

Brother Basil Gary: Missionary Apostle in Algeria

by Brother George Klawitter, CSC

Brother Basil Gary was born on September 20, 1812, in Avesnières, Mayenne, a suburb of Laval, about forty-seven miles northwest of Le Mans. In its pre-Revolution province (Maine), Laval was second in size only to Le Mans, and post-Revolution, the city was split between two departments: Mayenne and Sarthe. The area known as Avesnières, founded in 1073, was its own commune until 1863 when it merged with Laval. Thus, in Brother Basil's day his home town, Avesnières, was still administered as its own entity and boasted a medieval basilica, the Romanesque Basilica of the Trinity, in which, we can presume, little Michael Gary (Brother Basil) was baptized in 1812. The original church was built in the 12th century but was burned down by the English in 1429. Fifty years later the church was rebuilt. The windows were bombed out in World War II but replaced. The area also boasts a fine medieval castle on the Mayenne River. In the year Brother Basil was born, Laval and its environs had 15,000 inhabitants. Today it has 50,000.

The baby boy born in Avesnières was named Michael by his parents, Jacques-Mathurin Gary and Lise-Perrine Théréau. Since that part of France was rich in forests and farmland, we could presume that the family were farmers, but it is possible that the father was a local tradesman. We do not know. We do know that on January 18, 1837, Michael Gary, at age 24 went to Le Mans and became the 310th man to join the Brothers of St. Joseph. He became a novice two months later on March 20 and received his teaching diploma two years later in 1839. He professed final religious vows on August 19, 1838, and was sent to teach at Bône in Algeria on August 22, 1844. He was thus in the second contingent of missionaries that Father Basil Moreau sent to Africa, the

first contingent, led by Father Victor Drouelle, having ended in a mess in 1842, with the great Brother Andre Mottais returning to Le Mans in broken health.ⁱ Andre died two years later at Le Mans.

Three months after arriving in 1844 in Algeria, Brother Basil Gary in Bône wrote a letter back to Father Moreau in Le Mans. Bône, today known as Annaba, is a seaport town in the northeastern corner of Algeria, close to the border with Tunisia. Today it numbers about one million people. The ancient Roman town on the site was known as Hippo Regius, where St. Augustine was bishop in the late 4th century and early 5th century. The name “Bône” was a variant of a local word “ubbo” (“hippo”). After an extended rule under the Ottoman Empire, the territory was taken over by the French in 1832. It was this occupation that prompted Father Moreau in 1840 to respond to the invitation of the local bishop, a former classmate, to send missionaries to Algeria, just eight years after the French invasion. When Brother Basil Gary arrived at Bône in 1844, the city had under 20,000 residents.

Basil’s first letter to Moreau is a masterpiece of information about the trip from Le Mans to Algiers, a trip that took twelve days. En route to Paris, travel was less than happy because the coach was overloaded and necessitated both Brother Basil and the superior, Brother Hilarion, to sleep on top of boxes. Part of the way the two had to walk so station masters would not see that the coach was overloaded. Then there was a four-day delay in Paris because no tickets on the coach to Lyons had been reserved for them. Luckily they were shown a house to sleep in near St. Sulpice, the seminary where the saintly Father Mollenaut, Father Moreau’s former spiritual director, gave them a good meal on their second day in the city.

Basil was chosen to go ahead to Lyons because one ticket was secured for the day before the other five men could get their tickets. Sadly, in Lyons Basil was hit with a fever which took

him to bed so he was not able to greet the others when they arrived. He sent a boy to meet them, but the coach was late and the boy got quite drunk when he was waiting. Finally on August 28, they arrived at Toulon, the city of embarkation for Algeria, and early on the morning of August 31, they boarded the steamship Acheron and headed across the sea on their two-day voyage to Algiers, where they arrived on September 2.

Their first item of business was to visit the bishop, but he was not in town, so they visited the grave of Brother Louis Marchand, who had drowned there in 1841. Then they walked out of town to the Trappist monastery at Staouéli, where they stayed for several days helping the monks with gardening and kitchen duties because many of the monks were debilitated by fever. Back in Algiers by September 9, the six Brothers began to separate for their teaching assignments: two to Oran (Hilarion Fertou and Victor Catala), two to Philippeville (Aloysius Gonzaga Galmard and Liguori Guyard), two to Bône (Basil Gary and Marcel Coupris).ⁱⁱ When Basil and Marcel got to Bône, they stayed for a week with the parish priest before they moved into a boarding house. Marcel became very sick, so weak (we learn from Basil's letter at the end of November) that Basil had to carry him to and from his bed. Marcel improved, and Basil started teaching in the parish school on January 1, 1845, but their steamer trunks were still being held up in the French port Toulon so their clothing was severely limited. Nevertheless, Basil taught the thirty students who showed up at the school: one hundred were promised even though there was room for only sixty-two.

