

On the 30th of March, 1868, Father De Smet left St. Louis on the most important mission of his whole career. He was in company with the members of the commission, including Generals Sherman, Sheridan, Harney, Terry and several others. They went to Omaha via Chicago and thence to Cheyenne, holding a council with some Sioux bands on the way. From Cheyenne they made a brief pleasure excursion to Sherman Pass across which the new Union Pacific railway had but recently been built. The commissioners then went to Fort Laramie while De Smet returned to Omaha to go from there to Fort Rice. He left Omaha on the steamer Columbia, but made slow progress owing to low water.

Father De Smet in his narrative of this voyage mentions some of the characteristic experiences which his long acquaintance with the Indian country had developed. If it was known that he was coming up the river there were always people at the landings to see him. "When the boat stopped to cut or load a supply of wood," he writes, "I often had occasion to exercise the holy ministry among the inhabitants of the region who came down to the wharfyard or wharf, marrying couples who were awaiting the presence of a priest to receive the nuptial benediction, and regenerating the holy waters of baptism a great number of children and numerous adults."

And this is the experience he usually passed through when he found himself among a boat-load of passengers; "When the priest appears in the midst of such a throng he is critically scrutinized. He is measured from head to foot. He is like a curious beast in a menagerie. He is regarded with surprise and people are slow to approach him. But once the ice is broken, he is overwhelmed with questions upon all points of religion. These questions are quite often sensible enough, but generally are odd and sometimes even indelicate and gross, denoting a profound ignorance which inspires only pity and compassion."

The Columbia arrived at Fort Rice May 24th. Father De Smet passed a week in religious work among the Indians and Catholic soldiers, baptizing, marrying, and receiving confessions. He then spent two days in interviews with the chiefs and in making preparations for departure. His plan seemed wildly audacious to both whites and Indians and they freely predicted a fatal termination; but he told them that thousands of pure souls were praying for him and that their prayers would be heard and he would return in safety. His answer inspired courage. There were all the volunteers that he needed. Mr. Charles E. Galpin, an old Indian trader of great experience, who had married among the Sioux, accompanied him as interpreter. There were besides several of the principal chiefs and eighty warriors representing nearly all the Sioux bands. They went in the double capacity of protecting Father De Smet, if need were, and of persuading their hostile brethren to listen to him.

The first object of their journey was to find the camp of the hostiles, made up of malcontents from the various Sioux bands, who were uncompromising in their hatred of the whites and who refused to enter into any treaties with them. It was these Indians, a very numerous and powerful band, who were responsible for the depredations and savage cruelties at that time so prevalent throughout the West. The start was made on the morning of the 3d of June: "We were all assembled," says Father De Smet, "a large circle was formed, in which several officers from the fort and some of the soldiers joined, besides a great number of Indians from all these different tribes. I then offered a solemn prayer to the Great Spirit to put us in his keeping, and made a short address to the numerous friends who surrounded us, recommending us to their pious recollection."

Father De Smet gives at considerable length the details of this remarkable expedition. The route lay directly west from Fort Rice, south of the modern line of the Northern Pacific Railroad, for upward of 350 miles to the place where the Powder river empties into the Yellowstone. It was a long and tedious march, involving a passage of the Bad Lands country; but everybody was in good cheer and the physical obstacles did