

# Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

*Simon Bruté and the Western Adventure* (by Elizabeth Bartelme)

When thinking about Bishop Simon Bruté, comparisons to the movie character George Bailey (*It's a Wonderful Life*) come to mind. As you recall, Bailey was a man who desired to travel to far lands and make his mark upon the world but was continually frustrated by a sense of duty to family and community. It was only when an angel showed George how badly off the world would have been without him that George learns to be thankful for both the joys and the sufferings of the life that God gave him.

*Simon Bruté and the Western Adventure* paints the portrait of another man with the desire to do great things in faraway lands, yet who struggled with the realities handed to him. Studying medicine was a false start; he found his vocation in the priesthood. Yet Bruté remained restless: he had the heart of a missionary and wanted to spread the gospel in foreign lands. After a long wait he seemingly achieved his desire with an assignment to Maryland in the young USA. But no—he was to be a teacher with duties in an established parish rather than an apostle to the Indian tribes and frontier settlers. Yet he went at this disappointment with a good will, and came to love his home in settled, civilized Maryland. Along the way Bruté helped our first female American saint learn how to be one, educated boys who grew to be bishops, scored the admiration of President John Quincy Adams, and advised the existing American hierarchy on matters of theology. When at last the call to the wild west (Indiana) came, it seemed almost like a cruel joke on God's part. By now Bruté was old, not in the best of health, and firmly established in the patterns of Maryland life—how could he possibly succeed in a job that demanded a younger man's vigor? But Bruté put self-doubt aside and plunged into his missionary life, taking on a vast diocese with only three priests to help him, riding through the wilderness, sleeping on the ground, eating anything or nothing. He burned himself out in five years of unremitting labor, achieving an 800% increase in clergy, 20 seminarians, two convents, several schools, and 27 parish churches. He'd also become a beloved father to the people of Indiana, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

Unlike George Bailey, Bruté didn't need an angel to show him what a "wonderful life" he had led. Bruté had learned, whatever his personal preferences might have been (other biographers state that he had really wanted to be a missionary in China or India), to love whatever life God had given him. Ten days before his death, he wrote, "...in life or in death I humbly rejoice before my God."

But just imagine the angel Clarence showing us what *might* have been—in the absence of this humble, toothless Frenchman who never learned to speak English properly. Might Elizabeth Ann Seton, without Bruté's learned and gentle spiritual direction, have become so discouraged at her many setbacks or so distracted by the problems of her several children that her Order failed to thrive, leaving the American Catholic school system stillborn? Might the numerous boys and young men under his tutelage, those that eventually became priests—and even bishops—either never persevered in their vocations or come into them lacking some of the crucial wisdom needed for their unique roles in the pioneer Church in America? Might the first priests of the missionary diocese of Vincennes have grown disheartened and discouraged? We have an answer

for this last question—if not the others—in the words of Fr. Anthony Deydin, who eulogized Bruté:

*Is it not true that when he was with us, we did not feel our weariness? Is it not true that [with him there] nothing was hard to us; that we scarcely knew we were poor, though really devoid of every necessity of life? ...These are the men we have to continue to perpetuate...the models we have for imitation in life and death. (source: Indianacatholic.org)*

On September 12, 2005, Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein O.S.B. of Indianapolis formally opened Simon Bruté's cause for canonization, thereby putting forward for recognition by the whole Church the good model Bishop Simon Bruté provided for the priests and people of his time. Bruté's life is thus being set forth for emulation in his own diocese (Vincennes' episcopal see having been moved to Indianapolis in 1898). And at Mount St. Mary's seminary in Maryland, the first site of his priestly ministry, Bruté's worth has long been acknowledged. In honor of him who was called the "Guardian Angel of the Mount," the seminary gave Bruté's name to a campus hall in 1843 as well as to a medal in 1965 established for alumni whose achievements reflect honor on Mount St. Mary's University. In her first 100 years the Mount earned the distinction "Cradle of Bishops" as 28 of her alumni went on to be ordained bishops of various dioceses in our developing country. Archbishop John Hughes, the first archbishop of New York, was among these. To date this second largest Catholic seminary in the United States has supplied the Church with the formation of over 2000 priests.

Simon Bruté's repeated choices to bend, humbly and gently, to God's will in the face of disappointments and personal handicaps played a key role in building up the Body of Christ in America, probably far beyond his original plans and dreams. Simon would no doubt agree with an old poem by Anonymous titled "The Blessing of Unanswered Prayers," which concludes, "I got nothing that I had asked for, But everything that I had hoped for...I am, among all men, most richly blessed."