Teaching must have been a heroic chore since they had no books to use with the children. They were limited to lecturing. The students learned by memorization and written assignments. By July the number of their students did increase to sixty, but Basil had to send half of them away, much to the annoyance of the local sub-director of education. Basil was a man of great strength

and forthrightness. He was never afraid to face off authorities. But he did have excellent relations with the parish priest, even offering him a place to stay in the Brothers' house when the priest needed accommodations. There was yet no church building in Bône: the parish consisted of a pastor (Suchet), two Brothers, and a classroom in the Brothers' house. By May, however, Basil was able to report that the government had supplied the school with tablets, maps, and books for the students who could not afford to buy them. The building had more than enough rooms so, at the invitation of Father Suchet, the sub-director moved in! Basil was not happy, as he reported to Moreau, but his hands were tied. The two Brothers, Father Suchet, and the sub-director stuck to their own parts of the building so tranquility held.

It is probable that Brother Marcel was not teaching at Bône. It was customary for Moreau to send two Brothers out together on an assignment, one of them as a teacher and one as a cook-housekeeper. There is evidence of this happening both in Algeria and in France. In fact, as late as the 1870's the venerable Brother Leonard Guittoger was sent out to a small town to serve as cook-housekeeper for a teaching Brother. In Bône Brother Marcel initially suffered from a debilitating fever that limited his ability to work, but the school did not suffer for his sickness because Brother Basil was the teacher. Marcel eventually did earn a teaching degree in 1847. He died in 1896 at Angers aged 71.

The mission schools in Algeria were not quite like our idea of missions today as far as finances are concerned. In the first year at Bône, Basil apologized to Moreau that he had been unable to send money from their salaries, but by the middle of 1846, he was able to send Moreau 500 francs. It is curious that the mission establishments were expected not only to support themselves, but also to send money back to the motherhouse in Le Mans. In the twentieth-century we would have found it unthinkable that our missions in Africa or Bengal would be expected to

mail money back to the motherhouse. In the nineteenth-century, however, Edward Sorin was notorious for visiting houses (e.g., New Orleans) and returning home to Notre Dame with as much cash in his pocket as he could manage to milk from an outlying foundation. Apparently he had been schooled in finances by Moreau himself.

Brother Basil must have been a formidable confrere, as we can so conclude from the comments he made to Moreau about Brother Hilarion, the local superior in Algeria:

As for Brother Hilarion, I can't understand at all his manner of acting. The defeat that he experienced at Bône last year ought to make it pretty plain. But he's a clumsy oaf who thinks everything ought to go his way. Thus last year when I dared make comments about our trip that he didn't want to grant, I was treated like a beast and imbecile. However, he saw that afterwards all the noise he had made came to nothing. I count all that as nothing, my Reverend Father, and it's not for me to moan, but I'm saying it anyway. It's only to show that these clumsy oafs don't get the job done any more than others do.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we have to recognize in such comments that not only was Basil outspoken, but he was a strong administrator who, within one year of opening the school, had doubled its enrollment to sixty-five students. He was not about to be told what he could do by Hilarion, in spite of Moreau's obvious confidence in appointing Hilarion in the first place as superior of the three foundations in Algeria.

Hilarion himself, if more saintly than Basil, had a strong personality, which brought him into conflict with one of his men, Brother Louis Gonzaga Galmard, who was agitating for more Brothers to be assigned to each school in Algeria. He wanted, for example, four Brothers in Oran (*Holy Cross in Algeria* 205). But Holy Cross under Moreau, just as it had under Dujarie and Brother Andre Mottais, envisioned Brothers of St. Joseph as teaching in small villages where only

one teacher would be required. This model was decidedly different from the model that the Christian Brothers followed: they insisted that teaching communities number at least three or four men, and thus they confined their ministry to cities rather than villages. Holy Cross, outside of the secondary school in Le Mans, did not operate that way. In Algeria, however, the Brothers found themselves teaching in cities rather than villages, so the number of students seeking their education would require facilities and faculties larger than what Brothers of St. Joseph in France were accustomed to. At any rate, Brother Louis Gonzaga and his superior, Brother Hilarion, fought for a year over the issue of increasing the number of Brothers per school. Brother Basil mentions this altercation in his September 24, 1846, letter to Moreau, and he notes that the new bishop (Pavy) has also indicated his desire to add a second teaching Brother in Bône. We should note that Holy Cross in Algeria liked this new bishop: the first bishop (Dupuch) was irascible and untrustworthy, as Holy Cross found out in its first Algerian mission (1840-1842). Antoine Dupuch had a mercifully short tenure as bishop (1838-1845), whereas Louis Pavy enjoyed two decades of ministry (1846-1866).

Having good relations with a local prelate is important for ministry, and Basil enjoyed a cordial relationship with Bishop Pavy. Early on Basil asked Pavy for money with which he could buy prizes to award students at the end of the school year, a practice in Holy Cross that began under Dujarie and Andre Mottais and continued under Moreau. It was encouraged in the Christian Brothers' schools^{iv} and persists to this day in Holy Cross schools, generally at the end of the school year. It is nice to know that Basil's bishop not only tendered the money to purchase the prizes but offered to be at the ceremony itself: "His Grandeur really came to preside over our little ceremony and was especially satisfied with the children's behavior. They behaved like angels. I was astonished myself" (Basil Gary letter, September 24, 1846).

Relations with clergy were not always so cordial in Algeria. On a visit to Philippeville, for example, Basil fell into a messy conversation with the Vicar-General of the diocese on the matter of Basil's having a companion Brother who did not teach in the school. Basil tried to explain that if he used Marcel in the classroom, the local sub-director for schools would not work to get a third Brother for the foundation. Basil let the priest have his say: "Seeing that he was smirking, I said nothing more to him and let him say everything he wanted to. At the end he wanted to make some apologies to us and asked to be friends. I said yes just to keep him happy" (*Ibid.*). Apparently Brother Louis Gonzaga elsewhere had already traded words with a local pastor over the teaching of catechism. The pastor insisted that Brother stop teaching catechism until a "new" catechism arrived. Thus the children were unprepared to make their First Communion, a situation that Basil reports to Moreau, even though the disaster happened at Philippeville, not at Bône where Basil was teaching.

For the next few years, Basil at Bône seemed content, but in the fall of 1848, he cosigned a letter to Bishop Bouvier in Le Mans in order to raise nine concerns that Hilarion, Basil, and Louis Gonzaga had about Father Moreau's administration. It is a strong letter. Their first concern is that the Brothers under Moreau have become "servant brothers" (*Holy Cross in Algeria* 233) and have drifted away from their initial apostolate, which had been to serve in small villages in the Le Mans diocese. Secondly, the Brothers are now so estranged from the inner workings at Le Mans that they seem uninformed at the annual Chapter. Moreover, Moreau, through sermons, has scared the Brothers into silence about Chapter matters. Secrecy reigns. Then there is the matter of superiors: the Brothers are required to choose priests to be their superiors and master of novices, but even then Moreau might ignore their choices. Then there is the matter of Chapter legislation: it seems that Moreau can ignore any legislation as he sees fit. There is also the matter of ignorance of what

the general rules are since the last edition of rules took up two volumes. The three letter-signers also note that Moreau, in 1835, said he would put good Brothers to train in the novitiate so they could be future masters of novices. It never happened. Apparently priests under Moreau also took over teacher training: this was another grievance. Finally, Moreau's methods are souring the Holy Cross apostolate in general: "How many respectable pastors who were interested at first in our Institute and who furnished us with good subjects are sending them to other communities? Subjects that could have worked to develop the Institute and are soon disgusted either because they didn't receive care or they disapproved of the administration?" (*Ibid.*, 235).

The first signature on the letter is that of Brother Louis Gonzaga. The second is Brother Hilarion's, and the third is Basil's. Truth be told, it does not sound like the work of Brother Hilarion, who was a patient and rather holy religious. Both Louis Gonzaga and Basil, on the other hand, had a hard edge to their personality and would seem more likely authors of the letter. If anything, Hilarion could have come on as a co-signer in order to preserve the peace among confreres, over whom he was the appointed superior. But he did sign the letter so he did agree, at least to some degree, with its sentiments. Knowing Basil from his letters, we sense that Basil could very well have been the initiator, but the trouble-maker Louis Gonzaga is the prime suspect. Neither soured completely on Holy Cross, however. Basil remained at his teaching post in Bône, and Louis Gonzaga remained at Philippeville. Louis Gonzaga, it must be noted, transferred into the Holy Cross priests' society in 1855 and died in 1893 at age 73. Hilarion sadly died at Oran in 1849. faithful to the end. These were all three zealous men.

We like to think of zeal as a virtue but forget that it may have an underbelly, with what Father Moreau once referred to as his "customary frankness,"^v an attitude that today we would render as "I have the truth so get on my train or get out of my way." It may have been Moreau's

style of governing, but it is not the only way to govern. For contrast, we need think only of John Baptist de la Salle, another priest who founded a flourishing group of religious brothers but who remained revered throughout his life and was not exiled from his religious community the way Moreau was from the Holy Cross he had amalgamated. The acrimony that Moreau engendered accumulated so high that he died estranged from the very men (e.g., Sorin, Champeau, Drouelle) he had recruited and trained in leadership, virtue, and zeal.

We need only contrast Moreau with Dujarie and Andre Mottais to understand the underbelly of this “zeal.” Both Dujarie and Andre Mottais loom large in the foundation of Holy Cross, and both died surrounded by the love of their religious confreres, unlike Moreau who had to die in the care of his two blood-sisters and his faithful Marianites. What did the Marianite Sisters treasure in Moreau that their male counterparts did not? It bears further study. We have the facts—now we need the courage to interpret them honestly. Would that Philéas Vanier were alive today! So we are left with regrets at what we did to Father Moreau, who failed to notice that what he planted in his men as a motivational factor may have turned against him in the guise of his own zeal, and his “customary frankness.” He succeeded in his zealous planting, yes, but at what cost to his own peace of mind? Zeal can have an underbelly.

The tone of a Basil letter one month later to Father Moreau is decidedly different from the October letter. It concerns an “audience” that Basil had with the Algerian bishop (Pavy), an audience that counters much of the cordiality previously enjoyed between Basil and Pavy. Apparently the bishop is mightily concerned that the Brothers are shifting their allegiance away from him to the “university,” by which he probably means the teaching authorities who approve school teachers and curricula. In particular, the bishop threatens Basil that there has been no authority given either by Pavy or previously by Dupuch for the Brothers to teach “religion” in their

schools. This change in the bishop seems odd, since Pavy had been so generous and hospitable before. But people change, and Pavy, once settled in his office, probably had to flex his muscles in order to show who was running the show. Ultimately, Basil requests that Moreau “patch things up” with the bishop, something that Moreau could have been good at doing, given his many years of parrying with Bouvier in Le Mans. The Brothers, at any rate, continued on in Algeria as they had been, and the school at Bône thrived: by spring of 1849 Basil was able to tell Moreau that the school had 115 students and was anticipating more. The Brothers, including Basil, had to walk a thin line between diocesan authorities and government authorities: Basil was successful in this regard, making important friends in the government as he continued to make his school strong and viable.

That Basil was a strong-willed religious can be inferred from a rather bold letter that he sent to Bishop Bouvier in 1853. Two and a half years before this letter, he had already consulted Bouvier about the state of the Brothers’ Society. So bad had morale become in the early 1850’s, according to Basil, that he had thought about joining the Trappists, but Bouvier had encouraged him to stay with Holy Cross because of all the good work that was being done by the Congregation. In January of 1853, Basil is once again concerned:

I have to warn your Grace that it seems obvious that all the efforts of certain devout and religious Brothers who are still in our society will be powerless to keep up the work that has been diverted from its original goal, unless it pleases God to reestablish it in its original state. Reverend Father Moreau himself vowed that the purpose of the Brothers’ Society is totally different from what it was originally. Its end had been to train religious teachers to instruct poor country people and to do in the villages what the Christian Brothers couldn’t do, and such was the reason, Bishop, that made me choose the Society of the Brothers of

St. Joseph. Today one can see only big institutions run by priests, and most of the time priests from elsewhere. (Basil letter, January 29, 1853)

It is interesting that Basil invokes the Christian Brothers because at the founding of the Brothers of St. Joseph, a perceived difference between the two communities, as we have noted, was marked by the number of religious Brothers each group used to open and run a school: the Christian Brothers were mandated to have at least three men living together at a school, whereas Father Dujarie's plan was to place one man, living alone, at each village school. Christian Brothers stuck to the cities; Brothers of St. Joseph gravitated to small towns. The Holy Cross mission changed, of course, in 1837 when Moreau opened a high school (college) in Le Mans.

Brother Basil is rather open with Bouvier about Moreau's shortcomings, claiming in fact that, when Moreau was asked "why the prayer for the bishop had been removed" from evening prayer, Moreau "replied in public, in front of the entire Community and the postulants, that it was because of our being under the direct jurisdiction of the pope." It is doubtful that Brother Basil had been physically present at this event, living in Algeria as he did, so his information on the Moreau incident may have been garnered second-hand from one of his contacts back in Le Mans. Basil ends his letter by asking Bouvier if he would agree to take some of the Brothers back under his supervision. If this would not be acceptable to Bouvier, Basil writes, "I will try to find a way to enter another religious house to follow my vows." This is the threat of a desperate man, but we know that Basil did not leave the Congregation of Holy Cross and in fact lived another twenty years in Algeria, teaching in Bône, until 1873 when all Holy Cross religious in Algeria were recalled to France.

The last letter we have by Basil was written to Edward Sorin, Superior General, in early June, 1873. Basil begs Sorin to make a trip to Algeria to see how viable are the schools run by

Holy Cross Brothers: “the Congregation does not realize what it is losing by sacrificing these foundations, nor the evil that will result for religion in this country.” In a post-script, Basil points out that the trip to Algeria from France would not inconvenience Sorin much because boats come and go almost every day between the two countries. His plea did not work: all the Brothers were recalled to France because the provincial, Louis Champeau, wanted the men back in the Le Mans diocese, and Sorin blessed Champeau’s wish.

Basil died at Angers on December 13, 1888, just 15 years after the death of Father Moreau and 5 years before the death of Edward Sorin. Basil was 76 years old. This heroic man worked hard in Holy Cross, and if he did express himself a little strongly at times (one can possibly sense, for example, his hand behind the controversial 1848 letter co-signed by Brother Hilarion and Brother Louis Gonzaga), we should remember that Moreau himself acknowledged his own “frankness” in dealing with some situations. What made Basil Gary at times a cantankerous subject may have also made him an excellent teacher who tolerated no nonsense in his classroom. He did, after all, remain a teacher for decades, and he died in the retirement center that the Brothers enjoyed at Angers.

Of what importance to us today is Brother Basil Gary? Is he just another name in the rich history of Holy Cross? Or is he symptomatic of the unrest that sometimes plagues the Congregation of Holy Cross between hierarchy and servants? Is the tension between ordained and unordained unresolvable because it is based on a false ecclesiastical dichotomy? If we could answer that question, the question that worried Brother Basil Gary 150 years ago and still dogs Holy Cross today from time to time, we should better understand the minds of our three spiritual progenitors: Dujarie, Mottais, and Moreau, all three of whom projected a dualistic community that has at times successfully bridged a gap fomented by an inscrutable and indefensible definition

of church. As long as the Catholic Church continues to use hierarchy in its definition of “church,” there will be tensions in Holy Cross. Usually these are holy tensions, but sometimes they are not. Basil Gary was able to articulate some that were not. The Waldensians smile at us.

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ⁱ The Catta Brothers, with their usual deference to prelates, note that the bishop (Dupuch) possessed “nobility of soul” (Catta 1.459), but the man was less than noble and had to resign his bishopric in 1845, three years after the first Holy Cross mission ended in failure, partly due to Dupuch’s ineptitude in handling a canonical matter. Similarly, the Cattas claim that Brother Andre in Philippeville “was assisted by an excellent pastor” (1.482), a laughable conclusion to anyone who reads Andre’s letters from Philippeville. See Klawitter, 123.

ⁱⁱ Basil names Brother Ignatius as his companion in Bône (*Holy Cross in Algeria* 148), but Ignatius (Theodore Feron) was on the first mission to Algeria (1840), a mission which was recalled in 1842. Ignatius did not return to Algeria until 1850. There was no other Brother named Ignatius at the time. It was always Dujarie’s and Moreau’s practice to give out a saint’s name to one Brother at a time. As soon as that Brother died or left, the saint’s name could be given to another recruit. Basil’s reference to his companion as “Ignatius” is a mystery.

ⁱⁱⁱ Basil Gary’s letter to Moreau, June 4, 1846 (*Holy Cross in Algeria* 201).

^{iv} See de La Salle, 133-134.

^v Joel Giallanza, CSC, has noted that Basil Moreau in more than one letter refers to his own frankness and uses, in fact, the phrase “my customary frankness” in Circular Letter #40.