

Subject: Holy Cross History Conference, June 8-10, 2023

Subject: **"History of The Southern Province: 1968-2006"**

Friday, June 9th, 2023  
HOLY CROSS COLLEGE,

Good Afternoon,

This morning we heard about the new Province of East Africa. Later this afternoon, we will hear about the new Province of West Africa.

Now I'm going to talk to you about a province that no longer exists--The Southern Province. Actually, I'm glad that Fr Jim Connolly suggested that I give this presentation because I really don't want this history to be forgotten.

Now I've been working on this History of the Southern Province since 2011 and I plan to finish a full history by Christmas. Spoiler alert: This history will be your Christmas present!

My sources have been Brother William Dunn's booklet " Holy Cross in Texas, The Greatest Country in the World", Fr Christopher O'Toole's reflections called "Holy Cross in the South"; various first person accounts from the Archives and, of course, Fr Connolly's book on the Congregation of Holy Cross.

So, let's begin:

In 2011, I decided to get one of my knees replaced. So I went to stay at Holy Cross House so that I could do my physical therapy there. One day I happened to be eating at the same table as Father Ted Hesburgh, the former President of Notre Dame. Looking to start a conversation, I mentioned to him that I had been a member of the Southern Province but now we were all back in the Indiana Province. Without any hesitation, Fr Hesburgh said loudly "Ya never shoulda left." So, that's what I want you to decide---should we have left the Indiana Province?

As you know, there are some time constraints on these talks---like we have about 30 minutes--so I can only look at the History of the Southern Province ---and therefore I can't cover all the wonderful things that the Marianite Sisters and the Holy Cross Brothers did in Louisiana. Nor can I describe the ministries of the Holy Cross Brothers and the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Texas.

But whatever I do talk about had better be the truth because the last two Provincials of the Southern Province, Fr Len Collins and Fr John Korcsmar, are here today!

Okay, so how did Holy Cross get to Louisiana and later on to Texas?

Let's start with Louisiana:

This is what I told the Holy Cross School students at a Mass in New Orleans about what happened!

Quote:

"An elderly gentleman by the name of Pierre Le Dieux was riding in his horse and buggy, going down Rampart Street just outside the French Quarter. All of a sudden he spotted three babies, all between 6 months and 1 year old. They were crawling by the side of the road. Now it was not unusual to see little children in the street because of the yellow fever that left many children orphans. But babies crawling by the side of the road? So Pierre LeDieux scooped up the babies and took them to the nearby orphanage. He then went to St Louis Cathedral and tracked down Bishop Antoine Blanc. He said to the Bishop: we have got to find a religious community to come and run that orphanage. And that's what happened. The Bishop contacted Fr Basil Moreau in France and the rest is history!"

Unquote

After the Student Mass was over, the Superior General, Fr Tom Barrosse, who was also at the Mass, said to me: "nice story, Pete, but none of it is true!"

Well, of course he was right. But the Marianite Sisters and Holy Cross Brothers did go to New Orleans in late 1848 to run an orphanage ---and eventually a Holy Cross priest showed up to help in 1849.

Now let's look at Texas:

...I'll make it brief and this time it's true:

In 1874 Fr Edward Sorin, by now the Superior General of Holy Cross, got an offer of a donation of land in Austin, Texas. It was from Mary Doyle on the condition that Fr Sorin would start a Catholic School like the one that he had in Indiana. However Fr Sorin had a condition too. He would start the school only if the Bishop would turn over to Holy Cross the only Catholic parish in Austin, St Mary of the Immaculate Conception. It all worked out and Fr Sorin named the new school after his patron Saint, St Edward the Confessor.

Now let's go back to New Orleans. In 1871 the Holy Cross Brothers founded St Isidore School and in 1879 Archbishop Joseph Perche, asked Holy Cross to start a new parish on Canal Street in an area called mid-City out towards Lake Ponchartrain. The parish was named Sacred Heart after patron of the Holy Cross Priests.

So now we have the four pillars of the future Southern Province---St Edward's School and St. Mary's Church in Austin and St. Isidore School (soon to be called Holy Cross School) and Sacred Heart Church in New Orleans! Remember back before 1945, the Holy Cross Priests and Brothers in the US were all in the same province.

Another very important ministry on which the Southern Province was founded came to be called the "Texas Missions" or the "Home Missions".

It all started in 1907 when Fr Patrick O'Reilly was sent from Notre Dame to Austin, Texas ---to recover from tuberculosis or to die.

