

HOLY CROSS: CHARISM AND HISTORY 1985-1

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It is now just four years, give or take a month, since I first approached my provincial superior, Father Richard Warner, with the proposal to hold a conference on the history of the congregations of Holy Cross. With his immediate approval and encouragement, tangibly signified by his willingness to underwrite the expenses involved, a call for papers was sent out in April, 1981, and the conference was announced for March of the following year at Moreau Seminary, Notre Dame, Indiana.

That first conference drew about 150 people to one or more of its sessions and was so successful and generated such interest that a second "annual" conference was announced at the conclusion of the first one. Tonight we are in the midst of the fourth annual history conference and plans have been laid for a fifth. There is a sixth on the drawing board.

If truth be told, however, four years ago I would have settled for a turnout of twenty to thirty the first time around with the hope that sometime in the future we might hold another such gathering. In retrospect we can say that these conferences and the doing of the story of The Holy Cross family of religious communities were an idea whose time had come.

These conferences and the Holy Cross History Association which has grown out of them have succeeded because there was already present a genuine interest in recovering the story of our family. That interest needed only to be tapped and a forum provided wherein those who knew well a part of the story could share it with the rest of us. Moreover, besides being a forum for the sharing of knowledge already acquired, these conferences have been a stimulus to others to piece together, by research and reflection, the story of Holy Cross in all its branches, in all their endeavors and in the interaction between them.

While the members of the Holy Cross History Association can take a certain pride and satisfaction this evening in what has already been accomplished, there is, I submit, an unfinished agenda for our association which impels us to carry on the initiatives already launched with greater seriousness of purpose in the years ahead.

The summons of the Second Vatican Council to religious communities to reflect on their charism promoted a renewal of interest in the life and work of our founder, Father Moreau.

In Holy Cross we were fortunate in having already at hand the Catta Brothers' carefully researched biographies, not only of Moreau but also of Dujarié and of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours. In the years since the Council, these foundational studies have been supplemented by a number of shorter and more reflective works on the founders of Holy Cross as well as on other outstanding members of the family, among them Brother André, Father Camille LeFebvre and Sister Madeleva Wolff, to name but a few.

However, the spate of provincial and regional histories in recent years, prompted by Father Barrosse's call for a general history of the Holy Cross family, has revealed that for all our attention to the outstanding personages in our ranks over the years we have yet to lay hold of the larger story of what God has been doing in Holy Cross.

The definitive studies of the founders of Holy Cross have already been completed. For that we owe a debt of gratitude to our forebear: who commissioned these works and gathered and preserved the documents from which they could be done. All of us who are interested in the history of Holy Cross stand on the shoulders of Father Phileas Vanier who, in the early years of this century, began to recover and arrange the papers of Father Moreau and of other Holy Cross religious of the nineteenth century.

It was in 1920 that the general chapter of the men of Holy Cross decreed that "in order to honor and to perpetuate the memory of our Founders and to profit from their spiritual works, Father Phileas Vanier of the Canadian Province is assigned to collect the writings of Very Rev. Father Moreau on the spiritual life."

With official approbation for what had already become an avocation with him, Vanier proceeded to collect not only Father Moreau's writings on the spiritual life but also to win the confidence of Moreau's family and heirs who eventually delivered to the Congregation the papers of our Founder and of his nephew, Father Charles Moreau. From 1933 to 1937, as superior of the Congregation's house of studies in Le Mans, Vanier searched the archives of the Diocese of Le Mans, thus adding to the store of materials bearing on Father Moreau and the early years of the Congregation in France.

Named general archivist of his congregation in 1938, Vanier was assigned the task of researching the writings of Father Moreau in connection with his cause for beatification and of writing a critical biography of our founder. When he died in 1956, Vanier had had the satisfaction of seeing the completion of the definitive life of Moreau by Etienne and Tony Catta (English translation published in 1955).

What Vanier and the Cattas accomplished was a necessary first step. The Second Vatican Council's call to recover the charism of our founder invested the study of our past with a "usefulness" on which we could all agree. This was a second step. Now we must take a third step.

Imagine if you will, trying to learn and understand salvation history by studying only the Pentateuch and treating the books of Samuel, Kings and the Prophets as if they were of no consequence. Or imagine trying to comprehend Christianity by studying only the four gospels and ignoring the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul and other New Testament writers. Thus far, we in Holy Cross have sought to discern our charism by studying our origins. As yet, we have largely ignored our history.

