

**Materials Needed for a Definitive Biography
of Brother Andre Mottais
by George Klawitter, CSC**

In 1820 James Dujarie finally achieved his dream for a community of teaching brothers when a young man named Pierre Hureau showed up at Dujarie's rectory in Ruille-sur-Loir. Two years prior, the bishop had pushed Dujarie to found such a group because of Dujarie's success with the Sisters of Providence. Pierre Hureau, the first Brother-recruit, however, did not prove to be the rock of stability that Dujarie needed for his community. The saintly jewel he needed, Andre Mottais, arrived in October, three months after Pierre Hureau. Andre was so promising that Dujarie sent the young man first to Le Mans for five months of religious training and then for six months to Paris where Andre learned the rudiments of teacher training. Once back in Ruille, Andre became not only the novice master for the burgeoning community, but also the director of scholastic Brothers and the supervisor of all the men already out teaching in little village schools around the diocese. Andre fulfilled all these roles admirably until the Community was put under the direction of Basil Moreau in 1835. In Le Mans Andre led a quieter life than he had known in Ruille. In 1840 Moreau sent him to Algeria in the first mission outreach where Andre worked as a teacher, isolated from the other Holy Cross men, for two years. With his health broken, he returned to Le Mans and died two years later, much revered.

The first question we probably need to ask ourselves is why do we need a definitive biography of Brother Andre Mottais? After all he is mentioned in most

biographies of early Holy Cross figures and even given some credit for his work. We already have a very good two-volume life of Basil Moreau by the Catta brothers with some attention to Andre Mottais, not to mention as well a two-volume life of Moreau by Moreau's nephew Charles. And we have a biography of James Dujarie by Tony Catta. But sadly all three of these sources are quite clerical and consider the early Brothers of St. Joseph as a kind of weak preview to the great work of Basil Moreau. The finest biography of Dujarie is not, however, the Catta volume. The best biography we have of Dujarie is that by Philéas Vanier, who attempts to treat Andre Mottais therein with the attention he deserves, but unfortunately the Vanier book, published in 1948, has never been translated into English so its influence on the Congregation's history has been limited. We really do need a solid and definitive biography of Andre Mottais because he guided our Community in 1835 through a smooth transition of priest-directors and because scores of young men he formed became the early heart of the Community we know today. Where do we begin? We must start with what we have, and the best of what we have is Vanier's book on Dujarie and Catta's book on Dujarie.

But the best biographies are not written on secondary sources. A true definitive biography must be based on primary sources. For Dujarie we are lucky to have Brother Charles Smith's 2003 casebook on Dujarie. It is 171 pages long. Chapter Four (pages 35 to 40) contains a chronological listing of all the documents written by Dujarie. Unfortunately much, of the Smith volume concerns Dujarie's work with the Sisters of Providence, including two chapters on Dujarie's difficulties with the leadership of the Sisters. Nonetheless, a biographer of Brother Andre

Mottais cannot neglect the Smith casebook. It is, of course, something of a secondary source since a researcher is at the mercy of Smith's transcriptions and translations.

For impetus to begin work on Andre Mottais we are indebted to the 1989 dissertation of Thomas Maddix, CSC, a work titled *Naming the Options: A Study of the Mission of the Brothers of Holy Cross During a Period of Comfort and Discomfort*. Particularly valuable is the chapter "Breaking the Historical Amnesia: A Fresh Look at the Originating Vision of the Brothers of St. Joseph." Maddix is the first brave voice to face off clericalism in Holy Cross histories, particularly in the works of the Catta brothers. Maddix' insights may be a little acerbic at times, but his work on our originating vision has never been fully appreciated. The dissertation received some attention when it appeared, notably from the Holy Cross General Council, who deputized Gerard Dionne, CSC, to savage it in an extensive book review. Both the Maddix chapter and Dionne's attack have been reprinted in Klawitter's 2001 casebook on Andre Mottais. That casebook, privately printed, was an attempt to gather under one cover everything Andre Mottais wrote and much of what has been written about him outside of the Catta and Vanier books.