Through the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Fr O'Reilly recovered. He then founded Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in downtown Austin for Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals. The Dedication of Guadalupe Church was a big event in the mostly-Protestant and mostly Anglo Austin Texas.

However, in 1917, for health reasons, Fr O'Reilly left Our Lady of Guadalupe and moved to St Edward's University to recover his health.

But four years later he was well enough to travel north of Austin to serve Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals in towns like Georgetown, Round Rock and others. He celebrated Masses in homes, in fields and in cemeteries. That's why I like to call him call him the Father of Hispanic Ministry in Central Texas.

In 1935 ---with a big push from the Superior General, Fr J Wesley

Donahue--- the Provincial of the Indiana Province sent 5 newly ordained priests to Austin. Those priests greatly expanded the number of Texas Missions!

The first priest that I want to talk about from the Ordination Class of 1935 is Fr Al Méndez. This future Bishop of Arecibo, Puerto Rico organized 8 Spanish-speaking Mission Churches. The principal Church was San Jose Parish in South Austin and it eventually came to be called the "Queen of the Missions."

The next priest from the class of 1935 was Fr Frank Weber. He founded the first parish for African American Catholics in Central Texas. A quick story about Fr Weber: eight years after Fr Weber and parishioners had built by hand Holy Cross Church and Holy Cross School on the East Side of Austin, Fr Weber was talking to a medical doctor after Mass. The doctor was well known for delivering babies in their homes. When Fr Weber asked why he didn't practice in a public hospital, the doctor said: "O no, Father, they won't let people of color practice in that hospital. (He used the term Negro). So Fr Weber said right away---"then let's build our own hospital." And once again he and parishioners built the hospital by hand. That's when Fr Weber finally got the title "the carpenter priest".

The third priest from the class of '35 was Father Pat Duffy. In 1937 he started St Ignatius Martyr Parish in a funeral home right on South Congress Avenue. In 1940 he built a church and invited the Holy Cross Sisters to open a school in the Church basement. St Ignatius Parish is still staffed by Holy Cross and is still very active. (I think that it's one of Holy Cross's best parishes -- but maybe I'm prejudiced.)

Fr Tom Culhane, class of '35, cared for several Hispanic Communities north of Austin. He is credited with building several chapels that are now parishes in the Austin Diocese.

The last priest from that class of '35 was Fr Joe Houser. He began his ministry at St Edward's University but eventually he was named Pastor of San Jose Parish

I want to mention one more priest who was sent to Austin two years later--in 1937--Fr Fred Schmidt. As soon as he got to Texas he began to minister in Spanish in the areas north of Austin. Eventually he founded St William's parish in Round Rock, and Christ the King Parish in Belton. Later he would spend another 30 years serving in Mexico.

By the mid -1940's, there were 25 Holy Cross Parishes and Chapels in Central Texas.

As the Holy Cross numbers grew in Central Texas, Fr Joe Houser started looking for a place to get everyone together. In 1949 he found two and a half acres of land on the shores of Lake Austin. The cost was six thousand dollars. After bringing in a huge World War II barracks, the place became the Holy Cross Camp. For the next 60 years, Holy Cross Priests in Texas gathered

every month. Some drove almost 200 miles round trip. And almost nobody missed those gatherings! In effect, the Holy Cross priests in Texas had their own District or Province long before it was official. Often, Holy Cross Brothers and Holy Cross Sisters also came to the Camp for the get-togethers.

(So now I am half way through my talk and I want to pass out a few photos of the Texas Missions and some of the priests that I talked about. Remember, all those chapels in the photos are now parishes.

There is also a page showing the Holy Cross Sisters, Brothers and Priests catechizing in the countryside. And there is a page with the 5 Provincials of the Southern Province. I will talk about them next.)

So here is Part II of my talk about the actual formation of the Southern Province.

In 1963, the Indiana Province created a "District of Texas" and appointed former Superior General, Fr Christopher O'Toole, as "District Superior." From the beginning, Fr O'Toole wanted the District to become a province. But it was too small. So he developed what I call an Interstate 10 Strategy. He recommended that two new parishes in Louisiana be staffed by Holy Cross---one in Lafayette and the other on Baton Rouge. He also encouraged Holy Cross to be visible and help out in Florida. He did this by getting a donation of a motel in Fort Lauderdale from the former Governor of Puerto Rico, Robert Gore (an FDR appointee.) That motel was sold back to the Gore family and a different motel was purchased in Cocoa Beach, Florida. This motel was immediately turned into a Holy Cross Residence for the semi-retired.

