

BASILE MOREAU, R.I.P., 150 YEARS, 1873-2023**James Connelly, C.S.C.**

A missalette that I use offers a short sketch of a saint or other holy person for each day and will often quote the last or dying words of this person. Some of these citations are inspiring or insightful. St. Gleb, a Russian martyr, was quoted as saying, “I am being slain; I know not what for; but Thou, Lord, knowest.” Pope St. John XXIII, remarked, “My bags are packed. I’m ready to go.”

I currently serve on a province committee to find ways to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Fr. Moreau’s death in 2023-2024 and it occurred to me to look for Moreau’s last words. I looked wherever I thought that I might find them – the Cattas’ biography, the Marianite Annals¹ – but to no avail. In fact, Fr. Moreau was virtually unconscious in his last hours. As the Holy Cross congregations celebrate Fr. Moreau’s entry into eternal life this year, it seems appropriate to recall the circumstances in which he died and the long years in which his memory as founder and a holy man were not celebrated.

Fr. Moreau resigned as superior general in 1866 at age 67 after years of opposition from several senior members of his Congregation: in particular Edward

¹ Etienne Catta and Tony Catta, *Basil Anthony Mary Moreau*, translate by Edward L. Heston, C.S.C., (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1955). *Annals of the Congregation of the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, 1841-1941* (Le Mans, France: n.p.1951), Pp. 146-148.

Sorin, Victor Drouelle and Louis Champeau. Pope Pius IX had given him permission to live wherever he wished and he took up residence at the Institut Sainte-Croix the school that Moreau had founded in Le Mans. When the congregation sold the Institut Sainte-Croix in 1870 in an effort to pay its debts, Moreau moved out and into the house of his sister, just across the street from the school. By the time of Moreau's death there were no longer any community members residing in Le Mans. The Marianite Sisters provided his meals. He supported himself by preaching parish missions and substituting for priests who were ill or needed to be away from their parish. It was at one of these occasions, at a village near Le Mans, that Moreau took sick and was brought to his sister's house. He died there on January 20, 1873, in the presence of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors, several Marianites, and their chaplain, Fr. Charles Moreau. No Holy Cross priests or brothers were present.² There is no record of Basile Moreau having said anything just before he died.

At the time of his death and ever since the sale of the school, he was the only Holy Cross priest or brother still in Le Mans. Two priests and two brothers came from Paris for his funeral three days later. The superior general at the time, Fr. Edward Sorin (1868-1893), was in North America and read of Moreau's death in a newspaper. He issued a circular letter to the Congregation announcing the death of

² Marianite Annals, 147-148.

“our venerable Founder...to whom we are all indebted for our Religious existence as an Order in the Church.” Sorin prescribed the full suffrages for a deceased superior general and thereafter never mentioned Moreau again.³ The superiors of the Province of France appear to have omitted any reference to Moreau by name in their circular letters over the next twenty years, referring only on occasion to “our venerable founders”.⁴ As far as the members of the Congregation knew, the 1866 general chapter’s circular letter blaming Moreau for the community’s financial problems, the accusation was true.

Fr. Sorin died in October 1893 and his successor, Fr. Gilbert Français (1893-1926), immediately undertook to revive the memory and veneration of Fr. Moreau as the founder of the Congregation. In his first circular letter in November 1893, Français wrote that as he took office he would count on the intercession of “our pious founders,” Dujarié and Moreau. One month later, in his second circular letter, Français asked the Congregation to honor the memory of Moreau and Sorin, both of whom had borne the burden of office as superiors general. A year later, in another circular letter, he cited a Roman document that referred to Moreau as the “founder” of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Then in January 1899, Français

³ *Circular Letters of the Very Rev. Edward Sorin*, XXX, Notre Dame, Indiana, January 31, 1873 (Notre Dame, IN: n.p., 1885). I, p.55.

