orleans’ Mary, best represented in the quarterly publication *The Messenger of Our Lady of Prompt Succor*.³⁹ Publication of the *Messenger* ran from 1917 until after the opening of the votive shrine in 1928, providing for an in depth and long term illustration of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The *Messenger*’s usefulness is threefold: to demonstrate, first, the dynamic nature of the miraculous story; second, the interaction and degrees of influence between the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Ursulines, and the larger pool of lay devotees; and third, the direction of the devotion beyond the institutional period. As an organ of the archconfraternity and the Ursuline Alumnae Association, “the object of Our Lady’s Messenger is to propagate devotion to the august patroness of Louisiana, and to promote the erection of her Votive Shrine.”⁴⁰ The

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ *Messenger*. Authorship and editorship are not recognized in the journal, but, according to the Ursuline archivist, the Ursuline nuns bore these duties.

⁴⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 1.

quarterly, then, acts as a documentary source for the evolution of the miraculous story of Our Lady, especially involving the fire and battle miracles, as well as providing a vehicle into the every day favors granted to lay devotees. The Ursulines assumed the responsibility of collecting information, writing, and formatting the journal, at once true to the devotion they produced and propagated, while at the same time in alignment with the guidelines of the archdiocese. Yet the most useful aspect of the *Messenger* is the illustration of the laity's role and responses to the devotion, as opposed to the previously exclusive treatment of the Ursuline and archdiocesan relationship with Our Lady.

Continuing in the investigation into the miraculous story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the *Messenger* offers the next step in retracing the narrative development following Hogan's *Pilgrimage*. When considering the importance vested in Hogan's book by both the Catholic hierarchy and the laity alike, it is no wonder that the Ursulines who compiled the content of the *Messenger* relied on the Jesuit priest's account, sometimes copying verbatim. Each quarterly issue, in fact, contains an advertisement promoting the sale of the *Pilgrimage*. The three major miracle stories, as a result, receive the same relative amount of coverage in the *Messenger*; the origin and battle miracles continue to obtain a high level of exposure, while the fire miracle is still relegated to a marginal stature. Yet while the Ursulines take mostly from Hogan, there begins a simplification of the stories, and in some ways a reinterpretation, relying less on specific details and more on the general themes associated with each miracle and the relationship with Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

In 1917, the first issue of the *Messenger* containing the Battle of New Orleans miracle provides an instance where the canonical story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor changes. The article begins with a quote from the *Daily Picayune*, pointing out the belief in some miraculous

occurrence at Chalmette.⁴¹ Our Lady of Prompt Succor is cited as the initial focus of supplication for the women of New Orleans, but for the first time in the narrative's history, the aim of the city's prayers turned also to the Most Blessed Sacrament. So, while still keeping the Marian devotion at the fore, the Ursuline writers and editors introduce a new detail to the canonical story. An oversimplified interpretation of this event would infer an archdiocesan attempt to de-emphasize the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in favor of the more universal Eucharistic adoration; but this is just not the case. In fact, the *Messenger* is the only publication to insert the Eucharist into the miracle story on the Battle of New Orleans, thus demonstrating the singularity of such an inclusion.

However, as the *Messenger* grew more successful in fulfilling the second part of the mission statement, to raise funds for a votive shrine, there appears less interest in retelling the miracle stories of Our Lady in behalf of New Orleans, and more of an inclusion of stories and enumerations of the many monetary contributors. Indeed, concise lists of donors and donation amounts encompass the greatest number of pages per issue, possibly as a reflection of the intense objective held by the Ursulines and archdiocesan officials to construct a shrine worthy of Our Lady of Prompt Succor's many blessings. Therefore, it seems that, at least during the brief period before the final construction of the Votive Shrine, the emphasis temporarily shifted from devotionism to church building.

Yet despite the partial squandering of the quarterly's potential for insight into the lay devotees dedication to and desires for Our Lady of Prompt Succor's intercession, the *Messenger* still provides a previously unavailable glimpse into just what made people call on the Mary of New Orleans. The reasons for lay devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor are not surprising in

⁴¹ *Messenger*, August 1917, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 3-5. With quotation from *Daily Picayune*, 8 January 1891.

any way, at least not when compared with the prayers offered to any other saint or Marian devotion. Published prayers and petitions of lay devotees range from the simple request for a “special favor,” to the more detailed, though still ambiguous, needs pertaining to health, work, weather, and family. A typical example of a passage in the “Favors Received” section of the *Messenger* is as follows: “The favor that we have been praying for since April has been granted, and you will remember I promised to give one dollar per month for the period of one year. Thank you very kindly for the prayers.”⁴² Another insertion from Baton Rouge, Louisiana simply states “Enclosed find one dollar for the Votive Shrine of Our Lady in thanksgiving for a favor received.”⁴³ The letters often note an enclosed amount of money donated to the Votive Shrine fund. Also, as was the policy of the Ursuline compilers, the names of the supplicants never gain mention, lending to the difficulty in positively deciphering demographic information for most of the devoted writers. The hard copies of the letters no longer exist, due to the annual practice of burning them on the January feast day.

Helpful also is the *Messenger* in listing the places from which the devotees write their letters of petition. The most cited location of supplication, not surprisingly, comes from New Orleans. The remaining bulk of letters originate in south Louisiana, especially the smaller cities surrounding New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Houma, and Lafayette, all of which represent major seats of Catholic prevalence. Outside Louisiana, a trend can be tracked, whereby the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor follows the respective locations of Ursuline convents around the United States and other countries like Canada and France. But even then, the reasons for devotional proliferation extend beyond the reach of Ursuline persuasion, and into the realm of assumption. Like most Catholic devotions, the most successful means of devotional expansion

⁴² Ibid., February 1923, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 24.

⁴³ Ibid., August 1923, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 21.

rests with the efforts of the lay devotees themselves, if in fact they strongly believed in the effectiveness of the particular saint or Mary. The fairly widespread recognition of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, though probably not concentrated in any place other than Louisiana, demonstrates some universal appeal to the New Orleans-born Mary. The *Messenger*, as an official supplement to the lay dispersal of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, played a vital role in that wider recognition.

