

MOTHER MARY OF THE SEVEN DOLOURS 1989-8  
AS A PERSON AND AS MOREAU'S COLLABORATOR

by

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### MOTHER MARY OF THE SEVEN DOLOURS AS A PERSON AND AS MOREAU'S COLLABORATOR

At the onset of our religious family, three figures stand out who are like the roots of the mighty tree of Holy Cross. First of all comes Jacques Dujarie, Founder of the Brothers of St. Joseph, a pioneer whose work will be carried on in harmony with his institutions.

Then Basile Moreau is sent as the gatherer and the legislator who will confer on Holy Cross its spirit, its form and its impulse. And alongside Father Moreau stands Leocadie Gascoin, his spiritual daughter and providential collaborator in the foundation of the Sisters' Society.<sup>(1)</sup>

Dujarie and Moreau are now quite well known, but about Leocadie Gascoin, Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, we still have a lot to learn and to understand.

In the time allowed me, I will try to present her to you, first, as I see her at the time of her arrival in Holy Cross, and as she appears to me, as a person and as a religious of Holy Cross, throughout her thirty years of collaboration with Father Moreau.

### SITUATION AMONG THE FOUNDERS

Two dates, first of all, within which her story is written. She was born in 1818, and died in 1900. If we compare with the time when Holy Cross was constituted as a religious family, we note that at the time of the birth of Leocadie, Mr. Dujarie was 51 (she would not know him). Father Moreau was 19. Holy Cross, therefore, was established by three people belonging to three different generations. Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, being much younger, stands, from the beginning, as a disciple of Father Moreau, while he liked to see himself as the one who continued the work of Dujarie, whom he called once "the first father of most of our works."<sup>(2)</sup>

In time, Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours would become a close collaborator of Father Moreau, but between them the relationship of master to disciple, of father to daughter would remain. In some of his letters Father Moreau would address himself to the Superior of the Marianites thus: "my dear Mother and daughter!"<sup>(3)</sup> Having said this, let us ask who is Leocadie Gascoin, the young woman who presented herself to Father Moreau in June 1841 more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

- . she is then 23 years old;
- . born of a middle class family who, for generations was established in Montenay, in the Department of la Mayenne. His schooling was impressive for the time; she studied first in her village, then, until the age of 19, in the neighboring city of Laval, in a boarding school attended by young girls of the middle class;
- . she then took charge of the family house with all that it implies (her mother died when she was but 4 years old). It meant being present to her father as well as to her brothers and a younger sister, organizing and running the "household", being responsible for all, season after season, in the domaine of l'Ousier. At 23 years of age, she is a woman who has attained a real human and Christian maturity. From the traditional French middle class to which she belonged, she inherited realism and a practical mind, a sense of the value of time and of things, a quality of strength, order, and steadfastness.

#### LEOCADIE'S VOCATION

According to her own testimony, it was at the age of 22 that she became distinctly aware of the call to leave all to consecrate herself to God in religious life.<sup>(4)</sup>

Her consultations and her search were then centered on the communities she knew: the Carmelites, the Ursulines where she had an aunt. But she felt called to a life "given to Charitable works", as she said.<sup>(5)</sup> Circumstances which cannot be enumerated here brought her to Father Moreau who, at that time, was the superior of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Le Mans. At the invitation of the latter, she came to a retreat under the direction of the prioress. Father Moreau met the young woman during this retreat. We know the rest. At the end of the retreat, Father Moreau stated: "You are for Holy Cross..." It was on July 2, 1841.<sup>(6)</sup> Leocadie accepted these words as an answer from God. She went to neither the Carmelites nor the Ursulines... not even to those who Catta describes as "the beautiful community of Notre Dame de Charite". Thus, without hesitation, she committed herself to the unknown and to the real risk of a foundation yet to be born...

The following August 4, after one month of formation at the Good Shepherd Monastery, Father Moreau himself gave the religious habit to her and to the three companions who preceded her in the novitiate. It was these four novices who became the first real community of sisters, ... the community that completed the religious family of Holy Cross, that God has inspired to Father Moreau.

