

The History of the Congregation of Holy Cross:

The Genesis of a Book

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Let me say at the beginning that it is no easy thing to research and write the history of a religious congregation like the Congregation of Holy Cross that is two hundred years old and has been active in sixteen different countries. In 1982, when the superior general, Fr. Thomas Barrosse, asked me to take on the project, he said that he thought it could be done by simply synthesizing a number of books and articles that had been published up to that time. I had never done a project like this and was too naïve to request a sabbatical and a budget to cover travel and other expenses. I agreed to do it and made an outline of how I thought the story might be laid out, an outline that I revised many times. I proceeded to gather published materials for my grand synthesis and to visit archives in France, the United States, Canada, Chile and East Africa as opportunity arose. I regret that I could not get to Bangladesh, India, Ghana, Brazil and Haiti.

I soon saw that the project would not be as simple as Father Barrosse had thought. I agreed to research and write a history of the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1982. The book was published in December 2020, thirty-eight years later.

What I want to do this evening is to explain some of the decisions that I made and that lie behind the structure and the content of the book. I readily admit that I could have done it differently and perhaps better but I want to explain why I did what I did in hopes that it will help readers to better understand the story as I told it.

I soon saw that I would have to make some choices. My first choice was to make my story an account of only the Holy Cross men after 1857, when the Vatican insisted that Holy Cross women and men be organized as separate congregations. Fr. Moreau reluctantly agreed and so it was that Holy Cross Sisters were canonically separated from Holy Cross Brothers and Priests. If there was an immense amount of work that I would have to do to learn the story of the men of Holy Cross, there was at least as much to do to learn about the development of the women of Holy Cross, the Marianites as they were known in Fr. Moreau's time. I learned that in the course of the nineteenth century the women of Holy Cross were divided into three canonically separate congregations: the Marianites in France, the United States and Canada; the Sisters of the Holy Cross in the United States, India, Bangladesh and Brazil; the Sisters of Holy Cross and the Seven Dolours in Canada and Latin America. To account for this further division I devoted chapter six, "What Man Has Put Asunder," to an account of how this further division came about and the role of some priests and bishops in the separation..

A second choice that I made as I pondered my outline was to structure my story around the Congregation's ministries rather than individuals who were important. Focusing on ministries caused a problem due to a lack of institutional histories for many Holy Cross schools and apostolates. Needless to say, I couldn't follow this line completely. The story couldn't be told without reference to some individuals, Fathers Dujarié and Moreau, for example, and Brother André Bessette, the Congregation's only canonized saint to date.

There were others whose contribution needed to be noted. In the United States Edward Sorin governed the American community for more than twenty years and then the whole Congregation as superior general for twenty-five years. Moreover, he probably saved the Marianites in the U.S. for Holy Cross when he moved their first novitiate in America a few miles north to Bertrand, Michigan, in the diocese of Detroit, lest they be lost to Holy Cross when the bishop in Indiana told him to send any novices to the Sisters of Providence in Terre Haute.¹ In Canada Camille Lefebvre started a university in New Brunswick that eventually served to regenerate the Acadian people with only eight dollars in his pocket² and Joseph Rézé stabilized the congregation as provincial in Canada for twenty years and then did the same in France for six years.³ Gilbert Français as superior general

¹ P. 48.

² P. 79.

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for thirty-three years, longer than anyone else before or since, pushed the congregation to attend to the intellectual formation and accreditation of brothers and priests who were expected to be teachers. He also insisted that Holy Cross religious be worthy of the name. When the members of a house in France noted that the priest members could not attend common morning prayer at 5:30 a.m. because they had to go out to celebrate Mass for a convent, Français told the house to have morning prayer at 4:30 a.m. so that everyone could be present.⁴ James Donahue, bent on reviving the French province in the 1920s, slept on benches in train stations and dined on a tin of sardines and crackers to save expenses.⁵ Ernest Ryan, the founder of the Dujarie Press, over twenty years oversaw the publication of 350 titles and 500,000 copies of lives of the saints for students, holding writers to eleven words to a line and twenty lines to a page.⁶ Albert Cousineau led Holy Cross to Latin America, supporting the first foundations in Chile, Brazil and Haiti.⁷ Patrick Peyton took his Family Rosary Crusade to five continents. Theodore Hesburgh presided over the University of Notre Dame for thirty-five years and left it one of the leading Catholic universities in the world.

There were others and I have been criticized by several readers for not covering their contribution. To do so in many cases would have made my story

⁴ P. 216.

⁵ P. 241.

⁶ P. 263.

⁷ Pp. 249-251.

even longer and more complex. I especially regret my mistake in not giving coverage to the work of Fathers Germain-Marie Lalande and Claude Grou as superiors general. I hope that future writers will do them justice.