I am persuaded that the main task of the Holy Cross History Association in the years ahead is to advance the study of the history of Holy Cross for the years after the founders' generation. What must now be done and what we have only begun to do in our association through these annual conferences is to gather the building blocks, the myriad monographs and studies of individuals, local communities, Holy Cross institutions, movements and epochs within the communities which, assembled together, will reveal the religious life and the apostolate as they have taken shape among us. I suspect that it is only when we have done this that anyone will be able to write anything significantly new or significantly different about Father Moreau and his closest associates in the founding of Holy Cross.

TWO CONCERNS

Having said this about the task which lies before us, I should like this evening to address myself to two concerns which arise not only from our own enterprise, the history of Holy Cross, but which are present whenever someone tries to tell the story of people who, in President Kennedy's phrase, have made God's work their own (Inaugural Address, 1961). The first of these concerns is the distortion which inevitably occurs whenever we try to do history so as to edify. The second is that of maintaining a large view of God's plan.

Thus far, most of what has been done by way of researching and narrating the history of Holy Cross has been done in connection with promoting the canonization of Father Moreau. While that is a project with which I, personally, am in sympathy, it must be admitted that it is a way of doing history with a vested interest. The kind of biography which is written to advance someone's cause for canonization is one that seeks to prove that the man or woman in question practiced heroic virtue.

Making a good case for someone's claim to holiness should indeed be part of the investigation undertaken before a person is raised to the honors of the altar. However, those who make

the case tend to become advocates for their subjects, defending their honor and reputation against anyone who opposes or disagrees with them. An advocate proceeds by emphasizing the strong points in his case while ignoring, playing down or explaining away the weaknesses with which he may have to reckon. In the Roman congregation which handles the causes of Saints, the man called "the devil's advocate", is charged with spotting and exploiting the weak points. The average reader may not be so perceptive.

Does the practice of heroic virtue mean that everything that a saintly person does must be construed as the right and just thing to do? Are there never any mistakes in judgment? Do the saints never have a bad day or a bad week or even a bad year? Must every instance of conflict be resolved by demonstrating that the "servant of God" was correct and that those who opposed or disagreed were wrong? Bear in mind that one of the serious obstacles to Father Moreau's cause when it was begun was his dispute with St. Euphrasia Pelletier, the foundress of the union of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Had it not been for the timely discovery in the University of Notre Dame Archives of the papers of Archbishop Perché who as a young priest in France had been Mother Euphrasia's advisor, the prudence of some of her tactics in her conflict with Father Moreau could never have been brought into question and our founder's cause would have been doomed from the start.

We might do well here to recall the old adage that grace builds on nature. In dealing with the lives of saints, are we not treating of people whom God called to accomplish a specific task and whom he sustained while they did what they were supposed to do? As Jacques Grisé pointed out last year in his presentation to the history conference on the history of the canonization of Father Moreau, in the last analysis it is not the airtight case of the biographer that leads to canonization but the will of God as manifested through signs wrought at the intercession of the person in question.

In seeking to canonize the holy men and women among our ancestors in Holy Cross, must we also seek to canonize everything that they said or wrote or did? Must we try to canonize their position in every controversy in which they were involved? Except where there is question of heresy in thought or praxis, I submit that we do not. In fact, when we try to make them larger or better than life, we distort both our understanding of them and our perception of how they figured in God's plan for Holy Cross. I rather like Dorothy Day's assessment of her colleagues in the Catholic Worker movement. "We have both saints and martyrs", she said, "The martyrs are those who have to live with the saints."

The second of the concerns which I would like to share with you this evening is that of keeping in perspective God's

larger purposes for the church, for the world and indeed for all of creation as we seek to study the history of Holy Cross. As Christians we are committed to the proposition that our God is the Lord of history: that things do not happen in a manner which is random or beyond his control. We believe that he not only entered into history by becoming incarnate but that history tends to the accomplishment of his purposes. When we do the history of Holy Cross, how do we take into consideration the larger context of the church and the times in which Holy Cross has lived and worked?