Prior to the opening of the Votive Shrine, Mother Mary Teresa Wolfe wrote *The Ursulines in New Orleans and Our Lady of Prompt Succor, 1727-1925*, a publication praising the deeds and prayers of the Ursulines in New Orleans since their arrival in 1727.⁴⁴ Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as indicated in the title, is initially portrayed as a central figure in the history of the Ursulines. But when it comes to recounting the most famous miracles of the origin, fire, and battle, Wolfe includes only a few pages of narrative. The miracle at the Battle of New Orleans, in keeping with the coverage trend set by Hogan in 1907, receives the most concern on the part of the Ursuline author. Her details on the battle almost mirror Hogan's words in the *Pilgrimage*, except in enumerating only 1,781 casualties as opposed to the inflated estimate of 2,600 by the Jesuit priest. Once again, Andrew Jackson is depicted as the "Saviour of New Orleans," receiving an ovation at the mass of thanksgiving "unprecedented in this vast republic."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the coverage is scant in comparison to the past attempts at investing miraculous meaning to the most important moments in Our Lady of Prompt Succor's century-long existence. The miracle coverage also takes a rather minor position in contrast to the over two hundred years of the Ursuline presence in New Orleans.

⁴⁴ Henry Semple, *The Ursulines in New Orleans and Our Lady of Prompt Succor* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1925). The Rev. Henry Semple, president of Loyola University in New Orleans, acted only as the editor. An Ursuline nun, Mary Teresa Wolfe, actually wrote the book.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

At last, after seven years of raising funds through the media publication of the *Messenger*, Archbishop John William Shaw blessed and dedicated the new Votive Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor on 8 January 1924 under a veil of pomp and enthusiasm not seen since the 1895 coronation ceremony. On 6 January 1928, the Votive Shrine opened to the public with a solemn consecration of the grounds and building. However, the *Times Picayune* only reported on a mass of thanksgiving in remembrance of the Battle of New Orleans, not once mentioning the Votive Shrine.⁴⁶ Just five months later, Our Lady of Prompt Succor received the last major papal recognition of its existence: the title of Principal Patroness of the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "Ursuline Convent has Celebration," *Times Picayune*, 7 January 1928, p. 19.

⁴⁷ "Historical Sketch of the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor," pamphlet, UANO. An original copy of the papal decree is not available.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Period, 1928-Present

Papal and archdiocesan recognition imposed on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor dissipated following the opening of the national votive shrine in 1928, signifying the end of the institutional period and the beginning of the contemporary period. Chapter three, therefore, discusses why the male institutional figures released control of the devotion back to the Ursulines, and the subsequent actions made by the nuns. Not surprisingly, the changing treatment of the canonical story during the contemporary period offers a perspective into which devotional factors survived the institutional depreciation and who assumed the role of author. For it is in the last period that the lay devotees begin to involve themselves more in the narrative process through the medium of newspapers, magazines, and miracle stories. Also for the first time, the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor receives attention from a more skeptical body of public news writers and unaffiliated audiences. Therefore, the institutional transfer of power to the Ursuline nuns, compounded by the increased involvement of lay devotees, demonstrates the mechanics behind the devotional progression, or digression, of the contemporary period, and helps to decipher the present status of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in New Orleans.

The devotional surge elicited by the institutional period continued, though to a lessening degree, in the beginning of the contemporary period. The women and men who participated in the institutional period devotionism, of course, did not forget everything they learned prior to 1928, partly explaining why Our Lady of Prompt Succor remained recognizable to the general population of New Orleans. However, the difference between the institutional and contemporary periods was the growing tendency toward canonical stagnancy – the attitude taken by the Archdiocese of New Orleans to let the official story end in 1928. In response, the devotees, and potential devotees, of the contemporary period took the canonical story and instigated a new

tradition of popular narration. The Ursulines embraced this lay devotion, but as the twentieth century progressed, Our Lady of Prompt Succor's role in the lives of Catholics in and around New Orleans diminished. The reasons for this decline were the laissez-faire attitude of the archdiocese, the neutral and sometimes skeptical coverage of the devotion by newspapers and magazines, and the laity's recognition of the two indifferent influences.

The degree to which Our Lady of Prompt Succor appeared in newspapers and magazines fluctuated from decade to decade, usually at its highest levels when a special celebration commemorated some aspect of the devotion's history. However, it is important to note that the editors of the respective publications relegated discussion on the devotion to minor significance when compared to the larger content matter. The *Times Picayune*, the descendent of the *Daily Picayune*, never again treated the devotion as a story worthy enough to cover an entire front page, as occurred numerous times during the institutional period. Therefore, the intent of chapter three is not meant to inflate the importance of Our Lady of Prompt Succor without the necessary evidence, but instead exhibit what is available and offer possible interpretations from the limited sources.

The Ursulines, sanctioned by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, continued to write and edit the *Messenger* intermittently until the 1950s, thus further interpreting and disseminating the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Subsequently, when the archdiocesan officials removed some of the fervor behind their supportive role in promoting Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the Ursuline nuns became the de facto power holders of the devotion. However, the archdiocesan withdrawal, out of respect for the aged and popular Ursuline devotion, and with an obvious concern over offending and losing the support of the lay devotees, did not come suddenly.

Whether intentional or not, the editions of the *Messenger* after 1928 refocused the intent of the devotional publication on the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Common references to Our Lady of Prompt Succor were replaced to a large extent by appeals to more recognizable and universal Marian devotions and doctrines like the Immaculate Conception, Theotokos, and Our Lady of Wisdom and Mercy. Other areas of emphasis, beyond the representation of Marian spirituality, included articles concerning the Blessed Sacrament, lives of saints and popes, criticisms on the improper habits of lukewarm Catholics, fictional short stories on virtue and vice, and poems and songs praising everything from nature to technology. The everyday logistics of an archconfraternity regarding novenas, retreats, meetings, picnics, favors received, funds raised, letters from the archbishop, and many other forms of minutiae, continued to fill a considerable amount of the devotional guide's pages for those still actively devoted to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The very fact that the level of lay devotion remained high enough to necessitate such confraternal and shrine activities provides some evidence for a participatory, and somewhat independent, lay movement.