In addition to all the Mottais letters (translated by Klawitter), the 2001 Klawitter casebook on Andre Mottais, includes Andre's memos and his two mini-biographies: one of Father Lamare, with whom he lived while studying in Le Mans, and one of Father Dujarie. The casebook also contains the following pieces about Brother Andre Mottais: extracts from the Holy Cross Chronicles, Moreau's circular on Andre's death, Vanier's 1945 memo to the Superior General Albert F. Cousineau, an excerpt from Vanier's 1948

remarkable life of Dujarie, a 1952 piece by Brother Raymond Lapres, a 1979 monograph by Brother Joseph Santo, and the 1989 Maddix chapter mentioned above, along with its review by Dionne.

A true Mottais biographer, however, cannot rely on the Mottais translations by Klawtter in this casebook: to write a definitive biography of Andre Mottais, a researcher must go back to the original letters and read them as written. All but fifteen of them are held in the General Archives at the University of Notre Dame. Fifteen letters, discovered by the Mottais family just two years ago, are held at the motherhouse church in Le Mans, but photocopies of the original letters are on-line at the shrine's web-site. A warning: in the General Archives at Notre Dame, the Mottais letters are filed with typed transcripts. A Mottais biographer should insist on reviewing the original manuscripts of the letters and other documents so as not to be at the mercy of the typed transcripts, as accurate as they have invariably have proved to be. One never knows when a transcriber may have eye-skipped a word or an entire line. The original manuscripts are a must.

The same caveat is true for the Charles Moreau life of Basil Moreau: the English translation must be set aside in favor of the original French text. Fortunately, the wonderful Vanier life of Dujarie has never been translated into English: a researcher is forced to use the original text. Needless to say, a Mottais biographer will have to be superb in reading French. The biographer will also have to have excellent paleographic skills to decipher handwriting now and then. For example, there is one word in a Brother Anselm Caillot letter that I have never been able to understand, try as I have. I recall also that once in the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California, I puzzled for a whole week over one letter in a word from a fifteenth-century Wycliffite manuscript. I finally

cracked the letter, which had been used in the manuscript, a Wycliffite sermon, only once. It turned out to be an “x” in the word “buxom.”

One of the problems that any biographer of Andre Mottais will have to contend with is familiarity with the subject, but not in the way one might imagine. Janet Malcolm puts the problem this way:

Biographers often get fed up with their subjects, with whom they have become grotesquely overfamiliar. We know no one in life the way biographers know their subjects. It is an unholy practice, the telling of a life story that isn't one's own on the basis of oppressively massive quantities of random, not necessarily reliable information. The demands this makes on the practitioner's powers of discrimination, as well as on his capacity for sympathy, may be impossible to fulfill.

(Malcolm 56)

This problem should not become, however, a source of fear in the heart of anyone tackling a definitive biography of Brother Andre Mottais. The subject, in any case, is worth both the sacrifice and the implied danger of doing what no one has yet done for the history of Holy Cross. Conversely, a writer may be converted to a subject: forty years ago a biographer set out to massacre Queen Victoria in a new biography, but the more research he did, the more he fell in love with his subject and so ended up writing a biography in praise of the queen.

A short life of Andre Mottais has been published in three different versions by George Klawitter. The first appeared as one of the introductory chapters to *After Holy Cross, Only Notre Dame* (pages 11 to 37). This book, a life of Brother Gatian

Monsimer, includes some mention of Andre Mottais in the biography itself, but the most valuable portion about Andre Mottais is the lengthy segment in the introduction of the book. This material was reprinted in edited and expanded form for Klawitter's 2016 *Early Men of Holy Cross* (pages 1 to 46). Also valuable is Klawitter's introduction to *Holy Cross in Algeria* (pages xi to xiv). This 2007 volume also includes Andre's five letters written en route and inside Algeria. It remains to be seen how much new material can be added based on the fifteen letters by Andre discovered in 2018 (held at the mother church in Le Mans) and not contained in Klawitter's 2001 casebook on Andre Mottais. There is also much Andre material, some of it recycled, in Klawitter's 2019 book *The Brothers of St. Joseph*. Andre is referenced throughout this book.

