

AN EASTERN PROVINCE IN 1938

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by

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On May 4, 1948, a letter from The Very Reverend Albert Cousineau, superior general of the Congregation of Holy Cross, announced the establishment of a vice-province for those members of the Priests' Society in the United States who were working in eleven eastern states. The erection of this new jurisdiction was the culmination of many months of planning.¹ Moreover, it fulfilled hopes and aspirations dating back more than ten years on the part of a number of Holy Cross religious who wanted autonomy within the congregation for the foundations in the eastern U.S.

For most of the first hundred years after the congregation's initial foundations in the United States (1841) and Canada (1847), all the houses in each country were united under a system of governance which provided for one overall superior of the Holy Cross Brothers and Priests on each side of the border. Although a separate vicariate for Louisiana, which depended directly on the general administration in France, had been set up in the U.S. in 1855, it was discontinued sometime in the 1880s and merged into the larger American Province. A brief experiment with one unified province for all of North America had lasted only a little more than a year (May 1865 - July 1866) until the general chapter of 1866 had established separate canonical provinces for the congregation in Canada and the United

1. See Cousineau to Thomas C. Duffy, CSC, April 29, 1948, General Archives of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Rome (hereafter GA). The account presented by R. Desharnais in The Eastern Province of Our Lady of Holy Cross (n.p., 1981), pp. 18-21, is incorrect.

States.²

Throughout their first ninety years in the United States, the Priests and Brothers of Holy Cross had focused their efforts in the midwestern and southern states: Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Louisiana and Texas. Although there had been several foundations in the eastern states, these had not endured for a variety of reasons. However, beginning in 1933, at the instigation of James Wesley Donahue, the first American-born superior general, a concerted effort had been made to plant the Congregation of Holy Cross in New England and in New York State.³

In 1933, the Holy Cross Brothers took over the staffing and direction of Coyle High School in Taunton, Massachusetts. In 1934, a large country house in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, was purchased and became the headquarters of an Eastern Mission Band as well as a seminary for young men recruited in the eastern states, particularly in New England. In the following year, 1935, three new foundations were made in the east. The Brothers took over the direction of Vincentian Institute, a high school in Albany, New York, and the congregation was given a farm near Valatie, New York, about twenty miles southeast of Albany. On this latter property, in the fall of 1935, there was opened a juniorate, a high school formation program for young men who aspired to join the community as Brothers. Like the seminary at North Dartmouth, this house was intended for young men recruited in the eastern states. The congregation also purchased the Ames Estate in North Easton, Massachusetts, a large mansion on 560 acres of land.

2. Etienne and Tony Catta, Basil Anthony Mary Moreau (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), 2 volumes. II, 632-637. Minutes of the General Chapter of 1866, Session of August 28, Decrees 4 and 5. GA.

3. Desharnais, 12.

In the following year, 1936, the seminary and mission band were moved to the Ames house and the house in North Dartmouth became a novitiate for the eastern vocations.⁴

Thus, in only four years time, five houses had been opened, three in Massachusetts and two in New York State. The two high schools were growing, the mission band was building a reputation among the parishes of New England and vocations were being recruited and formed. However, the formation houses had their counterparts in the midwest. In 1934, the American Province had built a large novitiate in Rolling Prairie, Indiana, about twenty miles from the University of Notre Dame. A junior-ate for the Brothers had been operating in Watertown, Wisconsin, since 1912 and three formation houses, Dujarie Institute, Holy Cross and Moreau Seminaries, were functioning on the Notre Dame campus.⁵ The parallel formation program in the east was, to say the least, somewhat unusual for its time.

Moreover, although these eastern foundations were houses of the U.S. Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the general administration had been heavily involved in their establishment and their funding. The North Dartmouth and North Easton properties had been purchased by the superior general out of general administration funds, the title to these two and to the Valatie property was held by the general administration, a corporation in its own right, and the operating budgets of the eastern formation houses had been subsidized by the general administration.⁶ It appeared as if the superior general had intended from the beginning to establish a group of houses in the east which were

4. Ibid., 12-13. Andrew Corsini Fowler, ed., A Chronological Outline: The Congregation of Holy Cross in the United States, 1841-1978 (Notre Dame, Indiana: Province Archives Center, 1980), 1933.

5. Fowler, 1933-1936.

more dependent on the general administration than on the province to which they belonged.