The emerging independence of the lay devotees diverged in two areas of documentation: personal miracle stories and newspapers or magazines. The laity can be called independent not in the sense of intentional insurrection or autonomy, but rather as a way for the devotion to continue without a high level of involvement by the archdiocese. Fortunately, some miracle stories told outside the confines of the *Messenger's* content are available at the Ursuline Archives, pertaining to both clerical and lay experiences.¹ The two most celebrated examples of miracles related to the male clergy involve the two most influential bishops of the institutional period: Janssens and Meerschaert. Interestingly, the last major miracle recognized by the archdiocesan officials of the institutional period occurred in 1927 after the city of New Orleans

¹ "Answers to Prayers to Our Lady of Prompt Succor," File, UANO.

was saved from the potentially destructive force of the Great Flood of the Mississippi River. Archbishop Shaw, along with hundreds of clergymen, city officials, and laypeople, gathered at the votive shrine to thank Our Lady of Prompt Succor who once again “turned the tide and saved the city.”² The documents on the celebration’s proceedings, not surprisingly, do not mention the intentional dynamiting of levees and the subsequent flooding of Plaquemines and other parishes south of the city, renowned as one of the most despicable political displays in Louisiana history.³ Yet regardless of the ethical questions, the 1927 flood marks the last major miracle attributed to Our Lady of Prompt Succor by the church establishment in New Orleans. Afterwards, the miracle stories are primarily told through the words of either the laity or the Ursulines.

Access to the miracle stories of the contemporary period come almost entirely from an Ursuline Archive file entitled “Answers to Prayers to Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” as well as oral interviews with two Ursuline nuns familiar with the history of the devotion.⁴ These two sources on personal miracle accounts can be separated into three areas of concentration: weather, healing, and war. As for authorship, the majority of available miracle accounts derive from the writings or oral telling of laywomen or nuns. However, it must be noted that very little documentation on contemporary miracle stories exists, due to the practice of burning all letters of petition and thanks on the day of Our Lady’s feast. But in view of the miracle accounts that did survive, neither the three areas of Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s intercession nor the overwhelming tendency for women to write the miraculous accounts contradict the common traits of most other Marian or saints’ devotions throughout the Catholic world. Therefore, because the propagators of the devotion failed to create any miraculous marks to distinguish it

² “Grateful Orleanians Gather at Shrine for Thanksgiving Service,” *The Morning Star*, 9 July 1927, UANO.

³ John M. Barry, *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

⁴ “Answers to Prayers,” File, Ursuline Archives; Sr. Joan Marie Aycock and Sr. Angela Murphy, interviews by author, 2000-2001, UANO.

from the more popular devotions, Our Lady of Prompt Succor remained a regional cult restricted to the state of Louisiana.

Devotees of the contemporary period, in the tradition of associating Our Lady of Prompt Succor with natural phenomenon, continued to associate Mary's intercessory power with harnessing or preventing harmful weather activity. The late 1920s provide the earliest examples of this miraculous force over the weather, the first reportedly occurring in Gheens, Louisiana, after a storm destroyed St. Anthony's Church.⁵ The miracle came not in saving the church structure itself, but rather in allowing for the survival of a reproduced statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The second weather related miracle of the 1920s occurred in Augusta, Georgia, while a flood threatened the city. The depiction of the miracle in the Ursuline Archives' file tells of a young girl who said that the "boss of the river" prevented the flood's disaster, and the mother of the child attributed her simple remark to Our Lady of Prompt Succor.⁶ These and other more recent weather related miracles scatter the recollections, both written and oral, of contemporary devotees. However, since the 1970s, very few examples of weather miracles survived. The only remaining association Mary keeps over weather comes every year in June when the Archbishop of New Orleans allows parishes to pray to Our Lady of Prompt Succor for protection against hurricanes. New Orleans Catholics, when asked about the Patroness of Louisiana, consistently cite this linkage with safety during hurricane season, and often this aspect of the devotion is all they know.

Devotees of the contemporary period also incorporated the popular Catholic tradition of miraculous healing to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. One example of a healing story was sent by a fourth generation devotee to the Ursuline Convent relating a miracle experienced by her mother

⁵ "Miracle recovery prompted gift of statue to Gheens," *Bayou Catholic* (Houma, LA), 10 July 1991.

⁶ "Answers to Prayers," File, 4 October 1929, UANO.

in the early twentieth century.⁷ According to the letter, an unknown assailant attacked a young girl, and, reminded by her medal to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, she quickly proceeded to pray for help in running away. She did escape, but later collapsed on her porch and suffered a vocal cord paralysis as a result of the shocking experience. She did not speak for months, until, while seated during the feast day mass, she asked her mother to get change for the collection. Another account tells of a young baby dropped from a carriage while a horse reared in front of a snake.⁸ The horse proceeded to step on the infant's head, causing severe hemorrhages and rendering the child unconscious. The doctors unanimously agreed on the high probability of death, but the mother of the child refused their prognosis and petitioned Our Lady of Prompt Succor for a miracle; within days her face healed. These two examples of healing miracles, though comparable to most accounts attributed to other saintly or Marian devotions, nevertheless exhibit a level of personal lay participation in the devotion.

Mary's protective power during war also denotes a common trait associated with many Catholic devotions. Beginning with the Battle of New Orleans, Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the "God of Armies" were associated with safety against aggressors.⁹ Miracle accounts by devotees during the contemporary period continued in the tradition of associating Mary with battle. One example occurred over the skies of Europe during World War II, where some bomber crews counted an "eleventh crew member," Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as safeguarding them during bombing missions.¹⁰ These reports are not surprising when made in reference to the large number of soldier's listed on the archconfraternity roster during the 1940s. An elderly nun on her deathbed in 1989 also wrote of another series of miracles during World War II. In charge

⁷ "Adeline Agnes Forrester," Letter, "Answers to Prayers," File, UANO.