In addition to Andre's letters and memos, much attention will have to be paid to a very important sourcebook kept by Andre in the early 1830's: this accounts book is held in the General Archives at the University of Notre Dame. This large folio volume of several hundred pages is 99% in Andre's own handwriting. It contains financial records for the nascent community in Ruillé as well as records of candidate entries. There are lists of annual school appointments. There are vow formula documents. There are lists of signatures for key documents. Of great value is the account in Andre's hand of the 1835 transfer of the Brothers from Dujarie to Moreau. The ceremony is described and speeches by the bishop, by Dujarie, and by Moreau are reconstructed. There is a short beautiful life of Dujarie in Andre's hand. This accounts book is one of the most precious items Holy Cross has from the early years. There was a companion volume, an earlier volume (c. 1820 to 1829), but it

has been either lost or misplaced. The current archivists at the University of Notre Dame are unable to locate it. We know it exists because there are several references to it in the 1830-1836 volume.

No one can, of course, work on early Holy Cross history, without frequent reference to the *General Matricule* (membership list) created by Brother Bernard Gervais in 1946 from sources he identifies in a one-page preface to the matricule. The listing of the early Brothers has been reproduced in various forms by Klawitter in the appendices to *The Brothers of St. Joseph*. Other earlier matricules exist in the archives, and these lists would also have to be consulted to verify information given in the Gervais *General Matricule*. A biographer cannot research Andre Mottais in isolation from the other early men of Ruillé and Le Mans. A biographer has to be saturated in the records and writings of the times.

Of the thirty-five letters we have by Andre Mottais, six of them are the most valuable: three written to the Le Mans bishop in 1834 and three written after Andre's assignment to Algeria. In the letters written to the bishop, Andre's paramount concern is the health of James Dujarie, the beloved founder of the Brothers of St. Joseph. As Dujarie aged, his gout complicated his ministry. He was sometimes confined to bed for days. Vitally interested in the survival of the Brothers' Community, Andre wrote to the bishop without Dujarie's being aware of the letters. Andre, and two of the other Brother-Directors, wanted the Ruillé group to be turned over to a priest younger and more vital than Dujarie. The Andre letters about this matter show a writer of sensitivity and strength working to insure the continuation of the Brothers. Their evident vitality before the 1830 political turmoil

in France was a testament to their importance among the village parishes of northwest France. Unlike the Christian Brothers, the Brothers of St. Joseph did not work in major cities, preferring to do their apostolic teaching in small towns where the Christian Brothers would not minister because their rule required a physical presence of multiple Brothers in each school. The Ruillé Brothers, on the other hand, worked well singly or in pairs. An Andre Mottais biographer would have to study the growth of the schools under Andre's supervision.

The Andre letters from Algeria, on the other hand, are important for a totally different reason. Written in 1840 and 1841, three Andre letters (one written en route to Algeria and two written from within Algeria) chronicle Andre in a strange new milieu. Chosen by Moreau to be in the first mission band, Andre was reduced from Primary Director of the Community to simple confrere with at first some supervisory duties but eventually living alone quite a distance from the capital (Algiers) and the other Holy Cross men. Teaching in less than comfortable conditions, Andre plummeted into a dark night of the soul and his body weakened terribly. An Andre biographer would have to travel to Algeria to scout out and visit on-site the places where Andre lived and suffered.

Visits to Africa would be, of course, in addition to extended on-site visits to Ruillé and Le Mans, and various towns with schools that had been run by the Brothers of St. Joseph in their earliest years. Some of these school buildings are still standing. A biographer would have to experience the routes that Andre would have yearly traveled, often on foot, to make official visits of inspection and to give encouragement to the Brothers, especially the young Brothers, teaching in parish

schools. To be truly accurate, an Andre biography would have to reflect the countryside that Andre traversed.