To really grasp the importance of the commitment of Leocadie in the adventure of Holy Cross, and to better ascertain the traits of her personality, it would be good to recall now what Holy Cross was in 1841. Holy Cross as seen from outside by someone coming from elsewhere:

- . It was an association of priests and brothers which was recently established in Le Mans in view of collaborative apostolic works. The four year old association was still struggling to attain its internal cohesion.
- . It was a boarding school where the priests and the brothers of Holy Cross worked with a hundred or so elementary students.
- . It was the project of a religious family formed of three branches...the last of which was still missing...the sisters' society.
- . It was a service which, rightly so, called forth the existence of sisters to care for the clothing of the students and of the community of Holy Cross, to take up the responsibility of the infirmary and of the house-keeping at the mother house which was being set up.

It was to this new endeavor that Leocadie was called by God in the summer of 1841. To commit herself in the very humble place that would be hers.

#### ENTRANCE INTO HOLY CROSS, AN OPTION FOR RISK AND FOR POVERTY

For the young woman who left a well established middle class family in Montenay and who had first thought of religious orders (the Carmel, the Ursulines, the Good Shepherd) whose spiritualities were well developed, entrance into Holy Cross constituted an adventure which, humanly speaking, was total risk, insecurity, and poverty.

How did Leocadie Gascoin, now Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, live out this adventure? This is what we will now discover as we try to follow her from one stage to the next.

#### A) From the time she left the novitiate till her departure for Canada in 1847

On leaving the Good Shepherd monastery in mid-September, the new novices took up housekeeping in "an improvised convent" - a convent where there was not much more than beds - (7) and began their service at the Mother House of Holy Cross and at the College. Daily, they "would travel" on foot from the convent to the college at dawn and once night fell, led by a brother carrying a lantern because the area was not safe. It was in these circumstances that they were to continue their religious formation. The prioress of the Good Shepherd helped them periodically. Father Moreau met them as often as his work and mobility allowed. We can conclude that the sisters received their formation from three sources: the Prioress of Le Bon Pasteur who initiated them to religious life; Father Moreau, who gave them the spirit which he desired for Holy Cross, and their daily labours, which, under the circumstances put them to the test.

There needed to be someone who could unify this formation, someone who could deepen it and make it her own, who could live it day by day, and make it comprehensible for the whole group. Someone was needed to lead the way, to stimulate, and to

strengthen the others. Father Moreau entrusted this task to Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours.

This is the first image that tradition has presented to us: one who walked ahead opening up the path; one who took on the difficulties, went beyond them in faith and helped each one to do the same; one who was a constant example of courage and generosity in a service where few hardships were absent. Such a person was Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, a novice aged only 23 years, assistant first to the Prioress of Good Shepherd<sup>(8)</sup> and later with Father Moreau, with regard to the Sisters.<sup>(9)</sup>

The second image we keep of Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours is that of a woman of humility and patience.

We know that Bishop Bouvier of Le Mans never accepted the founding of the Sisters. At most he tolerated them, on condition that in the reality of Holy Cross they be only "an accessory" as he wrote.<sup>(10)</sup>

Consequently, Leocadie and her companions were obliged to live their religious life in a kind of clandestine manner. In the diocese of Le Mans, their group was neither recognized nor valued. They were dependent upon the decisions and moods of the bishop not only for their growth but for their existence. This was to last for 14 years, that is, until the death of Mgr. Bouvier in 1855. Leocadie who loved clarity and honesty experienced this poverty with faith, patience, and prudence. Because she was there "as humble as earth"<sup>(11)</sup> according to an expression she loved, and patient as the grain of wheat that dies, the community of sisters, nevertheless, took shape. It developed in Le Mans without it being too evident, in a kind of night out of which they must not come. It grew with temporary structures. It even spread beyond France and began to disperse in foreign lands, dedicated also to education like the priests, and the brothers.<sup>(12)</sup> On the death of Bishop Bouvier, the Marianites existed in fact, thanks to Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, who, during all these years, had been the soul of the group. At the end of her life, when she reviewed the events of the foundation she would write, "we who were called first to this work of God...our own end would have been to give it life through death to self...".<sup>(13)</sup> This quote summarizes, from many angles, how Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours saw and lived her contribution to the work of Father Moreau.