As we seek to understand ourselves as a religious family by coming to terms with our history, shall we ask only what have our apostolates and our way of life and ministry been? Should we not also be asking how what we have been and what we have done were perceived to be in the service of the church and whether it actually did serve the church as perceived? Will not too restricted a concern with the holiness of selected men and women among our forebears in Holy Cross lead us to ignore the part that our family of congregations has played in the larger church?

Bear in mind that Blessed André Bessette never met our founder and that the ministry of healing through the intercession of St. Joseph which Brother André began and which his congregation has continued to exercise was never conceived of by Father Moreau nor specifically listed by him among the ends and works of Holy Cross. May I reiterate a point which I have already made? Our vocation among the People of God is to be discovered not only in our origins but also in our history.

A CASE IN POINT

Before concluding these reflections, I think that it may be helpful if I try to illustrate the concerns that I have mentioned by offering a case in point. Among those in the history of Holy Cross whose lives have been studied and narrated because they serve to edify us, you are not likely to find the name of the third superior general of the Brothers and Priests and the longtime ecclesiastical superior of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Edouard Sorin. Sorin was many things: A pioneer, an entrepreneur, an authoritarian and paternalistic figure, a bold leader. No one, to my knowledge, has accused him of being a saint. The very fact, however, that there were serious and obvious flaws in Sorin's character makes him liable to misjudgment and even condemnation by the hagiographers. Because he was obviously wrong about some very important things does not mean that he was always wrong in his conflicts with the community's saints.

Let us briefly consider one document which any biographer of Sorin or Moreau must treat, Moreau's letter to Sorin of

September 13, 1852, in which Sorin was informed that he had been chosen to lead the first Holy Cross colony to Bengal. Permit me to quote (in my own translation) the pertinent parts of that letter.¹

Notre-Dame de Saint-Croix
Le Mans, 13 Sept., 1852

My dear friend, I come after having prayed and conferred at length with my council to notify you of the will of God insofar as it is possible to know it.

Despite the serious difficulties which will occur because of your removal, you will, in virtue of holy obedience and as soon as possible after having established your chapter and one whom you shall designate as your successor, go to East Bengal, to Dacca near Calcutta, as superior of the mission and where in time you will be presented to the Holy See for the posts of Vicar Apostolic and Bishop in partibus. I am sending your nomination to the Propaganda by the same courier.....

Father Cointet, who has been writing to me that he is ill because of the climate, will have to return (from Louisiana) as soon as possible to the Lake (Notre Dame) or even to France if his health requires it unless you can take him with you and Bengal will be suitable for his restoration. You shall decide this matter.

You and your three companions will draw on me only for the expenses of the voyage. You will find the Bishop of Dacca, Mgr. Oliffe, at Dacca or Calcutta. He will see to your needs and the expenses of establishing you.

Fr. Gouesse is going to immediately replace Fr. Cointet (at N. Orleans) with the obligation to submit his accounts to the Lake and to send or hand over to the Visitor the annual surplus from New Orleans. By the same post I am writing about all of this to the archbishop (of New Orleans) and citing the illness of Fr. Cointet.....

I pray that God will enlighten, sustain and fortify you in your new and important mission, the conditions of which you will see in the copy of the Cardinal Prefect's letter which I am enclosing.

Mgr. Oliffe has just left for Dacca after spending some days at Sainte-Croix. Write to him as soon as you are able to announce to him your departure.

I shall prepare twelve persons to leave from France, priests, brothers and sisters, as soon as you shall have informed me when you believe that you can be in Dacca.

tibi totus in Xto,

Moreau

As you may know, Sorin refused to go to Bengal.² He replied to Moreau's letter by saying that he was refusing the assignment to Bengal because he was not worthy to become a bishop and the appointment would entail that.³ He added that he would accept ordination to the episcopacy only if the Holy See commanded him to. Then he dashed off a letter to his friend in Rome, Father Drouelle, asking him to do whatever he could to prevent such a command from being issued.⁴ When Moreau swept this objection aside, Sorin threatened the secession ("emancipation" to use his word) of the houses in the United States from the rest of the Congregation. When Moreau insisted, Sorin procured a dispensation for five years from obedience to the general administration in Sainte-Croix for the Holy Cross religious in the U.S.

By the end of the following year, 1853, Sorin had submitted, had put his affairs in the U.S. in order and had gone to France whence he expected to proceed to Bengal. By then, however, Father Michel Voisin had been appointed to lead the first colony to Bengal and Sorin returned to the United States, restored by Moreau to the leadership of the foundations in this country.