James Wesley Donahue's twelve-year term as superior general came to an end in 1938. The general chapter that would choose his successor met for three weeks in July 1938 at Moreau Seminary on the University of Notre Dame campus. There the capitulants were presented with a proposal to establish the five houses in Massachusetts and New York as the congregation's second American province, autonomous within the limits of the constitutions and separate from the older and larger U.S. Province which had its administrative center at Notre Dame. This proposal became the most controversial issue at the general chapter of 1938, occupying the chapter for five of the twenty-two days that it was in session. Reading the minutes, especially those kept in French, which give the fullest account of the debates, one can almost feel the passion which gripped some of the delegates. In the end, the question was decided by a margin of one vote.

THE DEBATE IN CHAPTER

The chapter had opened on July 5th. After the opening ceremonies, the capitulants had divided into working committees; on July 8th. these committees had begun to report to the plenary sessions of the chapter. The proposal to erect a new province in the United States came up during the morning session of Friday, July 15th., in the report of the chapter's Committee on New Foundations. This committee had voted to send the proposal to the whole chapter for consideration by a vote of three for, two against and three abstentions. Thus, the proposal came to

6. See Minutes of the General Chapter of 1938, Superior General's address on the state of the congregation, pp. 2-3. GA.

the floor of the chapter as an issue which had already sparked controversy.⁷

The proposal was introduced by the superior general, Fr. Donahue, who spoke in favor of it. Explaining the origin of the eastern houses, Donahue defended the right of the general administration to purchase property or to invest money in any way not forbidden by canon law. This was apparently in response to questions raised about the role of the superior general in the acquisition and support of the five eastern houses since 1933. In his address on the state of the congregation at the opening of the chapter, Donahue had announced that the general administration held property in New York and Massachusetts valued at \$300,000. He would later acknowledge a debt of \$63,000 on the eastern houses. However they were acquired, Donahue explained, these eastern houses were now under the jurisdiction of the superior of the American Province.⁸

Next to speak on behalf of the proposal was Fr. James Burns, the provincial of the American Province. Burns would argue that a separate province in the east would facilitate the recruitment of vocations in that part of the country and that an experienced superior on the scene could better administer the eastern houses and cut expenses.⁹ Fr. Georges Sauvage, the procurator general of the congregation, also spoke in favor of erecting a new province, citing what he called "supernatural reasons."¹⁰

7. This and other references to the proceedings of the General Chapter of 1938 are taken from the chapter minutes in the GA: E=English version, F=French version. The two versions were kept simultaneously by different secretaries and are not identical.
8. Sessions of Friday morning, July 15, and Wednesday morning, July 20, E.
9. Session of Friday morning, July 15, E, and Tuesday afternoon, July 19, F.

The minutes record that during the afternoon session on that first day of debate, the chapter passed three resolutions pertaining to the regulation of certain matters, should the new province be established. The first of these resolutions asserted the right of individual religious to travel in another province in the same country. The second resolution guaranteed to the University of Notre Dame the right to recruit students, seek endowment, cooperate in national educational ventures, enlist business counsel, seek loans or other assistance and continue to engage in any activity of similar nature in the territory of the new province. The third resolution guaranteed those religious who were currently assigned to any of the five eastern houses that if a new province were erected, they could return to the Indiana Province if they wished.¹¹

All of these resolutions seem to have been designed to allay the apprehensions, real or anticipated, of some of the capitulants over the establishment of the proposed province. Thus far, no one had spoken against it in principle. But there was one issue that could not be easily set aside; in the end it would be the crucial point in the debate.

It had first been raised by Fr. Michael Mulcaire, the vice-president of the University of Notre Dame, whose acumen in matters of finance is widely accredited with having brought Notre Dame through the depression years. Mulcaire had already asked to see the financial statement of the American Province and had questioned why houses of formation had been duplicated in recent years in the east when those already established in Indiana and Wisconsin were not utilized to their

10. Session of Friday morning, July 15, E.

11. Session of Friday afternoon, July 15, E.

capacity.¹²

In the afternoon of the second day of debate, Mulcaire established himself as one of the leading opponents of the proposal to erect a new province. Reviewing the arguments put forward for the foundation of an eastern province, Mulcaire insisted that a province needs financial resources to sustain it and that the proposed eastern province was not financially viable. To erect a new province in the eastern states in 1938, predicted Mulcaire, would be courting disaster. The Congregation of Holy Cross had waited a hundred years to have a second province in the United States. Could it not wait a few more years until the financial base was more solid? The solvency of the congregation in the U.S. depended on Notre Dame, Mulcaire argued, and the solvency of Notre Dame depended on the revenue from its football team.¹³