B) From 1849 to 1863: fourteen years in Canada

Eight years had gone by since Leocadie Gascoin had arrived at Holy Cross; eight years during which she had been assistant to Father Moreau with regard to the sisters, then superior, and all the while, still a novice. Father Moreau saw her at work, at Holy Cross College and at the Mother house where she organized and directed the hard work of the sisters; among her companions whom she supported, stimulated and guided; in the difficult context of the first collaboration of men and women, <sup>(14)</sup> which he wanted within his religious family. Between the founder and Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours, there developed a mutual confidence, and a unity of vision within which thirty years of unwavering collaboration took root.

In 1849, Father Moreau appointed Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours as superior of the mission in Canada. The foundation had been in existence for two years; it was already promising and candidates for religious life were numerous for that time.

Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours would form them. In the Canadian community she would teach the spirit of the rules. As superior and directress, she would give life and solidity to the boarding school at St.-Laurent; on the work of education, begun by the sisters, she would imprint a dynamism and a quality inspired by the pedagogy of the Founder. Having left France for two or three years, she was to stay in Canada for fourteen years. <sup>(15)</sup> It was she who became the first provincial superior there in 1860. The first general chapter of the Sisters having elected her superior general, and thus responsible for the whole Institute, she returned to the Mother house in Le Mans, seat of the general administration.

The stated aim of Father Moreau when he sent her to Canada was, as I said, to consolidate the Canadian foundation according to the spirit of the Rules. In this regard, he had total confidence in Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours. In the letter of obedience which he wrote on May 26, 1849, he expressed himself thus:

"We authorize her to dispense, in concert with Father Reze, the sisters under her Obedience, from the Rules which she believes are incompatible with the customs of the country and all other circumstances, according to her judgment and that of Father Reze. At the same time, demanding that our dear daughters of Canada obey her as they would us. We leave to her Chapter, presided over by Father Reze, the care of naming a Superior for Saint-Martin, of organizing the said Chapter, and of modifying all the obediences, if necessary." <sup>(16)</sup>

Let us remark the extraordinary latitude he gave her... In the direction of the community of sisters, he considered her as his second self. This being the case, he opened up to the young sister - she was thirty-one - a field where all her aptitudes, all her qualities would be exercised. For the sisters in France, it was still a clandestine type of life, while in Canada, Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours could take on her full stature and be part of a variety of experiences which she would later put to profit in the ministry of government which she would exercise until her seventies.

C) From her departure from Canada (1863) until her retirement in 1886

The years went by. On her return to France, Sister Mary of the Seven Dolours would hold the reins of government in the Institute in the most troubled and painful period in the history of Holy Cross. Trials and difficulties of every kind were upsetting the Congregation: the secession of the Indiana Sisters;<sup>(17)</sup> the financial disaster of Holy Cross that swallowed up the few possessions of the sisters in Le Mans; the resignation, then the distancing of the Founder; the breaking up of the collaboration with the Congregation of Holy Cross that left Le Mans; the obligation for the sisters - and especially for Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours - to find a shelter for the whole community, to develop some other institution in order to assure their subsistence and to live their mission according to the Constitutions and Rules, which had just been approved by Rome.<sup>(18)</sup> And finally, the death of the Founder.

Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours suffered greatly from the collapse of Holy Cross in Le Mans, that seemed to be the end of a life work so dear to the Founder. She suffered from the consequences of these events on the life of the sisters in France. She suffered above all because of the sufferings of Father Moreau and her powerlessness to help him - even financially.