⁸ "Miracle recovery prompted gift of statue to Gheens," *Bayou Catholic* (Houma, LA), 10 July 1991.

⁹ Hogan, *Pilgrimage*, 120.

¹⁰ Agnes Reppelier, "Our Lady of Prompt Succor," *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, no date.

of a boarding school in Verazdin, Croatia, she and her students experienced German air raids daily, hiding in the cellars of the convent and school along with many local civilians. “Then, out of the blue, [she] had an inspiration: [she] knew, without any prior thought about it, that [she] had to place everything under the protection of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.”¹¹ After the initial inspiring moment, the Ursuline nun no longer brought her students into the cellar. Instead she let them sleep in their beds while the bombs fell and she paced the corridor invoking the quick help of Our Lady. These miracles associated with war are not surprising, for the reason that people universally recognize the helplessness faced by humans during war, and also the necessity for something greater than themselves for protection and peace. Mary is quite often the answer.

Published documents found in newspapers, magazines, and books provide another mode of tracking and interpreting the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the contemporary period. However, the Ursulines and archdiocesan officials hardly partook in the documentary dissemination of the devotion during the contemporary period, which probably explains the lost details and the development of mistakes in retelling the canonical story. The reasons for the changing presentation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s story are many. First and most obvious, the Ursulines and archdiocese became just part of the story, no longer vesting the resources and interest in the devotion like before. Instead, lay people, some not even devotees, held the power of the pen, and thus the power to reform the canonical story to the liking of the Catholic public. Therefore, the public story became almost devoid of devotional zeal and relegated to simple recitations of “fact.” Disaffection on the part of the church directly related to the decline, first, in the amount and intensity of proliferation, and, second, in the actual number of devotees. No

¹¹ Sr. Margarita Labertic, “Croatia: Devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” 1988, “Answers to Prayers,” File, UANO.

wonder, under these depleting circumstances, the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor ceased to elicit the comparatively high level of activity and belief as before.

The first special recognition given Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the contemporary period came in 1945 on the fiftieth anniversary of the coronation. Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans presided over the solemn mass, attended by the bishops of Lafayette and Natchez. The religious newsletter, *Catholic Action of the South*, contains an article on the “coronation jubilee,” however the coverage is limited to enumerating those in attendance and abridging the devotion’s history.¹² Rummel, in a letter dispersed throughout New Orleans and Louisiana, attended to the devotion’s need for official recognition and validity. Rummel described the general history of the devotion, vested with affective charges to the lay people for a “renewal of our allegiance, our love, our loyalty to her... [as] children and subjects worthy of her predilection, solicitude, and powerful intercession in the court of her son, the King of kings.”¹³ The editors of the *Times Picayune*, however, failed to report the fifty-year celebration at the Votive Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, most probably due to the high volume of articles on World War II.¹⁴

The year 1960 marked the sesquicentennial of Sr. St. Michel’s arrival with the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in New Orleans, again briefly causing an increased level of newspaper coverage, while at the same time eliciting some diocesan complaints over the proper dating of the feast day. By 1961, a number of dissenting voices amongst the clergy of the Archdiocese of New Orleans found discrepancies over the correct date for the feast day. The issue arose from the popular incorporation of the liturgical feast day, officially celebrated on 15

¹² “Prelates Attend Mass for Coronation Jubilee,” *Catholic Action of the South*, 22 November 1945. The *Catholic Action of the South* was the precursor to the *Clarion Herald* (New Orleans).

¹³ Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, “50th Anniversary of Coronation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor,” *Catholic Action of the South*, 6 November 1945.

¹⁴ *Times Picayune*, 10-15 November 1945.

January, with the civil holiday recognizing the Battle of New Orleans on 8 January. The archdiocese, in response to the growing confusion, released an addendum describing how individual parishes may celebrate the feast day on either 8 or 15 January.¹⁵ However, in a letter of that same year, Rummel wrote to a complaining priest that he wished for the 8 January date to become the official day of recognition and that 15 January “be eliminated in connection with the observance.”¹⁶ This statement by Rummel never became official, and so the debate continued for some years, causing priests to ask again for clarification from the next Archbishop Cody. Today, there still stands both an unofficial and official feast day of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The feast day controversy represents, at a very simple level, the dichotomy between the lay and canonical appropriations given to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Because of the laity’s influence over how the archdiocese handles the devotion, the archbishop was compelled to align the public and secular celebration of the Battle of New Orleans with the religious celebration of the Patroness of Louisiana’s feast day.

The 1970s and 1980s contain no anniversaries or special celebrations pertaining to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and both religious and secular publications place tertiary significance on the devotion. Catholic publications, especially the *Clarion Herald* of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, replaced stories on Our Lady because of the changing interests of both the lay readers and diocesan writers. However, the lack of coverage was not a concerted effort on the part of the publication staff to eliminate Our Lady of Prompt Succor from history. Yet, regardless of the intent, it has managed to play a large role in the depletion and inaccurate understanding of the devotion. Secular newspapers like the *Times Picayune* also reduced coverage of Our Lady of Prompt Succor by limiting exposure to either a few pictures on the annual feast days or skeptical

¹⁵ Archdiocese of New Orleans, “Addenda – 1961 Ordo,” UANO.

¹⁶ Fr. Generes to Archbishop Cody, Letter, “Proposed change of date for the feast of OLPS,” 20 January 1964, UANO.

articles on the motive of the devotees and the historical and ethical validity of her miracles. None of this is to say that Our Lady of Prompt Succor did not have devotees, only that the editors of the respective publications of the period in and around New Orleans did not consider the devotion newsworthy enough for the average reader, Catholic or non-Catholic.