From that point on, the debate began to grow more impassioned. Burns replied with "great energy" that Notre Dame's revenues belonged to the congregation and implied that the congregation could use the money as it pleased. Donahue said that Mulcaire's figures were incorrect and proceeded to explain how he thought the proposed eastern province could pay its way. Brother Bernard Gervais, one of the general assistants, offered a spiritual argument; if Fr. Moreau were there, he would establish the new province.¹⁴

Since the question of finances had begun to loom so large in the debate, the Finance Committee of the general chapter was asked to report on the budget for the proposed eastern province. It reported that operating expenses of \$41,500 were projected of which \$25,000 or 60% was to be provided by the general administration.¹⁵ But where was

12. Session of Friday morning, July 15, E.

13. Session of Saturday afternoon, July 16, F.

14. Ibid.

the general administration to get the money?

The general chapter of 1932 had decreed that each province should contribute a stipulated amount to the operating expenses of the general administration. The provincial administrations, in turn, were to be funded by taking one-third of the surplus of the institutions of the province. In addition, for extraordinary expenses the 1932 decrees gave the general and provincial administrations the power to tax the houses of the community.¹⁶ Since the only house in the American Province that regularly had a large surplus was the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame would have to bear the brunt of any extraordinary tax.

Mulcaire and John O'Hara, the president of Notre Dame, pointed out that contrary to common accounting practice, the university's surplus as reported by the Finance Committee of the general chapter allowed nothing for the depreciation of buildings. Burns, Donahue and Sauvage replied that the 1932 chapter decrees, including the "rule of one-third," had been approved by the Sacred Congregation of Religious. Moreover, Sauvage argued that taking one-third of the revenues of a house was common practice in religious communities. Donahue added that if one considered that the best men in the congregation were sent to institutions like Notre Dame, the taxes were not too high.¹⁷

At this point, Fr. Philéas Boulay, a capitulant representing the Bengal mission, was recognized. Concerned about the North American Holy Cross community's support for the missionaries in Bengal "on the eve of mass movement conversions," Boulay offered a resolution to the effect that the proposed division of the American Province should be

15. Sessions of Tuesday, July 19, E.

16. J.W. Donahue, Circular Letter #15, (July 12, 1933), pp. 13-14. Sessions of Monday, July 18, E and F.

17. Sessions of Tuesday, July 19, E and F.

"no hindrance to the apostolic activities of the Bengalese [Bengal Foreign Mission Society] for the support of the Mission of Dacca." In particular, Boulay's resolution stipulated a monthly allotment of \$3,000 to the mission.¹⁸ The chapter passed Boulay's resolution. The fact that it was offered suggests the extent to which financial considerations were becoming the major concern in the debate.

Throughout the debate, with the exception of Sauvage, the procurator-general, the American capitulants had dominated the discussion. But on the morning of July 20th, Boulay, a Canadian and a missionary in Bengal for many years, reviewed the arguments for and against the new province in a speech that Brother Ephrem O'Dwyer would later characterize as the best that he had heard on the question.¹⁹

He could not understand, Boulay began, why the exemplary religious in the east needed a provincial nearby, in their midst, in order to persevere. Nor could he understand why the admission of postulants to the novitiate could not be handled just as easily from Indiana nor why, for that matter, a novitiate had been established in the east when there was more than enough room at Rolling Prairie. The founders of Holy Cross, he noted, had established provinces because they had humbly undertaken works which developed to the point where they needed houses of formation. But this proposed eastern province had begun with houses of formation.

As for the recruitment of vocations, with so many families in the east sending their sons to be educated at the University of Notre Dame why would anyone be opposed to a religious formation at this much admired school? Why had a novitiate and houses of formation been

18. Session of Tuesday afternoon, July 19, E.

19. Session of Wednesday morning, July 20, F.

opened in the east when they already existed at Notre Dame?