Two traits of her personality were in particular evidence during these years:

- a) her courage to "refound" in a sense, the Marianites in France;
- b) her fidelity to the Founder.

a) Her courage to re-establish the situation of the Marianites in France

When the buildings that formed the patrimony of Holy Cross in Le Mans were put up for sale, the sisters had to leave the Institution where they had been working for nearly thirty years.<sup>(19)</sup> They were stripped of everything, with no place to shelter them all, no money, no credit and practically no

institutions in France. "We had the Cross, but not a plot of land on which to plant it" wrote Mother Mary of Egypt at that time.<sup>(20)</sup> Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours took the situation in hand. She multiplied her efforts to lodge properly, as soon as possible, the sisters who had lived in Holy Cross, especially the sick and the elderly. She would try to make Holy Cross recognize the credit owed them for the thirty years of contribution to the institution and to the common funds.<sup>(21)</sup> To assure the livelihood of the community, of the novitiate - and soon that of the Founder<sup>(22)</sup> - she would open a little boarding school adjacent to the Mother House;<sup>(23)</sup> then gradually she would accept some missions outside Le Mans, notably in a high school at Blois,<sup>(24)</sup> and, in a shelter for elderly people at Pontvallain.<sup>(25)</sup> In short, by virtue of her courage and her faith, she would rebuild what was threatened with ruin. She gave back to the Sisters in France a field of mission that was their very own, assured them of a relative security, opening up for them a new future on French soil, out of the initial project of collaborative work with priests and brothers of Holy Cross.

It was thanks to her presence and her action at the heart of the community of the Sisters, that Father Moreau could say, during the last days of his life: "If it were not for the Sisters, there would be nothing left to me and God would have taken from me all that I had done for Him."<sup>(26)</sup>

b) Her fidelity to the Founder

From her very first meeting with Father Moreau, Leocadie Gascoin saw in him, the instrument of God, not only for the conduct of her personal life but for the foundation of that which had hardly begun to exist; the work and the family of Holy Cross. With the years, this feeling became stronger. Mother Mary placed complete confidence in Father Moreau and his apostolic inspiration.

This confidence would never waver, nor would the quality of her collaboration, regardless of the litigations and the calumnies that overwhelmed the Founder. Unselfish and vigilant, she would apply herself totally to understanding the thought of Basile Moreau and to follow the furrow made by him...

As though she had no personal apostolic dreams, no personal ambition, her honor, her own grace would be to help him whom God had chosen to found the family of Holy Cross.



When the great tribulations that led Holy Cross out of Le Mans and into ways that Father Moreau had not foreseen, Mother Mary stood beside the humiliated rejected Founder, sharing his suffering, defending him, offering him the little material help she could; surrounding him with respect and affection till the moment of his death.<sup>(27)</sup>

Once the Founder was gone, Mother Mary doubtless experienced a great solitude. Her fidelity to Father Moreau made her feel responsible, not only for preserving his memory for the generations of Sisters to come, but responsible above all for transmitting his views, his intuitions and the spirit that animated him. At times, this was a heavy responsibility. The Constitutions of the Marianites were not yet approved definitely by Rome. What personal drama did she experience at such times? What turmoil in her interior world? Who could even say! At most, we can pick up something in what is left of her personal correspondence.<sup>(28)</sup> One thing is certain: in her will to keep the spiritual heritage of Father Moreau intact, she would adopt, little by little, with regard to the Constitutions for example, a stance that was much more uncompromising than that of the Founder himself, especially if we consider that the Constitutions had so far been given only temporary approbation, and on an experimental basis.<sup>(29)</sup>

Father Charles Moreau's influence on Mother Mary appears more and more evident at that time.<sup>(30)</sup>

Let us recall the letter of obedience quoted above, so suited to circumstances and needs! A letter that guided Mother Mary while she was at Saint-Laurent. But the woman of 1882 was not quite the same as that of 1849. A storm had shaken her! So, in 1882, she answered her Canadian Sisters and the Bishop who supported them with these harsh words: "I would rather be cut up in small pieces than consent to the mutilation of the rules received from the Founder."<sup>(31)</sup>

Let us notice how the key words have changed! There is no mention of adaptation or dispensation, but only of mutilation. With a heart-wrenching that was proportionate to the affection that united her to the Sisters in Canada, Mother Mary resigned herself to the break with them. Had not Father Charles said to her a few days only after the Founder's death:

"If any member tried to introduce changes in those principles of our religious life (those that are set forth in our Constitutions) you should be adamant; (...) the existence of the Institute depends upon the removal of those subjects. (32)

After so many other sorrowful pages, she turned this one as well. For her, this sacrifice was necessary for the preservation of the heritage.