The year 1995 brought the centennial of the coronation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and, as before, coverage of the devotion increased in both secular and religious publications. Archbishop Francis Schulte led New Orleans in celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the crowning by first issuing a letter to the parishes and organizations of the archdiocese, whereby he recognized Mary's "protection in times of sin, war, flood, and fire."¹⁷ But the letter goes no further than identifying Our Lady of Prompt Succor with the basic themes that she is so easily associated. Afterwards, Schulte inserted a letter into the *Clarion Herald* entitled "We still pray to Our Lady of Prompt Succor," reporting on the events of a hundred years ago and the commemoration to come.¹⁸ Then on 19 November, Schulte celebrated a commemorative mass at the votive shrine, followed by the *Times Picayune*'s pictorial display of the day's proceedings and a few captions calling Our Lady of Prompt Succor the "spiritual protector of New Orleans and the state."¹⁹

Regular, though brief, coverage of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in the *Times Picayune* occurs every January. Since 1995, the presentation format has diverged very little, except in the case of 1998, when the *Times Picayune* religion section headline read: "Mass raises questions of ethics."²⁰ More specifically, the article speculated on the role of prayer in human conflict, in particular at the Battle of New Orleans, by asking if the "prayers for city safety [sought]

¹⁷ Archbishop Francis B. Schulte to Archdiocese of New Orleans, Letter, "Feast of Our Lady of Prompt Succor," 8 January 1995, AANO.

¹⁸ Archbishop Schulte, "We still pray to Our Lady of Prompt Succor," *Clarion Herald*, 16 November 1995.

¹⁹ "Celebration of Our Lady," *Times Picayune*, 20 November 1995.

²⁰ Bruce Nolan, "Mass raises questions of ethics," *Times Picayune*, 10 January 1998.

death?"²¹ Schulte answered the question in a homily at Our Lady of Prompt Succor Church in Chalmette, in which he made a distinction between praying for the safety of a city and the death of an enemy. Sr. Susan Kindler, the Ursuline prioress at the time, added that the Ursuline prayer before Our Lady of Prompt Succor in 1815 might seem politically incorrect today, but considering the time and circumstances of the period, the petition was not so much unethical as it was necessary.

The contemporary period saw the publication of four books addressing the devotion and story of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in New Orleans. Rodger Baudier wrote *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* in recognition of the national Eucharistic Council to be held in New Orleans.²² This 1939 book represents the first and only attempt to write a comprehensive history of Catholicism in Louisiana. In 1957 and 1959, respectively, Brother Gerald Muller wrote *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans* and Harnett Kane wrote *The Ursulines: Nuns of Adventure*, both of which read like children's books.²³ Then, in 1993, Sr. Jane Frances Heaney wrote *A Century of Pioneering: A History of the Ursuline Nuns in New Orleans, 1727-1827*, the product of over fifty years of research and an unprecedented contribution to the study of the Ursulines in Louisiana.²⁴ All four authors, regardless of their different approaches, used some of the same major sources for describing the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor: the Private Archives, Hogan's *Pilgrimage*, and Wolfe's book on the Ursulines and Our Lady. However, the four works can be distinguished from each other by how the sources are used. Baudier simply mentions Our Lady of Prompt Succor in passing. Muller's book is strictly a devotional document written at an elementary level. Kane keeps the same simple form as Muller, but with less devotional

²¹ Ibid.

²² Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Hyatt Stationary MFG. Co., Ltd., 1939).

²³ Gerald Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*; Harnett Kane, *The Ursulines: Nuns of Adventure* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1959).

²⁴ Jane Francis Heaney, *Century of Pioneering*.

promotion and more historical interpretation. Heaney, in stark contrast to the other two books, intended her work for the non-devotional reader.

Rodger Baudier's *Catholic Church in Louisiana* includes the positive role of the Ursulines in New Orleans, but, in reference to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the devotion is only mentioned within a brief description of the miracle at the Battle of New Orleans. Sr. St. Michel's role in first bringing the statue to the city is eliminated, and he only recognizes Sr. St. Marie as the nun to make the vow on the night before the battle. Andrew Jackson and the American cause receive some coverage, ending the discussion with the future president thanking the nuns for their prayers and recognizing the "intervention from above."²⁵ As an aside relating to the events surrounding the Eucharistic Council, the Archdiocese of New Orleans website notes the Ursuline participation in the proceedings of the conference as the opening procession bearer of the monstrance.²⁶ Interestingly, the monstrance, specially designed for the occasion, bore an engraving of the image of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

The most familiar book published for the devotees of the contemporary period came when Brother Gerald Muller wrote *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans* in 1957. Simple in its presentation, Muller's book reads like a story written for an audience of children. The progression of the story on Our Lady of Prompt Succor parallels the same narrative line as Hogan's *Pilgrimage*, while at the same time including and altering some minor details. One notable difference is the treatment of the infamous pirate, Jean Lafitte, and his followers who were commonly known as murderers, smugglers, and outlaws. Irrespective of their poor reputation, Muller points to Our Lady who "found a place for the services of a famous band of

²⁵ Baudier, *Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 266.

²⁶ Charles Nolan, "A History of the Archdiocese of New Orleans," <http://archdioceseno.ssga.com>, May 2001.

pirates.”²⁷ For Muller, there is no disputing the role of Mary at the Battle of New Orleans, concluding, “The intercession of Our Lady of Prompt Succor had indeed shielded the Americans and had granted this stupendous miracle to them.”²⁸ The book went out of publication by the 1960s, but in recognition of the coming centennial celebration of the coronation, the Ursulines decided to reprint a paperback version of the work; the republication remains the primary source of devotional proliferation by the Ursulines today.

