



## The Mission to America & Managing Risk for Mission

In 2018 we will celebrate the anniversary of St Philippine Duchesne and companions setting out for the 'New World' in the Rebecca. It is worth reflecting on this 'Rebecca moment' as we discern how to live our mission in the new worlds that are emerging today.

### Suggested Process

- *Prepare for the contemplative exercise with a period of silence or reflective music.*
- *Invite participants to listen to the story placing themselves imaginatively in the scene, noticing what they are seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling.*
- *Allow time for silent reflection.*
- *Read the reflection on managing risk for mission.*
- *Listen again to the story.*
- *Discuss what we can learn from the 'Rebecca moment' for our risk management for mission today.*

### Contemplative Exercise

Early in their relationship, Sophie Barat had enthusiastically encouraged Philippine to pursue a missionary vocation. But she was too good an administrator to think that a struggling order could simply pack off a few nuns and set up shop in a new land. She was not swayed by Philippine's exuberant and impulsive pleas to be sent to "the heathen." To such a demand in 1808 she replied:

*It is simply astonishing that a woman of upright intention and sane judgement like yourself could have concocted any such scheme, fixed her will on it, and then could believe it to be the will of God. What does it amount to? Simply abandoning a solid and lasting good to go in search of one that is uncertain ...*

But the situation of the congregation had changed by 1815. In Paris, Philippine continued to pester her superior about a foundation in the New World. In 1816, Sophie wrote to another friend in the order:

*Can you believe it – Philippine is always thinking about her mission overseas, and my brother [Louis] has almost smoothed the way for her. In spite of the terror such a venture causes me, we shall, perhaps, see it carried out. I tremble to think of it. Pray about it, but do not talk about it, lest people get excited and lose their heads. We live in an age in which it does not take much to upset people.*

In fact, Louis' intervention was key. Although he knew little about the missions, he was naturally disposed to favour Philippine's extreme inclinations. On his own initiative, he had contacted William Dubourg, the bishop of Louisiana in North America. The large diocese of Louisiana at that time extended from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains... Between them, without even consulting Mother Barat, they arranged that Philippine would go to work in Dubourg's vast diocese. Louis

Barat's rather cavalier manner gave Philippine tremendous hope that the Mother General's will would be swayed...

Louis's meeting with Dubourg was indeed influential in starting a process. Within a few months, the bishop called on Mother Barat herself. He knew of Philippine's long desire to work with the Indians. In the territory of his own diocese, there were many Indians, but no one to work among them. He presented so convincing a case to Mother Barat that she accepted his invitation to send a group of her religious. They would begin their work in the burgeoning river town of St Louis. Straightaway however, her chief advisors, including Varin, rallied against the new foundation. For one, they claimed that Philippine was too valuable to Sophie in Paris to leave her at this time. When the naturally temperamental Dubourg returned to meet with Mother Barat in May 1817, he was understandably chagrined and angry to learn that she had changed her mind. Just this once, Philippine's impetuosity played to her advantage. She boldly interrupted their conversation, knelt dramatically with clasped hands before her friend Sophie and begged her to let her go. The Mother General paused, reflected a moment and finally acquiesced.

(Extract from Catherine Mooney RSCJ, *Philippine Duchesne: A Woman with the Poor*, Paulist, 1990 pp 110 – 112)

## Reflection on Managing Risk for Mission

One of the core tasks of governance is risk management. Perhaps the most important category of risk for ministries of the Society of the Sacred Heart is risk to mission. In managing all other categories of risk, we need to keep sight of mission. Risks in the areas of finance, personnel, reputation, and so forth are important because they can hinder our faithfulness to and effectiveness in our mission. They are instrumental values or means rather than ends. We must remain attentive to the relationship between means and ends in our risk management.

Another key risk to mission is mission drift. There are many good and worthwhile activities that we could undertake, but not all of them are actually expressions of our mission. We have a particular role to play and contribution to make within the mission of the church – and so do many others. We don't need to be in every space. In fact, spreading ourselves too thinly can lead to superficiality. We need only to be who God is calling us to be, and to do what God is calling us to do. Risk management must be linked with discernment for mission.

Mission is an inherently risky business. If we are faithful to the mission of Jesus, we can expect the cross. Managing risk for mission is not about eliminating or always avoiding risk, but rather anticipating, managing and choosing the risks we take. Union with the Sacred Heart of Jesus calls us to a willingness to be open and vulnerable knowing the consequences. The love of the Heart of God invites us above all to take the risk of loving as God loves with all that that entails.

