Blog
Spirituality

The Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor on the grounds of the Ursuline motherhouse at Maple Mount, Kentucky (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph)

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I was a voracious reader in 7th grade. Our school used the *Faith and Freedom* series, which, as the name implies, combined Catholicism with patriotism. Instead of paying attention in reading class, I would read ahead in the textbook.

But the only story I remember is about Our Lady of Prompt Succor and how she saved New Orleans. I probably remember it because I was in an Ursuline school at the time and was a big fan of the old country-western ballad by Johnny Horton called "The Battle of New Orleans." I loved that song because it was irreverent and funny — and because my mom was Irish and Scottish and always enjoyed hearing about the British losing a battle.

Then I joined the Ursulines, who on the grounds of the motherhouse in Mount St. Joseph, Kentucky, have a shrine featuring Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

When I mention this title of Our Lady to the uninitiated, my listeners usually laugh: "What kind of 'sucker,' you say?" But she is French, you see, coming to New Orleans in 1810 and widely venerated as the patroness of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana.

French Ursulines arrived in New Orleans in 1727 and established what is the oldest currently operating school for girls in the United States, according to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor's website.

The shrine's history continues:

> During a period of crisis after a large group of nuns left New Orleans for Cuba in 1803, Mother St. Andre Madier, one of the seven nuns who remained, appealed to her cousin, an Ursuline in France whom the reign of terror had forced to leave her monastery at Pont-Saint-Espirt. She was Mother St. Michel Gensoul, a remarkable woman of great talent and interior piety, who, during the exile in Montpellier, opened a boarding school for girls there. Fearing for the flourishing school, Bishop Fournier refused to request her leave, saying that only the Pope, then a prisoner of Napoleon, could give such a permission. One day while praying before a statue of the Blessed Mother, she was inspired to say, "O most holy Virgin Mary, if you obtain a prompt and favorable answer to my letter, I promise to have you honored in New Orleans under the title of Our Lady of Prompt

> Succor."
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> Since the end of December 1810, when Mother St. Michel, her companions and the statue arrived in New Orleans, devotion to Our Lady of Prompt Succor has grown in New Orleans and Louisiana, and has spread through the United States and even beyond.

Our Lady of Prompt Succor also was credited with saving the city and the convent from a fire in 1788 and for helping win the 1815 Battle of New Orleans.

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According to the story in my reader, in January 1815, Gen. Andrew Jackson had urged the sisters to pray, and they and many citizens held all-night prayer vigils. Jackson and his small, ill-equipped band of soldiers fought the large, better-equipped British army and saved the city from British control. Following the battle, Jackson wrote a letter of thanks to the bishop for "the great assistance we have received from the Ruler of all events." (This was the part I thought was really cool as a teenager.)

Our Lady is still hard at work: Some along the Gulf Coast still consider her the go-to for any disaster, like Hurricane Katrina.

How did Our Lady of Prompt Succor get to Kentucky? From the biography of Sr. Eugenia Scherm in our community archives, I learned that in 1915, Sister Eugenia and her companion were supposed to catch a ship from New Orleans to the Panama Canal, but because of a terrible hurricane, they missed the boat, which later sank with 96 passengers, the Times of Shreveport reported in September 1915.

Stranded in New Orleans for two days, they caught a ride on a cargo ship. On their way back, they were again caught in a hurricane. They prayed for a safe trip and made a promise to Our Lady of Prompt Succor to erect a shrine in her honor and spread devotion to her. It took 12 years to raise the money, but on Oct. 21, 1927, the feast of St. Ursula, the shrine was dedicated.

Our Lady of Prompt Succor's feast is Jan. 8, the same day as the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

This started me thinking about the many devotions we have in our Catholic toolbox. There are more than 10,000 Catholic saints, though some legends and folk heroes — and one dog, St. Guinefort — have been demoted. Being a saint became harder as the process moved to Rome.

Add to this the multiple devotions and titles of Our Lady. Not even Wikipedia would hazard a guess at how many, though it made a noble attempt to name a truckload of them. But then, if you start getting into Orthodox and Islamic titles for the Virgin ...

And St. Joseph would add a lot more. It was amazing to walk through St. Joseph's Oratory of Mount Royal in Montreal and see the ranks of candles at little mini-altars dedicated to him under different titles.

Something for every race, nationality and culture! If you have a saint in your life and want to write about them, please send your reflection to me at mmorek@ncronline.org.