Harnett Kane, a well respected journalist of Louisiana, finished the decade in 1959 with the book *The Ursulines: Nuns of Adventure*. Like Muller’s book, the textual content bears an elementary level of simplicity. But unlike Muller, Kane’s book involves the entire story of the Ursulines in New Orleans since 1727, mentioning the devotion only in reference to the fire of 1812 and Battle of New Orleans.²⁹ Yet even though the coverage is slight in comparison to Muller’s, one instance in particular offers insight into the continuing patriotic agenda of the authors since Hogan. Kane hints that because of the Ursuline prayers to Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the battle, the great American general gained the presidency of the United States. The general readership of this book most likely consisted of Catholic school children, the potential devotees of the future. Yet in reading of the significant function of the Ursulines in New Orleans, it would have been understandable for the young readers to allocate the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor with a peripheral position in relation to the many Ursuline successes and “adventures.”

The 1993 publication by Sister Jane Frances Heaney of the Order of St. Ursula, *A Century of Pioneering: A History of the Ursuline Nuns in New Orleans, 1727-1827*, expands the separation of the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor from the objective history of the

²⁷ Muller, *Our Lady Comes to New Orleans*, 24.

²⁸ Ibid., 27.

²⁹ Kane, *Ursulines: Nuns of Adventure*, 139-141.

Ursulines. In her preface, Heaney is quick to point out the “erroneous traditions that have become part of the ‘history’ of the Ursulines in New Orleans.”³⁰ Intent on presenting a historical representation of the facts, Heaney recounts the Ursuline role in the Battle of New Orleans without the use of affective language or devotional intent. The only mention of Our Lady of Prompt Succor comes in a sentence stating that on the night of 7 January 1815 the women of the city prayed to Mary for an American victory. Heaney’s coverage of Andrew Jackson is equally brief and modest, unlike the overemphasized praise given to the general by the previous authors. Jackson is then described as “not a particularly pious man,” although he considered the victory to be a gift from God.³¹ By writing a historical and objective interpretation of Our Lady of Prompt Succor’s role at the Battle of New Orleans, Heaney reveals a level of devotion to the immigrant statue that incorporates a practical, more reserved depiction of the facts.

Another way to understand the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, especially in uncovering how the cult is followed today, is by interviewing devotees and attending the related novenas and feast days. Interviews of current devotees reveal three things about the devotion: those who are most involved in the devotion, what type of practices they perform, and why they believe and perform such things. The Ursuline nuns themselves, of course, are the most accessible, plentiful, and eager sources of first hand information on the devotion today. In particular, Sr. Joan Marie Aycock, head of the Ursuline Archives, and Sr. Angela Murphy, head of the archconfraternity, assisted most in the production of this thesis. Their interviews proved valuable in putting a face to the contemporary state of the devotion by speaking in behalf of both the Ursulines and lay devotees.

³⁰ Heaney, *Century of Pioneering*, V (Preface).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

The current devotees of Our Lady of Prompt Succor include laypeople and religious, women and men, young and old, rich and poor, as well as Louisiana natives and out of state citizens. While no quantitative demographic studies are available, some estimates and generalizations on individual and groups of adherents can be deduced. Religious nuns and priests comprise the first group devoted to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The Ursuline nuns maintain the most recognizable role in the proliferation, and actual survival, of the cult. Sr. Joan Marie and Sr. Angela are only two of the many Ursuline nuns who exhibit a lively relationship with Our Lady of Prompt Succor, sometimes going so far as to attribute every good thing that happens to “their” Mary. One nun even said that she thinks of every Mary as Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The perspective of nuns like Sr. Jane Francis Heaney who attempt to separate their personal convictions from objective historical analysis, however, tempers this evident enthusiasm.³² But even in the case of Heaney’s intentional separation from her book with the devotion, Sr. Joan Marie admitted that, before her fellow sister died, she kept a strong personal devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor.³³

A number of secular and religious priests, most often associated with the Jesuit order, also promote the devotion to their respective parishes or ministries. The Ursulines, being Ignatian in their spirituality, link themselves with the Jesuits in New Orleans, whereby the religious priests act as chaplains to the votive shrine and maintain a prominent role in the profusion of the cult. Yet beyond the obvious association with the Jesuits and Our Lady of Prompt Succor, some secular diocesan priests also promote and personally adhere to the devotion. Hurricane season offers the best example of widespread diocesan involvement, whereby the archbishop of New Orleans permits each parish to make a special petition to Our

³² Heaney, *Century of Pioneering*, VII (Forward). “The reader must keep in mind that in 1949 [when Heaney first wrote her dissertation] a Roman Catholic nun would have been reluctant to criticize the clergy...”

³³ Joan Marie Aycock, interview by author, 22 May 2000, UANO.

Lady of Prompt Succor for protection. Some priests go further in supporting the participation of their parishioners in a confraternity to the Patroness of Louisiana. In fact, since 1892, ten individual church parishes and one mission church have been named for Our Lady of Prompt Succor, representing six of the seven dioceses in Louisiana.³⁴ A large portion of these congregations pride themselves in their association with Our Lady of Prompt Succor, eagerly anticipating the January feast day by either celebrating at their home parishes or sponsoring bus trips to New Orleans.³⁵ Therefore, despite the general disassociation of many priests from Our Lady of Prompt Succor, there do exist pockets of diocesan support for the devotion throughout Louisiana.

However, by and large, lay devotees provide the bulk of support and participation in the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor during the contemporary period. While people of every age and gender involve themselves in the devotion, the majority of followers encompass young school-aged girls and elderly women from New Orleans.³⁶ The first dominant group of devotees contains the female students of the Ursuline Academy. From pre-kindergarten to the senior year of high school, the Ursuline nuns and lay teachers incorporate Our Lady of Prompt Succor into the ordinary school day in the form of daily prayers, masses, and the January feast day. All the students know the general story of “their” Mary, for the most part relegated to the content of Muller’s book, as well as participate in weekly mass at the votive shrine. However, such exposure to Mary is not unusual for Catholic elementary and high schools, the only difference being that they can claim and celebrate a Mary all their own. Elderly women account for the second major subgroup of devotees. Because of the votive shrine’s location, most devotees reside in New Orleans and are Ursuline Academy alumnae. Some followers observe Our Lady

³⁴ Catholic Directory of the United States, 2001.