It is easy to fault Sorin. Moreau clearly had the authority to command him to go to Bengal. Sorin's initial response was tactically devious and manipulative to say the least. Moreau's patience in dealing with him was admirable. Can anything be said in defense of Sorin's conduct or was he merely one of those difficult people who gave Moreau the opportunity to demonstrate his holiness?

Let us try to look at this incident from Sorin's point of view and in the context of the concerns of the Holy Cross community in the United States. In the U.S., Holy Cross had established itself not in the settled urban areas of the east but on the frontier, in the forests of Indiana and Michigan. By 1852, the foundation at Notre Dame was the apostolic center for all the Catholics within a radius of one hundred miles.

Children, both boys and girls, were sent to Notre Dame and Bertrand for an education and orphans were received and cared for at both sites. Young men and women who wished to devote themselves to religious life were trained and sent out on mission from these two centers. When the number of Catholic families in a location warranted it, schools were established in outlying places. In addition to teaching at the "university" the Holy Cross priests rode a circuit through northern Indiana and southwestern Michigan. In a sense, Holy Cross was the church in these areas since the dioceses were so large and had so few personnel. The Congregation was probably serving as many Catholics on the Indiana-Michigan frontier as there were in all of East Bengal.⁵ Moreover, by 1852 there was a foundation in New Orleans which caused Sorin no small concern.

To serve all these commitments there were in September, 1852, only eight Holy Cross priests in the United States, including Sorin.⁶ One of them, Baroux, had been sent to France at the beginning of the month whence he set out for Bengal in December. Baroux's departure had necessitated the closing of the Indian mission at Pokagon, Michigan, because there was no other priest available. Three others, Schilling, Shortis and Voors had been ordained that year and were inexperienced. Another, Fourmont, had arrived in the U.S. from France that summer. He may not have spoken English. He certainly knew little of the United States.

Father Cointet was sick in New Orleans. Father Gouesse had been assigned to New Orleans but in the fall of 1852 he was still in Canada. Moreover, when Moreau had named Gouesse superior in New Orleans in 1851, Sorin had vigorously objected and had replaced him with Cointet as soon as he could. Sorin knew what Moreau would learn only later, that Gouesse had a problem, probably alcoholism, which rendered him unsuitable as a local superior.⁷ Among all the Holy Cross priests in the U.S. only Sorin, Cointet and Granger had much experience of religious life and of pastoral ministry in their adopted country. Granger had spent his life in houses of formation and had already begged Moreau to leave him in that work, a plea which had been heeded.⁸ If Sorin were removed and sent to Bengal, who among these men could lead the Holy Cross community in the United States?

Sorin had become an American citizen by the end of 1850. He had come to the U.S. as a young man of twenty-seven. By 1852 he had been in the country eleven years. He had grown to maturity, on the American frontier and he had made the Holy Cross mission in America his life's work. Now, at thirty-eight, he was being asked to start over in another part of the world, in another culture and in another climate. Admittedly this was a difficult thing to ask of a man. It was being asked of him, moreover, by a superior who himself had scarcely been

outside of France. Sorin and the other Holy Cross religious in the United States could well have doubted that Moreau understood what he was asking.

In his letter to Sorin, Moreau spoke of his long deliberation in choosing Sorin to lead the first colony of Holy Cross religious to Bangladesh. True, the project had taken shape four months before, in May of 1852. But there had been nothing like a feasibility study. Moreau had been advised that five priests would be enough to take care of the Catholics of Bangladesh.⁹ Moreau's correspondence reveals that his greatest concern was how to raise the money for the transportation and maintenance of the religious that he proposed to send to Bengal.¹⁰ The first record of any discussion as to who should lead the group is in the minutes of the general chapter held in August, 1852. There Sorin and Michel Voisin were considered but the chapter left the choice among them to Moreau.¹¹ Three weeks later, in his letter of obedience to Sorin, Moreau wrote that he had conferred "at length" with his council. In October, Moreau wrote that the general chapter had chosen Sorin.¹²

The papers of both Moreau and Sorin reveal that Moreau had led the American superior to expect that the U.S. mission would have to supply some of the personnel for the new mission in Bengal because of the need for people who could speak English. Sorin knew as early as the summer of 1852 that Baroux, Cointet and Granger were under consideration.¹³ I have found no evidence that Sorin knew that he was under consideration.