A third choice that I made was to tell the story of Holy Cross in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries country by country. I realized that the context of the congregation's history in France, the United States, Canada and Bengal was unique in each place in many instances as it took root in those nations and I devoted whole chapters to a single country instead of integrating developments into an account of what was happening elsewhere. Once Holy Cross was established in a country, it was possible by the third decade of the twentieth century to integrate the story of the congregation's history in the various lands where it was active. This I did in the last four chapters and the epilogue.

A fourth choice that I made was not to keep silent about controversies in the Congregation that threatened to embarrass or divide the community. In chapter seven I described the efforts of several members to undermine Basile Moreau's leadership in the 1860s which eventually led to his resignation as superior general in 1866. In chapter twelve I described the effort to separate priests and brothers into two congregations at the general chapter of 1932 and the subsequent reorganization of the Congregation into separate societies in 1945. I found it odd that one reviewer accused me of being "averse to the subject of conflict within the

congregation.”⁸ As controversial issues vex the community in years to come, it will be important to know that Holy Cross has dealt with divisive issues and individuals before.

Prior to accepting my manuscript for publication, the University of Notre Dame Press sent it to two readers for their judgment as to whether it deserved publication. While both readers recommended publication, one of them faulted me for failing to mention the spiritual experience or vision that led the founders to begin a religious community. Insofar as I can see, there was no such experience or vision. The bishop of Le Mans asked Dujarié to organize a community of laymen to revive the parochial schools of the diocese and Dujarié obeyed. Another bishop asked Moreau to take over the direction of the Brothers of St. Joseph from an ailing Dujarié and he obeyed.⁹ Thus began the Congregation of Holy Cross.

No current history of a religious community in the Catholic Church can be complete without reference to the effect of Vatican II on the community. In the case of Holy Cross, it is difficult to determine whether significant changes occurred *because* of Vatican II or only *after* Vatican II. On the eve of the council, in 1962, the Congregation of Holy Cross had more than two thousand members in perpetual vows. Ninety percent of them were members of the North America

⁸ Leslie Woodcock Tentler in *Church History*, Volume 90, Issue 3, September 1921, pp. 725-727.

⁹ See chapter one.

provinces. By the end of the twentieth century 543 members in perpetual vows had withdrawn from the community, most of them from the North American provinces. Vocations were notably fewer and there had been many deaths. The average age in the Congregation was fifty-eight.¹⁰

In an effort to account for this exodus, which paralleled a similar development in the North American Church, I looked at the Council documents for an explanation, but found none.¹¹ Many confrères in my generation had expected the Council to abolish celibacy for men in religious vows and when this didn't happen, they made their own decision, with or without ecclesiastical approval. Looking for a suitable explanation, I used that offered by Father Thomas Barrosse, superior general in 1974-86. In a series of circular letters from 1975 to 1979 he argues that an inadequate understanding of the values and commitments of religious life in Holy Cross was responsible for the departure of so many men in perpetual vows.¹² Whether there is a better explanation for this decline in membership in Holy Cross and in the North American Church in general remains to be seen. In future years, as the sociologists of religion and others analyze the data, there may emerge a more cogent account as to why this phenomenon occurred where and when it did.

¹⁰ Pp. 259, 289, 317.

¹¹ Pp. 282-284.

¹² Pp. 289-290, 294-296.

I had intended to stop my history of the men of Holy Cross at the end of the twentieth century, but the Notre Dame Press wanted it to cover the first years of the twenty-first century. As I noted in my introduction, writing a history of the past twenty years is more like journalism than history. In the epilogue, which covers 1998 to 2018, I noted the merger of provinces in North America until there would be only one province for priests and brothers by 2030 as planned, and the creation of new provinces in Bangladesh, India and Haiti and the prospective creation of new provinces for East and West Africa. Although the North American provinces experienced a steady decline in membership between 1968 and 1998, the growth of the Congregation in India, Bangladesh, East and West Africa and Haiti changed the balance of membership in the community at large. These developments, I argued, reflected the development of the center of the Congregation in Asia and Africa just as the establishment of foundations in Canada and the United States in the 1840s had reflected the Congregation's center moving from France to North America. The full import of this transfer remains for the next historian of Holy Cross to explore.

In my introduction I observed that I thought of my history of the Congregation as comparable to the Gospel according to Mark. As the first history of the Congregation it serves as an outline of the life and ministry of Holy Cross. Future historians will, no doubt, fill in missing aspects of the story just as the later

gospels added aspects to Mark, such as the infancy narratives and details of the crucifixion and resurrection appearances. At 84, I may not be alive to read the next history of Holy Cross, but I rest content that my contribution will be of use to its author.