³⁵ Shirley Brouillet, interview by author, 2 February 2001, Alexandria, Louisiana.

³⁶ Joan Marie Aycock, interview by author, 22 May 2000.

of Prompt Succor at the weekly novenas and masses held at the votive shrine, but as Sr. Angela confirmed, the attendance normally does not exceed twenty-five people.³⁷ The January feast day represents the only event capable of drawing a significant crowd.

Participation in the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor declined during the contemporary period, and the reason for the shift is twofold: the release of cult control by the Archdiocese of New Orleans in the 1930s and the ineffective proliferation by the laity. After the establishment of the Votive Shrine, archdiocesan officials saw no other course to take in expanding the devotion. The Ursulines, then, regained dominant influence over the devotion, and continued to publish the *Messenger* until the 1950s. Records show that the devotees remained supportive of the Ursuline-sponsored programs, and today the archconfraternity continues to receive over a thousand letters annually. However, the large majority of people who send letters are either elderly women or Ursuline Academy alumnae. This exclusive following demonstrates the ineffective promotion of the cult to Catholics unaffiliated with the institutional period or the school. Therefore, the number of adherents stagnated and the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor aged and declined alongside her devotees for the remainder of the twentieth century.

³⁷ Sr. Angela Murphy, interview by author, 12 December 2000.

Conclusion

One hundred and ninety years after Sr. St. Michel first invoked Mary under the title Our Lady of Prompt Succor, Catholics in the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana still invest the devotion with some miraculous power. However, the reasons and means by which the cult of Our Lady of Prompt Succor survived differ from the archetypal Marian devotions of Europe and North America. The devotions of Our Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe, all rooted in Euro-Catholic tradition, are archetypal in the sense that they all contain the same popular characteristics of a miraculous apparition to a particular seer or hearer, an initial period of tension with the ecclesiastical authority, and an eventual incorporation of the devotion into the Church, ultimately eliciting a massive national and international appeal.¹ Our Lady of Prompt Succor can also be compared and contrasted with the immigrant cults of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Harlem and Our Lady of Charity in Miami, thus distinguishing the Patroness of Louisiana as primarily a regional devotion devoid of any ethnic affiliation or widespread recognition.² Therefore, Our Lady of Prompt Succor is significant to the study of Marian devotionism because of its proliferation, survival, and official status despite a clear deviation from the typical devotional blueprints of Europe and the United States.

The canonical story and devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor does not correspond well with the major European model of Marian devotionism in three ways: there are no apparitions, no repression by or conflict with the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and no considerable following beyond the borders of Louisiana. The most popular stories of Marian

¹ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes* (New York: Penguin, 1999); Michael Carroll, *Catholic Cults and Devotions: A Psychological Inquiry* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989); Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995).

² Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

devotions, such as Our Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe, all contain apparitions of Mary, whereby the seer receives some unexpected visual or audio message. In the case of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, Sr. St. Michel acted as the initiating intermediary between heaven and earth. However, instead of through a miraculous vision or communication, the Ursuline nun invoked Mary's intercession by making a vow for quick help in the face of adversity. The miracles of the fire and battle similarly rely on a vow made by the Ursulines for quick help. The quick letter exchange between Sr. St. Michel and Pius VII, the shifting of the wind to drive the fire away from the convent, and the lifting of fog from the battlefield require no real stretch in faith on the part of the devotee. The presumed supernatural aspects of the canonical story, therefore, can be reasonably understood as wholly natural phenomena. However, iconographic and artistic depictions of the two miracles sometimes exhibit the image of Mary hovering above the potentially destructive natural and military disasters, inferring supernatural intervention through the actual presence of Our Lady during the events.

Because the devotees to Our Lady of Prompt Succor did not advocate any fantastical apparition or revolutionary message, the male church authority allowed the devotion to proceed free of inhibitions and with the blessing of the church. The first instance of episcopal recognition occurred in 1809 with Bishop Fournier of Montpellier, France, blessing the statue before her voyage to New Orleans at the bequest of Sr. St. Michel. The Vicar General, Fr. William Dubourg, continued in the tradition of acceptance at the Battle of New Orleans, followed by Blanc and Pius IX in 1851, Janssens and Leo XIII in 1894, Shaw in 1928, Rummel in 1945, and Schulte in 1995. At least initially, church officials questioned the validity of Bernadette's vision of Mary in a grotto near Lourdes, France. Juan Diego's first visits to the bishop after Mary appeared to him on a hill at Tepeyac, near Tenochtitlan, Mexico, proved

fruitless until the miracle of the roses and cloth image. Mary's apocalyptic message espoused to a young girl named Lucia at Fatima, Portugal, elicited a controversy that still lingers today. However the controversies surrounding these three most recognizable Marian devotions acted as a catalyst for interest and, ultimately, belief in their supernatural powers.

Once the pressure of lay devotion exceeded the inhibitive strength of diocesan officials and became advantageous for the Holy See's association, the archetypal Marian cults quickly reached national and international adherence. The devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, while under the sanction of the Ursulines for most of the nineteenth century, appears to have gained some popularity amongst the Catholic citizens of New Orleans. It was not until the institutional period of expanded archdiocesan involvement that Catholics outside the city and state gained exposure to the devotion through the quarterly publication of the *Messenger*. However, since the confraternal journal dissolved after the construction of the Votive Shrine in 1928, the only recognizable level of devotion outside Louisiana appears in association with a few Ursuline Convents around the country and world. Even in the state of Louisiana, more church parishes are named for Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lourdes, or Fatima, than in honor of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the principal Patroness of Louisiana. Nevertheless, New Orleans remains the center of the regional devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, essentially limited to the state of Louisiana and linked with small pockets of cult activity around other Ursuline Convents.