The budget of the general administration for 1938-1939 will begin with a surplus of \$27,000, Boulay noted. If the general administration has to subsidize an eastern province, how can it avoid having to impose in two or three years an extraordinary tax? Boulay proceeded to remind the capitulants that they were neither Americans, nor French, nor Canadians nor Bengalis but religious of Holy Cross and that they must act in the interests of Holy Cross. If this new province was established, Boulay feared that "our successors will judge us harshly for having acted out of sentiment rather than on the dictates of reason, prudence and wisdom." He would not, Boulay concluded, insist on the virtues of faith and confidence in God as others had done in the course of the debate. But one must not be so rash as to tempt Providence.²⁰

Boulay was followed to the speaker's stand by Brother Walter Remlinger, also a delegate from Bengal. Bro. Walter told the chapter that too great an importance was being placed on financial considerations. A religious congregation was not a business. The congregation must not count on itself but on God. Those who were opposing the new province seemed to Bro. Walter to be exalting confidence in the human person and rejecting all supernatural power. He urged the chapter to establish the new province with the same spirit and confidence in God that Fr. Sorin had when he began the rebuilding of Notre Dame after the great fire of 1879 by offering \$100 for masses.²¹

The debate was drawing to a close and several capitulants who had not been active participants now stated their position. Brother Ephrem O'Dwyer said that he had come to the chapter opposed to founding

20. Session of Wednesday morning, July 20, F.

21. Ibid.

a new province but that now he favored it. The houses that would comprise the new province existed and they would survive. He proposed raising to \$5,000 the minimum amount to be paid annually to the general administration by the American Province in order to provide a larger subsidy for the new province. Brother Agatho Heiser expressed his doubts that the extra \$5,000 in Bro. Ephrem's proposal would be enough. Fr. O'Hara said that he would propose an additional \$15,000 in exchange for a guarantee against future levies. After some discussion of what constituted an extraordinary expense which would entitle the general administration to tax the provinces, the proposal was brought to a vote.²²

As the president of the chapter, Donahue summarized the discussion before holding the vote. In the proposed eastern province there would soon be 102 religious. There was property worth more than \$350,000. Although there was a debt of \$63,000, that sum was not out of proportion to the debts of the Canadian and American Provinces. In the history of the world, remarked Donahue, he was not aware of any province that had been established with as many guarantees as this one. The bishops of Fall River [Massachusetts] and Boston were calling Holy Cross to a large and vast apostolate. "Poor and abandoned children have need of us!" The question before the chapter, according to Donahue, was: "Are we going to keep these [eastern] houses or make them disappear? My answer," he declared, "is that it is preferable to establish a province."²³

Of the thirty-one votes cast, fourteen were in favor, fifteen were opposed and there were two abstentions.²⁴ There would not be a new

22. Session of Wednesday morning, July 20, E.

23. Session of Wednesday, July 20, F.

province in the congregation in 1938.

EPILOGUE

Looking back from a vantage point of more than fifty years, the decision not to establish a new province in 1938 appears providential. What no one could foresee in July of 1938 was the outbreak of World War II in Europe the following year and its disrupting effects. During the war years, many colleges were short of students, a number of priests went into the armed services as chaplains and the congregation's financial resources had to be carefully managed. A new province in the eastern United States may well have found itself in a difficult, if not desperate, situation.

In retrospect, however, one must wonder whether the debate at the general chapter of 1938 did not prepare the way for the creation of new provinces in North America where no new jurisdictions had been erected for seventy-two years, since 1866. The chapter had elected a new superior general, Fr. Albert Cousineau, the first Canadian to hold the office. Although he had not taken a prominent part in the debate over the proposed eastern province at the 1938 chapter, Cousineau had been a delegate and had heard the arguments pro and con.

When Cousineau came to convoke the next general chapter in 1945, the first item on the agenda that he proposed was the division of the existing provinces. "The steady increase in our membership, the expansion of our works, and the needs of society," wrote Cousineau in his circular letter of January 7, 1945, "bring to the fore the question of dividing our provinces."²⁵ The 1945 general chapter resulted in a

24. Ibid.

restructuring of the congregation into two societies, Brothers and Priests, each with its own province in the United States and Canada. However, by then Anglo-Canadian (1943) and Acadian (1944) Vice-Provinces had already been set up within the larger Canadian Province. In 1946, they became independent of the mother province. In the United States, an Eastern Vice-Province for the Priests' Society was established in 1948 and raised to the status of a full province in 1952. Two vice-provinces for the Brothers' Society in the United States were erected in 1956. Two years later, they became full provinces.

The division of the existing provinces in the Congregation of Holy Cross may not have been opportune in 1938 but it was an idea whose time had come.

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