Then, somehow, Fr O'Toole got the 1966 Indiana Province Chapter to create a "District of the South" by combining the District of Texas with the Holy Cross places in Louisiana and Florida.

And finally, the 1968 General Chapter created the "Southern Province" and Father O'Toole, of course, was named the first provincial.

I happened to be ordained that year, 1968, so I have known everybody who ever ministered in Southern Province!

When the Province began, there were 15 Holy Cross parishes in Texas and 3 in Louisiana. There were also chaplaincies at hospitals and prisons.

In the First Provincial Chapter of the new Southern Province in 1970, there was drama, drama, drama. With only 21 delegates at the chapter, it would only take 7 votes to block an election! All 7 of the recently ordained priests were talking about voting for Fr Gene Dore--a model pastor at Sacred Heart Parish and a longtime pastor at St Ignatius Parish in Austin. But the night

before the vote, Fr Dore had a serious heart attack. So besides praying for Fr Dore, the quick thinking young priests started talking about voting for Fr Larry LeVasseur, recently back from Chile. Well, after a few votes, (and maybe a few promises from Fr O'Toole) one of the young guys changed his vote...and Fr Chris O'Toole became the first elected provincial of the Southern Province.

Actually, the Province was off to a good start. There were 74 Holy Cross members working in the South including 8 priests from other provinces. There were also some postulants, novices and seminarians-- about 10 in all.

To be brief, after 5 years as District Superior and 8 years as Provincial, Fr O'Toole decided not to run for another term. So, at the 1976 Southern Province Chapter, there was more drama.

In an attempt to be more democratic, the previous province chapter in 1973 had decided to vote by mail at the 1976 Chapter. It was a disaster! Given a point system, we opened the mailed-in ballots.

Suddenly, Fr Jack Miller began to accumulate points-- and there was no stopping him! The General Assistant at the chapter, Fr Bill Hogan, actually said to a few of us afterwards---"it's over! The Southern Province is doomed."

Well, Fr Miller was provincial for only 4 years until the Superior General, Fr Tom Barrosse, basically forced him to resign.

But that wasn't the only problem. It was becoming clear that when the Southern Province was beginning in 1968, the bottom was dropping out of vocation recruitment. In the first 12 years there were only 3 ordinations. In the next 26 years there were only 7 ordinations and two of those priests left the community. So very early it started to look like the Southern Province might not survive.

(Well, Fr Miller was provincial for only 4 years until the Superior General, Fr Tom Barrosse, basically forced him to resign. Two Provincials down, three to go! )

At the extraordinary provincial chapter of 1980, I was elected provincial. After 8 years, Fr Len Collins succeeded me without drama and served for 9 years. Fr John Korcsmar then served for 10 years until the end. During all these years the Southern Province was turning over to the Diocese of Austin and to two dioceses in Louisiana parishes that not only were very active but were in good shape financially.

Now I want to mention a decision that was taken back in 1987 that has lasted until today-- and we hope for many years to come.

After a lot of consultation within the Southern Province, and after presenting a proposal to the Council of the Congregation, the Southern Province decided to accept a huge Mission Parish in

the Archdiocese of Monterrey in Northern Mexico. The name was "Santo Tomas Moro". It was in a very poor area!

Eventually the parish was divided and Holy Cross asked to take the poorest area called "La Luz". This Holy Cross Mission in Mexico still thrives to this day.

(During all the years of the Southern Province, Holy Cross had some of the most active parishes imaginable. Many were Hispanic and most were growing. However, unfortunately, as the Southern Province was beginning in 1968, the bottom was falling out of vocation recruitment.

During the 38 years of the Southern Province's existence, there were only 8 new priests in the Southern Province. So it started to look like the Province might not be able to survive.)

Then there were two events that foreshadowed the beginning of the end. At the Southern Province Retreat in June of 2005, while sitting at the dinner table, Fr Joe DeVliegher slumped over and died in the midst of his brothers. Then in August of that same year, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and Sacred Heart Church was closed for good.

In the end, the 2006 Southern Province Chapter voted to rejoin the Indiana Province. Have you ever voted to suppress your own Province?

We did it---24 to 1.

At the November gathering of the 2006 Extraordinary General Chapter in Rome, the Southern Province was suppressed and was joined to the Indiana Province. As of December 12th, the feast of our Lady of Guadalupe, we were back home in Indiana...1968-2006.

So, was Fr Hesburgh right? Should we not have left the Indiana Province?  
What do you think?

Thank you!

(Fr Pete Logsdon CSC)