⁴ An incomplete collection of the circular letters of the superior of the French province, 1860-1899, is in the University of Notre Dame Archives, CSCG, file 312.1/C5.

called on the Congregation to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Moreau's birth on February 11, 1799.⁵

Fr. Charles Moreau, the founder's nephew, had resigned from the Congregation in 1868 and was angry over the treatment of his uncle. He had possession of Basile Moreau's papers and was at work on a biography of his uncle that was published posthumously in 1900 by his cousin, Marie-Joseph Bouleau to whom he left the papers.⁶ Français tried to prevent the publication of this book because of its "regrettable insinuations, unwarranted assertions, (and) unjust accusations made in a lamentable tone." Noting that the older members of the Congregation would remember Charles Moreau "for the unevenness of his temper, his oddity and irritability" he recalled that Charles Moreau has been out of the community for more than thirty years, "but neither that lapse of time, nor the sight of our French province rescued from ruin at the cost of supreme efforts, nor the isolation in which he immured himself had mitigated his bitterness towards us."⁷

⁵ *Circular Letters of the Very Rev. Gilbert Français, Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross* (Notre Dame, IN: Congregation of Holy Cross, 1913): November 3, 1893, p. 10; December 4, 1893, p. 12; October 9, 1894, p. 45; January 12, 1899, pp. 130-138.

⁶ Charles Moreau, *Le Très Révérend Pere Basile-Antoine Moreau, Prêtre du Mans et ses Oeuvres*, 2 volumes (Paris: Librairie de Paris, Firmin –Didot et Cie, 1900). On the history of this publication, see Léandre -M Fréchet, C.S.C. *Les Archives Générales*, Rapport de l'Archiviste (Roma: Curia generalizia di Santa Croce, 1967), pp. 15-17.

⁷ Gilbert Français, *Circular Letters*, October 3, 1900: pp. 176-177, 179-180

While there was no publication of an English translation of the biography, a typescript edition in English circulated with several chapters omitted or revised.⁸

In 1920, Français managed to acquire Basile Moreau's papers for the Congregation and they were transferred to the archives of the Canadian Province.⁹ In that same year, a new seminary at the University of Notre Dame was named after Moreau, the first building in the Congregation to be so designated.

A new superior general, Fr. James Donahue (1926-1938), continued the rehabilitation of Moreau. In 1931 he was able to purchase the conventual church in Le Mans that had been secularized in 1903. In 1937, as part of a celebration of the centenary of the founding of the Congregation, the church was reconsecrated. The following year, a new superior general, Fr. Albert Cousineau (1938-1950), presided over the translation of Moreau's remains from the funeral chapel in the Congregation's cemetery on the Rue de l'Evantail to the crypt of the church.¹⁰

In 1955, the Congregation introduced at the Vatican the case for the canonization of Basile Moreau.¹¹ More than eleven biographies of Basile Moreau have been published in French or English, all of them attesting to his holiness of

⁸ See M. Georgia Costin, C.S.C., "The Case of the Missing Chapters," *Holy Cross History* (Newsletter of the Holy Cross History Association, Notre Dame, IN. vol. IV, No. 2 (winter 1986-87), p. 3.

⁹ See Fréchet, loc. cit.

¹⁰ Henri-Paul Bergeron, C.S.C., *Basil Moreau, Founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross*, translated by Eveline Swaile, C.S.C. (Rome: Congregation of Holy Cross, 1985), pp. 192-193.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

life. The most definitive of these, *Le T.R.P. Basile Antoine Moreau (1799-1873) et les origines de la Congrégation de Sainte Croix*, by two French historians, Étienne and Tony Catta, ran to more than two thousand pages and was published in English translation in 1955.¹² Basile Moreau's voluminous writings required a lengthy study. There were changes in the procedures for canonization and the certification of a miracle attributed to the intercession of Moreau resulted in a delay of many years. Pope Benedict XVI gave his approval for the beatification of Basile Moreau in 2006.¹³

On September 15, 2007, in a ceremony in Le Mans, Basile Antoine Moreau, C.S.C., was inscribed among the *beati*, the "blessed" of the Catholic Church. His long neglect by the congregation that he founded finally came to an end.

¹² James Connelly, C.S.C., "The Many Lives of Basil Moreau," 2003 Conference on the History of the Congregation of Holy Cross, St. Edward's University, Austin, TX.

¹³ See Jacques Gris , CSC, "The Cause of Father Moreau: A New Perspective, 1984 Conference on the History of the Congregations of Holy Cross, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN.