

82-3

WE CAME SOUTH-  
EARLY HISTORY OF THE MARIANITES IN LOUISIANA

1982-4

Prepared for the Conference on the  
History of the Congregation of Holy Cross  
in the U.S.A.

March 18-20, 1982  
Moreau Seminary  
Notre Dame, Indiana

by Sister Madeline Sophie Hebert, M.S.C.  
Our Lady of Holy Cross College  
New Orleans, Louisiana

/All Rights Reserved/

WE CAME SOUTH  
Early History of the Marianites in Louisiana

Spirit of the Founders

From Laigné-en-Belin, his birthplace, after his years of formation at Issy, and ordination to the priesthood, Father Moreau came to Le Mans. He was asked and he accepted the responsibility of the Brothers of St. Joseph from their Founder Father Dujarié. He grouped the diocesan missionaries, of which he was one of the founders, into the priests of Holy Cross. He felt the need for a woman's influence in his works and he found Leocadie Gascoin to lead his "pious girls." By uniting priests, brothers, and sisters, the Salvatorists, the Josephites, and the Marianites into one family, he founded the Congregation of Holy Cross.

From Montenay in the Department of the Mayenne, Leocadie sought a consecrated life in the cloister. By chance, or by a special grace of God, she came upon one of Moreau's priests who directed her to the newest foundation of the Good Shepherd nuns in Le Mans. Here Leocadie met Basil Moreau who saw in her the woman who could lead his Marianites in the family of Holy Cross.

Marianites - Daughters of Moreau, yes, and in so many ways, his daughters. Daughters of a man of self-sacrifice, a man of determination, a man of suffering, and a man of success.

Marianites - Daughters of Leocadie Gascoin, Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors, yes, and in so many ways, her daughters. Daughters of a woman of love of God, a woman of gentleness, a woman of kindness, a woman of service, a woman of gratitude.

Founded by Basil Anthony Mary Moreau, a missionary at heart and a devoted son of the Church, the Marianites came to the New World to serve wherever they were needed and called. Inspired by Leocadie Gascoin, Moreau's generous and intrepid co-worker, the Marianites were ready and willing to move south from their first American foundation in Indiana.

St. Mary's, Bardstown

The family spirit, which was a distinguishing characteristic of Father Moreau, impelled him to send, as soon as it was possible, members of each branch of his three-fold family to serve wherever needed. In this spirit, the Marianites and the Salvatorists accepted the offer of the Auxiliary Bishop of Louisville to take over the direction of St. Mary's College near Lebanon, Kentucky. The fathers were not numerous enough however to answer the call immediately, so Father Sorin was obliged to ask a secular priest to take possession of the College in the name of the Congregation. Father Delaune, a secular priest, was the director and Father Saulnier, who had arrived from France, assisted him along with the seven lay professors of the College. One brother and four Marianites were sent to take charge of the domestic work.

On arrival the Marianites could do no more than practice the virtues learned from Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors. An epidemic of typhoid fever was raging in the city. The sisters immediately set about consoling the parents who had come to the College to claim their sons. With the motherly kindness of their Foundress they took care of the sick, cared for the clothing of the boys, and cooked and served their meals. They were examples to their black help, and in a few months these easy-going, good-natured people had become docile and even industrious. But things soon changed and in a year financial difficulties forced the withdrawal of the brothers and fathers. The Bishop, however, obtained permission to retain the sisters. The additional responsibilities became so heavy that the sisters were deprived of community life as they should have and wanted to practice it. They had no news from France or Indiana in response to their correspondence and there was reason to believe that their mail was being withheld. Not only were they unable to enjoy community life among themselves, but they were deprived of contact with their sister Marianites in other parts of the world. About this time Father Moreau sent Father Drouelle to America as a visitor. Immediately on hearing of the plight of the four sisters in Kentucky, he decided to visit them. What a delightful surprise was in store for the sisters, although Father had great difficulty in gaining admission to the convent; the sisters feared him to be an intruder. Their anxiety was soon dispelled when they recognized him as

Father Drouelle of Holy Cross and from France. As a result of this visit Father Moreau promised the sisters that they would be recalled at the end of the scholastic year. In the meantime, Father Drouelle continued his journey south where he met with Archbishop Blanc of New Orleans and discussed with him the possibility of making a Holy Cross foundation in his diocese. Orphanages and educational institutions were products of the social conditions which existed in south Louisiana at this time. The Archbishop made a formal request to Father Moreau who agreed to send brothers and sisters to take charge of a boys' asylum, which was badly in need of good management. Thus, the sisters of Bardstown were not recalled, but recalled to follow the missionary zeal of their founder. They were going to Louisiana.

### Louisiana

Louisiana, the land of majestic oak trees with their branches draped with fairy-like moss, of enchanting rivers and bayous, of that great Mississippi on the banks of which rose La Nouvelle Orleans - a bit of France in the new world. It was fitting that Holy Cross should find its way into the service of the descendants that country, France, in which Holy Cross itself had come into existence. In April 1848 with six brothers, who had come from Indiana, three of the four Bardstown Marianites set out for New Orleans under the leadership of Rev. Father Granger, CSC. Once again the "family" of Holy Cross was enroute to carry the word of God and to serve the less fortunate.

Let me digress for a moment and recall that the cross was the banner that the early explorers of our country raised aloft as they reached the New World. DeSoto sailed the mighty Mississippi, called the waters Immaculate Conception, and planted a cross in mid-stream. In 1718 Bienville landed at New Orleans and erected a cross on the site where he was determined to build a great metropolis. Now more than a hundred years later the Congregation of Holy Cross came to what was then the flourishing metropolis of New Orleans.

### St. Mary's Orphan Boys' Asylum

On arrival at St. Mary's Boys' Asylum, Sister Mary of the Five Wounds was responsible as Superior, Sister Mary of the Nativity was her assistant and had charge of the kitchen, and Sister Mary of Calvary took care of the nursery and infirmary. All of this sounds very grandiose - the institution had been founded years earlier as a part of the developing city which at that time was a center for society, and

one of the largest ports in the New World. But the asylum, established to care for boys left orphans by war, pestilence, and hunger, located in the third District, an impoverished section of the city, was in a deplorable condition. On learning that the sisters and brothers had arrived in New Orleans to take over the management of the asylum, a gentleman, who knew the condition of the institution and the pitiful state of its inmates, shook his head sadly and said, "Never will they be successful in such a project. Their zeal will soon disappear." Little did he know of the power of God, of the determination of the sisters and brothers, and of the spirit of Holy Cross.

The first chronicler of the asylum tells us "The cross in the shape of every suffering awaited them in Louisiana; they found not only a poor house, but one that was dirty and disgusting in the extreme. The orphans, without beds and mattresses, were obliged to sleep on the bare floor, and the blankets and quilts were so dirty they had to be shoveled out to be burned." Immediately the sisters set about procuring sleeping furniture and covering for the children.

Another story is told that one day the chaplain in speaking to one of the sisters noticed that she was extremely weak and said to her "Sister, you are weak, surely you are hungry." Her condition was too evident for her to deny. Immediately on leaving the asylum the priest went to secure the assistance of the prioress of the Ursulines. For six months the Marianites were provided their daily meals through the generosity and sisterly concern of the daughters of Saint Angela.

One day while going to confession a sister encountered a lay woman who without explanation, other than to determine if the sister was attached to St. Mary's asylum, handed her \$30 - a fabulous sum for those days. On returning home the sister recounted her happy experience, and one of her companions laughingly remarked - "Perhaps you should go to confession every day." This generous lady, Mrs. Jourdan, became one of the chief benefactors of the institution.

The chronicler stresses for us the beautiful spirit of forgetfulness of self of the brothers and sisters when the needs of the orphans had to be met. It was through the humility and generosity of one of the brothers that the sisters had food to prepare and serve to the boys, even if they themselves went hungry. "Every morning brother went out with a cart to beg from the hotels and restaurants



the left-overs of the day before. The collection was thrown pell-mell into large bags, and often included fruit skins, cigar stubs, and on occasion a knife, a fork, or a dish towel." Undaunted by appearances the sisters set about cleaning and preparing the contents of the bags and with their feminine touch produced a meal for the orphans. Fortunately for them, New Orleans restaurants had not yet introduced the custom of doggie bags.

Because of the determination of both brothers and sisters to provide better conditions at St. Mary's, which meant a continual practice of humility and self-abnegation, these daughters and sons of Moreau and Mother Seven Dolors grew in the esteem of a few charitable families. Business men and affluent women began to interest themselves in the needs of the sisters. One day one of the sisters met a gentleman on the street who offered to help them raise money for their own convenience. He proposed a fair, but the sister, not being accustomed to being assisted financially by such means, thanked the gentleman, and told him that she would have to discuss the matter with the Bishop. This she did and was advised by the Bishop that the gentleman in question was of high repute and that anything he would do to assist the sisters would be an honest gesture of generosity. The proposed fair was planned and executed, and the financial results enabled the sisters to build a home for themselves. The sisters withdrew from their crowded quarters in the orphanage and set up their convent home where they could enjoy living once again in accord with their religious rule - which privacy and privilege had been deprived them since their arrival in New Orleans.

During this time Sister Mary of Calvary fell victim to yellow fever and for a while it was thought that she would not survive. This woman of strong faith and of stronger will power would not be overcome by illness - especially an illness through which she had nursed so many of her charges. By God's will she recovered and was welcomed by the ever generous Ursulines into their convent for a three-month convalescence.

In the fall of 1849 Father Sorin came to New Orleans to visit his sons and daughters and being impressed with the achievements of the sisters promised to send them help. A professed sister and a novice arrived soon after to swell the ranks of the pioneers, and in 1850 two other sisters were sent from Indiana. But what the right hand gave, the left hand took away. The brothers were withdrawn and the sisters assumed complete charge of St. Mary's Orphans Boys' Asylum.

Immaculate Conception - Orphanage and Industrial School

Parallel with the need of caring for orphaned boys in New Orleans, there was need to house girls whose parents had died of illness or war, who had been abandoned by mothers or fathers unable to provide the necessities of life for their daughters, or who were too old to be cared for in the orphanage conducted by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Pious women of the city had assumed these responsibilities until it became known that the Marianites had been so successful in caring for the boys at St. Mary's. In 1857 the Marianites were invited to open the Immaculate Conception Industrial school for orphan girls from 12 to 18 years in order to provide them with moral instruction, as well as to prepare them with a trade so they could earn a respectable living.

Armed with the necessary permissions from Church authorities and her religious superiors, Sister Mary of the Five Wounds, relying on the support of the benefactors who had proven themselves sincere through their assistance to St. Mary's Orphan Boys' Asylum, took the responsibility of the institution for girls. Two generous friends, Mrs. LeBaron and Mrs. Jourdan, rented a small building and agreed to supply all the food and clothing needed by the children. By August, nine young girls had been accepted. The chief work of the trade school was making rough clothing for negro slaves. The work was difficult, yet the good will of the girls, the generous support of the benefactors, and God's all-provident care paid off. At the end of six months the revenue exceeded the expenses by \$2.00. Small margin of profit, yes, but sufficient to prove that Sister Mary of the Five Wounds was correct in saying that the girls would not be a burden on public charity. With success came the need for expansion as the original building could comfortably house only six girls. Once again the Ursulines came to the assistance of the Marianites. They not only gave the use of a house but had it repaired for this purpose.

When Sister Mary of the Five Wounds was occupied at St. Mary's the orphan girls were cared for by a kind widow, Mrs. Dorsey Kelly. One of the principal benefactresses of the industrial school, she gave not only financial support and service but completed her generosity by devoting her own life to the cause. One of the first novices to receive the holy habit in New Orleans, she was known as Sister Mary de Chantal.

### Louisiana Novitiate

Eager to continue and to enlarge the possibilities of their charitable works in the south, the Marianites requested Father Moreau's permission to open a novitiate in which future Marianites could be formed. In May 1854 Father Moreau commissioned Sister Mary of the Five Wounds to organize the novitiate, which she set up in a frame building, property of the Industrial School. The first home of the Louisiana novices, affectionately called "The White House," was blessed on June 24, 18<sup>54</sup>~~55~~, by Father Guesdon, CSC; Sister Mary of the Passion was installed as Mistress of Novices. Not all of the novices were privileged to share in the joys of their new home - two were obliged to continue rendering service in the Industrial School where their formation was directed by Sister Mary of the Nativity. The band of eight followed the religious life as exactly as they could. Praying the office in Latin was not so easy and the Mistress of Novices was sometimes obliged to fulfill the functions of the two choirs. This was one of her joys, but in other matters she found herself practicing the self-sacrificing virtues of the Founder and Foundress. There were many material privations to which the postulants and novices were subjected. Food was very scarce; butter, sugar, and meat were seldom had, and the furniture was definitely in accord with poverty. As in many of the early foundations of the Community, the one chair for each sister had to be carried to recreation, to the refectory, to the dormitory according to need. Sister Mary of the Passion was a living example of gentleness to her novices and postulants. She treated them with a motherly kindness, and she formed them into strong women who "planted the roots of the tree of the cross down deep into the virgin soil of Louisiana."

### Immaculate Conception School for Girls

Father Moreau trusted in Divine Providence. In "Moreau Spirituality" Father Mork stresses our Founder's spirit of trust which his Marianites demonstrated in their determination to extend the kingdom in Louisiana by establishing institutions of learning. Having been invited by their benefactors to begin a day school for the education of young children, the sisters sought the approval of Archbishop Blanc. Admiring their courage the Archbishop permitted the Marianites to acquire a small property in his name. The Archbishop's stamp of approval assured them of the assistance of charitable persons who provided the backing necessary for borrowing money with which to construct a building. Father Guesdon, CSC, the superior of the sisters was enthusiastic about the project, but his support came to an untimely end when on September 19, 1855, he succumbed to yellow fever. His



death was a heavy blow not only to the members of the Congregation in Louisiana, but even more so to Father Moreau who had counted on the wisdom and administrative ability of Father Guesdon to stabilize the Louisiana Province. Not having a replacement to send from France, Father Moreau asked Father Sorin to send a superior from Indiana. Father Sorin responded not by sending a priest, but by sending three sisters and two brothers who took over the government of the two existing establishments of Holy Cross, St. Mary's Orphan Boys' Asylum, and St. Mary's Female Industrial School. This situation was soon changed following the intervention of the Archbishop through the assistance of Rev. Father Raymonde, a French priest who later became Vicar General of the Diocese of New Orleans. The brothers and sisters of Louisiana were understood and encouraged by Father Moreau and the five visitors were returned to Indiana. This disturbing period came to an end when under the determined and untiring energy of Sister Mary of the Five Wounds a brick building was constructed for the Girls' Industrial School and the old frame building became the first Marianite institution of traditional education in Louisiana. This school, as the Immaculate Conception Boarding School for girls, received its name from its location, two blocks from the river which DeSoto had called the Immaculate Conception. This institution was the forerunner of the Academy of the Holy Angels.

#### Academy of the Holy Angels

The Academy operated in its little frame house until 1861 when the Archbishop of New Orleans, Most Reverend Jean Marie Odin, CM, approved plans for the construction of a brick building. The cornerstone was laid on May 3, 1862. In the immediate area of the industrial school and only seven blocks away from St. Mary's Boys Orphanage, the establishment of a day and boarding school for girls at the corner of Congress and Elmira Streets gave the Marianites of Louisiana the opportunity to carry out not only the mandate of "the instruction and Christian education of young girls, especially of poor and abandoned children" but also to extend its missionary endeavors to the middle class. There were difficult days in the beginnings of the Academy. Although blessed with generous patronage, it was marked by the presence of the cross.

1862-1872 were years of great suffering. The war between the states with its attendant ravages, the passage of the city into Federal hands, the need for food in order to sustain life, the constant fear of utter destruction by war, fire, epidemics were causes for the sisters to rely even more heavily on Divine Providence.

It is difficult to imagine, but despite the progress of the war, the construction of the Academy continued and the building was completed and dedicated to the Holy Angels on October 2, 1865. On February 2, 1866, the Academy became a chartered educational institution under the laws of Louisiana.

Holy Angels remains our only Community-owned high school and is staffed by a faculty which includes 12 Marianites.

#### St. Basil Academy, Plaquemine, Louisiana

In 1853 the pastor of St. John Church, Plaquemine, Louisiana, erected and established St. John College for the education of young boys. Its counterpart, St. Basil Academy, named in honor of the founder of the Marianites, opened its doors to young ladies in September 1857.

On arrival in Plaquemine the sisters were housed in a six-room, one-story frame building which also served as the school. Sometime during the pastorate of Father Fallet, who succeeded Father Chambost in 1858, the people of Plaquemine realized that the sisters should have a home of their own. A suitable site was purchased by two Catholic gentlemen in 1859. The building, a two-story, half-brick, old colonial home, was more accommodating to serve as convent and school than its predecessor.

The Academy prospered until the Civil War when the city fell into the hands of Federal Forces. In 1862 the school was closed and the sisters were recalled to the Provincial House. The convent served as barracks for the Confederate soldiers. The story is told in letters between Sister Alphonsus Rodriguez and Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours that one recalcitrant Marianite refused to return to New Orleans and did not appear at the Provincial House until two years later. She used her influence, as one highly respected by the people of Plaquemine, to protect the convent property, and apparently she did keep troops from destroying it by making the necessary contacts with officials of the Federal Forces.

After the war, and under the able leadership of Sister Mary of St. Bernard, the Marianites returned to Plaquemine in 1865. One year later St. Basil Academy was chartered by the state of Louisiana to grant diplomas.

A fire in 1873 almost brought this educational endeavor to an end. It had, however, a more spiritual result. Since their return to Plaquemine, the sisters had been

deprived of the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in their convent. When the parish church was destroyed by the above-mentioned fire, the pastor decided that the Convent Chapel should serve as a repository for the Eucharist. Thus, the sisters had the privilege of the Lord dwelling with them.

This fine old planation building remained the residence of the Marianites until the Community withdrew the sisters from Plaquemine in 1976. Today this landmark has been transformed into a restaurant whose lounge is called Sister Mechtilda's Room.

One of our first Marianite missions in Louisiana, the small town of Plaquemine can boast of contributing more sisters to our Province than most communities in which we serve.

#### St. Augustine - 1883

St. Augustine School opened by the Marianites in Plaquemine in 1883 was a forerunner in providing educational possibilities to black youngsters. This institution suffered birth pains as did other such institutions in the post-civil war era in the South. With the continued support of the sisters and the Josephite Fathers, who founded St. Augustine parish, the school prospered until 1966 when integration laws closed its doors - and opened wider doors for the education of blacks providing them with the same facilities and privileges enjoyed by their white peers.

#### Opelousas

After having successfully established St. Mary's Academy for Boys in Opelousas, Louisiana, the zealous pastor of St. Landry Church began to look for a suitable location for a girl's academy. With borrowed money Father Gilbert Raymond purchased a lot, trusting that the Archbishop would assume the debt. Disappointed but undaunted by the refusal he received, he continued his plans to build a school for young ladies of his parish and the surrounding countryside. He set about securing the services of the Marianites to staff the institution. In the fall of 1856 five sisters arrived to begin classes in the Academy of the Immaculate Conception. Success followed their efforts and the school prospered with the number of boarders increasing to 80 within a short time. Day scholars also came in good numbers. These first successful years gave way to the difficulties of the Civil War. Fear for the safety of the sisters urged their superior to recall them to the Provincial House.

Once the war was over, sadder days were in store for the Academy. The countryside was in a deplorable condition; people were impoverished; there were no more slaves; and plantations were devastated. Father Raymond was determined, however, that Christian education would continue in his parish. Displeased because the Marianites had been removed, he with his parish co-workers and advisers, set about finding other religious to staff the Academy. He succeeded in securing the services of the Brown County Ursulines of Ohio who took charge of the school. Because they were few in number, and at a distance from their motherhouse, and probably because they were Yankees, they had great difficulty in properly staffing the school. Young ladies did not choose to enter their religious community because of the severity of their lifestyle; thus, the hope of increasing their numbers became less and less probable. Eventually, they left Opelousas and once more the Academy closed its doors. Again the determination of the pastor caused him to return to the Marianites for help. The re-establishment of the Marianites in Opelousas carries us past the period I should be treating, but the incidents accompanying their return bear witness to the cross, and so are worthy of being related. In 1879 on September 3, four sisters left the Provincial House to travel by water on the steamboat "Big Sunflower" which afforded very little sunshine on our travelers. They were ill accommodated in a cabin large enough for one traveler and when they requested larger quarters, they were told they could repair to the men's quarters. We can conclude that they preferred to remain where they were. Water travel from New Orleans to Opelousas was via the little town of Washington, Louisiana. For the journey which today takes no more than two and one-half hours by car, the sisters spent three days of discomfort and three sleepless nights, then six hours by oxcart before arriving at their destination. When they finally reached the convent no provisions had been made to receive them - there were no beds, no mosquito bars, so another restless night was spent and the following days promised no better rest nor security. The convent had been abandoned for two years and had become the haunt of vagabonds. The sisters often encountered male strangers in the house during the day and were disturbed by disquieting noises during the night. It was not unusual to hear someone falling over the benches in the downstairs classrooms, and even attempts at forcing the doors of the sleeping apartments added to the discomfort. Many changes have taken place at the Girl's Academy in Opelousas - the institution changed its name to the Academy of the Immaculate Conception; it later became a co-ed institution; it was merged with Holy Ghost School for the colored and today it



is know as Opelousas Catholic. The administration is under a religious of the Sacred Heart and two Marianites continue as members of the high school faculty.

### Conclusion

We have followed our Marianites from France to Indiana, from Indiana to Bardstown, from Bardstown to New Orleans, and from New Orleans to outlying cities of Louisiana. In all of the travels, in all of the stopping-off points, we've seen the shadow of the cross. Did not Moreau walk his own way of the cross? Did not Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours carry her cross? Why then, should their daughters have been different? But as it was with Father Moreau and Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours, so was it with the early Marianites. Courageous, determined, gentle, prayerful women, they were never over-powered by the cross. Quite the contrary, they lifted its shadow from the lives of others, they cared for orphans, they nursed the sick, they taught the truth and love of God to the poor and underprivileged. They shouldered their own burdens as they passed through the difficult times of struggling to remain faithful to their roots.

Today's generation of Holy Cross has its own life to live, its own era of challenge, but it also has the strong foundation upon which its early years were built.

May the spirit of the Founders live on in the priests, brothers, and sisters of today and tomorrow as they, too, carry forward the Congregation's standard - The Holy Cross.



## "WE CAME SOUTH"

### Early History of the Marianites in Louisiana

The following are the sources for this paper:

1. Annals of the Congregation of the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross (1841-1941 (no author given) LeMans, France, 1947
2. Marianite Centennial in Louisiana, 1848-1948, (no author given) New Orleans, 1948
3. Marianites of Holy Cross Louisiana Province Research and Planning Project, Book I Community and Ministry, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Washington, D.C., 1976
4. Catholic Action of the South, "St. Basil Academy, Founded in 1857" September 10, 1936
5. Catholic Commentator, "St. John High School" January 31, 1979
6. The Morning Star, "Opelousas the Beautiful" March 14, 1908
7. The Plaquemine Post, "Colorful Pastor Dies" January 4, 1979
8. Rotary Club Sketch Book of Historic Opelousas, p. 40