A visit to Larchamp would also be de rigueur, especially to the Mottais farm where Andre lived from 1800 to 1820. The house he was born in still stands and is owned by the de Blic family. Talks with locals in Larchamp could very well yield new finds as happened three years ago when Mottais family descendants gave Holy Cross fifteen Andre letters that had never been inventoried in the General Archives. Who knows what other letters may exist in and around Larchamp? For Holy Cross, the town of Larchamp has always been revered as the birthplace of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors, but it is time to revere the town as the birthplace of another famous person: Brother Andre Mottais. Parish records in Larchamp will have to be consulted (for baptismal, marriage, and obituary data) and town records as well. A family genealogy would be helpful, constructed from scratch if it does not already exist. Family photos will have to be duplicated and, if possible, a common facsimile of facial traits assembled by way of a computer in order to reconstruct a possible face for Andre Mottais. We have, of course, no photos of him because photography did not exist before 1829 and did not really become popular until a generation after Andre's death. Could we hope that a sketch or drawing of Andre exists? It may be too much to hope for. But from descriptions of other family members contemporary to Andre, we may be able to posit Andre's height, weight, hair and eye color. A history of family illnesses may also help us appreciate Andre's final infirmities.

A good biographer will have to trace the Mottais family today. It was this family, after all, who entrusted to Holy Cross the 2018 cache of Andre letters.

Descendants will have to be interviewed. Family photo albums will have to be consulted. Stories passed down through the generations will have to be taken into consideration. These sources have yet to be tapped for information on Andre. Moreover, the deBlic family in Larchamp, Andre's birth town, will have to be consulted. They currently own the farm where Andre was born and raised. If permission can be secured, the interior of the Mottais house will have to be photographed and individual rooms identified.

In addition to Larchamp visits, a biographer will have to spend much time in Ruillé. Whatever archival material remains in Ruillé will be found at the parish office, the motherhouse of the Sisters of Providence, and the town records. Buildings contemporary to Andre wait to be visited, including in Ruillé the building once known as the Grand St. Joseph. It will be necessary to get inside the Grand St. Joseph so interior logistics contemporary to Andre from 1824 (when the building was erected) to 1836 (when the building was sold) can be appreciated.

Similarly a biographer should spend time in Le Mans with the Marianite Sisters. Although their archives are now in New Orleans at Holy Cross University, there may be items of interest remaining at the Solitude. At any rate, an Andre biographer will have to be comfortable with the streets and buildings between the present Holy Cross mother-church in Le Mans and the Sisters' Solitude. The former novitiate building (La Charbonnière) will have to be visited. At Le Mans, not only the motherhouse church and chapter room are important for a Mottais biography, but also the large building next to it, which was originally the secondary school but today serves as a retirement home for military veterans. And then there is the Holy

Cross Cemetery, today under the supervision of the Marianite Sisters. Somewhere in that cemetery are the remains of Brother Andre Mottais. But where? What can be learned today from the Marianite cemetery in Le Mans? Precious little. Andre's grave is gone. Only his name remains among scores of names of other Holy Cross Brothers and Priests on the back wall of the cemetery, noting simply that these men were once buried here but have been reshuffled to accommodate later grave of the Marianites.

Finally, a good biography of Andre Mottais will need photos. Since we have no photos of Andre, we will have to settle for photos of the buildings he lived in and photos of Mottais family members as close as we can get them near-contemporary to Andre himself, or at least within the first fifty years after his death. We will need new photos of the Mottais farm buildings, the church in which he was baptized, the rectory at Ruillé, as well as the Grand St. Joseph novitiate in Ruillé, the orphanage in Algiers (if it still exists), the parish house in Phillippeville, Algeria (if it still exists), and the cemetery in Le Mans. Could we someday have as well a documentary video on this wonderful man?

A biographer for Brother Andre Mottais should be young, vital, fluent in French, and ready to travel to France and Algeria. Such a biographer will have to have the patience of an archivist, the imagination of a solid researcher, and an intense love of the subject. Brother Andre Mottais needs such a biographer, sooner now than later never.

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