Granted that the times and the practice of obedience today are much different that both were in 1852, one can still imagine the impact of a letter like Moreau's to Sorin of 13 September 1852. Are Moreau's biographers justified in reproaching Sorin for failing to respond with instant submission? What is to be said of Moreau for springing such a surprise on Sorin and his community? The local chapters of both the man and women of Holy Cross at Notre Dame wrote collective letters to Moreau pleading that Sorin be allowed to continue to lead the community in the United States. The Cattas dismiss these as attempts to manipulate Father Moreau and suggest that they were inspired by Sorin. What evidence is there to sustain this judgment other than the Catta's own suspicion of Sorin?¹⁴

None of this is to say that Moreau should not have given Sorin the assignment to Bengal or that he did not have the authority to do so or that Sorin was justified in the tactics that he used to resist going to Bengal. It is to say, rather, that taken out of the context of Moreau's sanctity and looked at from the perspective of Sorin and the Holy Cross community in Indiana and Michigan this incident appears much differently.

If we can bring such a breadth of understanding to the whole of Holy Cross history, perhaps we shall be able to view

the controversies of our past more dispassionately. And seeing the other side of these controversies, perhaps we can move to heal the memories of the past which are so corrosive to the spirit of collaboration.

NOTES

1. The original of this letter is in the General Archives, Congregation of Holy Cross, Rome (hereafter G.A.).
2. See Etienne and Tony Catta, Basil Anthony Mary Moreau (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), I, pp. 886-926, for an account of the beginning of the Bengal mission. On Sorin's refusal, see pp. 952-983.
3. Sorin to Moreau, October 21, 1852, G.A.
4. Sorin to Drouelle, October 26, 1852, G.A.
5. For an account of the apostolate centered at Notre Dame du Lac see the following documents in file 405, "USA Instituta", G.A.: "Etats-Unis d'Amerique-Etats d'Indiana et du Michigan"; "Etablissements des Etats-Unis, Xbre 1849"; "Fondations des Freres de St. Joseph (Etats-Unis) 71-4-49"; "Numerus Missionum Presbyteris Sanctae Crucis creditarum, una cum brevi earum descriptione."
6. Catalogue of the members of the society (of the Priests of Holy Cross). Indiana Province Archives (hereafter I.P.A.).
7. On Gouesse see Sorin to Blanc (Archbishop of New Orleans), March 31, 1851, undated 1851 and June 2, 1851, I.P.A., Granger to Moreau, September 1, 1852, G.A., describing a seminarian who complained when Sorin insisted on abstinence from intoxicating drinks, wrote "...craignant de voir renouveler les scenes que le pere Gouesse nous donna par le passé...." Moreau to Blanc, September 13, 1852, G.A., assured the archbishop that he did not think that Gouesse would give him any trouble "apres ses resolutions et mes conseils." Granger to Moreau, October 22, 1852, G.A., Cointet to Moreau, October 31, 1852, G.A. The minutes of the general council of April 18, 1855, G.A., state that Moreau dismissed Gouesse from the Congregation. See also the file in G.A., "N.-O. chroniques."
8. Moreau to Granger, June 22, 1852. Granger to Moreau, September 1, 1852, G.A.
9. Drouelle to Moreau, April 27, 1852, G.A.

10. See Moreau's correspondence in G.A. for June-August, 1852, especially the many letters to and from Bishop Thomas Oliffe and Charles Oliffe, the bishop's brother and agent in Paris.
11. Minutes of the general chapter, August 21, 1852, G.A. The chapter left the choice to Moreau "because he needed to assure himself about the state of affairs in America."
12. Moreau to the minor chapter at Notre Dame du Lac, October 29, 1852. G.A.
13. See Moreau to Granger, June 22, 1852, and Granger to Moreau, September 1, 1852. Also Sorin to Moreau, September 8, 1852, and the minutes of the general chapter, August 21, 1852. See also Moreau to Sorin, May 13, May 20 and May 22, June 17 and July 18, 1852. For Sorin's side of the correspondence, see Sorin to Moreau, July 14, and August 18, 1852. All in G.A.
14. E and T. Catta, I, pp. 954-959. See Minor chapters at Notre Dame du Lac to Moreau, October 7, 1852, G.A.