In the context of Marian devotionism in America, the cult of Our Lady of Prompt Succor bears some contrasting marks to the ethnic immigrant model of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Harlem, New York, and Our Lady of Charity in Miami, Florida. The United States contains far less and younger Marian devotions than Europe, and even fewer scholarly presentations of them, thus limiting the range by which Our Lady of Prompt Succor may be

compared. Nevertheless, two cults of Mary stand out above all others in terms of popularity and influence in the lives of particular ethnic immigrant groups, and also in their academic treatment: Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Charity. Robert Orsi, in *The Madonna of 115th Street*, offers a study of urban devotionism to Mary by Italian immigrants wrestling with their ethnic identities in late nineteenth- early twentieth century American society. Thomas Tweed's *Our Lady of the Exile* provides a more contemporary investigation into the Cuban immigrant community of Miami and the reformation of a cult transplanted in the United States. These two cults share five common traits that formulate a model for Marian devotions in America: prior foreign establishment, ethnic association, immigration from the respective area of origination, reformation of the devotion by both the laity and episcopal hierarchy to fit the new needs of the ethno-immigrant community, and the maintenance of a regionally exclusive following. The devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor makes some exceptions to this five-part model, thus distinguishing it from other popular Marian cults.

While Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Charity both enjoyed cult followings in other foreign countries, Our Lady of Prompt Succor sustained no formative link with any area outside Louisiana. Sr. St. Michel issued the first vow to Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Montpellier, France, however explicitly citing New Orleans as the site of devotion and not anywhere in her home country. Documentary evidence reinforces the argument that the nun kept her new Mary from French Catholics, waiting instead to arrive at her destination on the Mississippi River. The Ursuline nuns of New Orleans were the initial recipients of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and the first instance of a public devotional display came inadvertently during the fire of 1812 when Sr. St. Anthony held the Sweetheart statue to the window. Therefore, the cult of Our Lady of Prompt Succor was first opened to devotional expansion in America, and

thus not an immigrant statue in any sense other than the physical transportation from France to Louisiana.

As an extension to the first trait of prior foreign establishment, and unlike the cults of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Charity, the devotees to Our Lady of Prompt Succor cannot be associated with any one ethnic immigrant group. Clearly, Italians and Cubans claim Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Charity, respectively, in effect recreating their homeland as insulation from the unpredictable and hostile factors contributing to their new environments. Our Lady of Prompt Succor, in contrast, bears no ethnic affiliation, instead finding its roots in the religious Order of St. Ursula. Admittedly, a large majority of the Ursulines in New Orleans were French immigrants, supplemented by the historical influence of France on the population content of New Orleans and Louisiana. Yet while most of the earliest devotees were probably of French descent, the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor did not consider such ethnicity as a major contributing factor to its identity. Instead, the Ursulines, who provided charitable assistance to all inhabitants of the ethnically diverse port city of New Orleans, would have introduced the cult to any and all Catholics, whether French, Italian, Spanish, Irish, German, Native American, African, or any other background.

The fourth common trait of American devotions to Mary, the lay and ecclesiastical reformation of the cult to suit the particular ethnic community, partially applies to Our Lady of Prompt Succor's formation by the Ursulines, Archdiocese of New Orleans, and lay devotees. Of course, because Our Lady of Prompt Succor originated in America, the first Ursuline devotees did not customize the devotion to the religious necessities of an ethnic group, but rather acted as the initial fashioners of how the cult was to be practiced and believed. As argued in chapter two, the Archdiocese of New Orleans effectively assumed control of the cult in 1894, resulting in an

upsurge in literary coverage and the total number of devotees. After approximately thirty years of increased involvement, the archdiocesan officials shifted their role to an observant capacity, thus reverting control back to the Ursulines, and, for the first time, the laity. However, unlike some of the problematic popular practices associated with Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Charity, Our Lady of Prompt Succor never exceeded the bounds of devotional tolerance set by the archdiocese. There is no documentary evidence to suggest that extreme acts of asceticism followed cult activities in New Orleans similar to Orsi's depiction of women devotees licking the ground and dragging relatives by the hair. Likewise, New Orleans' church leaders did not experience theological dilemmas comparable to the Archdiocese of Miami's handling of Santeria influences among devotees of Our Lady of Charity.

The last characteristic of Marian devotionism in America, a regionally exclusive following, applies to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. If it were not for the works of Orsi and Tweed, the two devotions in Harlem and Miami, respectively, would have remained unknown or obscure to all but the inhabitants of the particular areas where the cult shrines stood. Similarly, the further one gets from New Orleans, the less likely the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor is known. However, the devotees of particular cults in America do not regard such geographically limited adherence as a necessarily bad thing. There are no intentional movements, lay or ecclesiastical, to expand the cult to other areas around the nation, much less internationally. For example, at the Shrine to the Immaculate Conception at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where there exist over a hundred side-altars housing international Marian statues. The representation of American-born or raised cults is scarce. Instead, the devotees of each regional cult, in a way, placed limits on how far to go when proliferating "their" Mary, and thus created imaginary boundaries of influence. For Our Lady of

Mount Carmel, her power applied primarily to the Italian immigrant families concentrated within a few blocks in Harlem. Devotion to Our Lady of Charity is mainly restricted to Cuban refugees or immigrants actually residing in or around Miami. Our Lady of Prompt Succor, in much the same way, is considered the Patroness of Louisiana because of her devotees' especially constructed association with the Catholic Church in the Pelican State.

The devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as one of the oldest and first solemnly crowned Marian statues in America, is significant to the study of Catholic devotionism in the United States, and more specifically in Louisiana, because of its related insight into the interpersonal relationships between lay devotees, the Ursuline nuns, and the Archdiocese of New Orleans. As a city famous for its historically diverse demographics and sinful attractions, New Orleans somehow maintains one of the strongest Catholic populations in America, and the devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor is just one vehicle into understanding its dynamic makeup. The potential for an even deeper awareness of the many facets of Catholicism is comparable to the expansive studies on devotional and ecclesiastical relations in New York City. However large or small the role of Our Lady of Prompt Succor played, and continues to play, in the exceptional Catholic situation of New Orleans and South Louisiana is inconsequential when it is clear that very few places in the United States can breed and invigorate such devotion.