The events passed. She carried on her task with the Marianites in France and in the United States for three more years. In 1886, she requested that she not be re-elected Superior General. She had performed this service for twenty-six years. She would die in 1900 at the age of eighty-two.

At that time, the Congregation of Indiana and that of Canada were creating their own history in the dioceses of America. The Marianites also moved forward into their own future. Mother Mary, who had been at the beginning of their history, could now enter into her eternal rest.

At the end of this "expose", I realize how incomplete it is! So, as a conclusion, I would let the final word to Father Moreau, as he appreciates Mother Mary's contribution in the founding of Holy Cross family:

"For the rest of my life, I will bless the divine goodness for giving me the great consolation of seeing your Congregation approved at last...and for having led me to find in you such a generous soul for the founding of his work." (33)

X  
J. M. J.

Tout à la Grâce, rien à la Nature.

LA VIE PAUVRE, HUMBLE, CACHÉE ET LABORIEUSE VOUS MÉRITERA LA VIE QUI NE DOIT PLUS FINIR.

Nous *Nasile Antoinette Marie Noreau*  
Recteur de Notre-Dame de Sainte-Croix, conformément aux règles  
de nos chères filles en J.-C., dites de Notre-Dame de Sainte-Croix,  
après nous être entendu avec le Conseil de cette Communauté, avons  
nommé et nommons, par cette présente lettre d'obédience, la Sœur  
MARIE *des Sept Douleurs, Supérieure de*  
*nos établissements de Sœurs au Canada,*  
lui enjoignant de s'en acquitter d'une manière conforme à son  
directoire, et de fixer sa demeure à *St-Basile*  
*de la Rivière St-Louis*. Nous autorisons à dispenser  
*Notre-Dame de Sainte-Croix* d'ordonner le P. P. Père, les Sœurs  
fournies à son obéissance, des  
Règles dont elle ne pourrait, ou ne  
devrait par devoir prescrire l'exécu-  
tion, à cause des mœurs et usages du  
pays, ou de toute autre circonstan-  
ce, à son jugement, et à celui du  
P. Père, enjoignant à nos chères filles  
du Canada, de lui obéir comme à  
nous mêmes; et nous abandonnons  
à son Chapitre, présidé par le P. Père,  
le soin de nommer une Supérieure à *St*  
*Martin*, d'organiser ledit Chapitre,  
et modifier, au besoin, toutes les règles.  
à *N.-D. de Ste-Croix*, le 26 mai 1844.  
*Noreau*



R E F E R E N C E S

- (1) In her circular no. 3, November 24, 1867, Mother Mary writes: I see myself as "the one whom Divine Providence gave to our Reverend Founder as his closest collaborator."
- (2) Basile Moreau, "Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de M. l'abbé Jacques-Francoise Dujarie", in Lettres circulaires du T.R.P. Basile Moreau, C.S.C., I, p. 21.
- (3) For example: Moreau to Mother Mary, September 18, 1849.
- (4) Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours, quoted in Catta, Etienne et Catta, Tony: La tres reverende Mere Marie des Sept-Douleurs (1818-1900) et les origines des Marianites de S.-Croix, Le Mans, La Solitude du Sauveur, 1957, p. 13.
- (5) Op. cit., p. 26.
- (6) Marianites de S.-Croix, Chroniques des Soeurs Marianites de S.-Croix du Mans, 1844-1862, p. 11.
- (7) Catta, op. cit., p. 33.
- (8) Id., p. 32.
- (9) Cf. Chroniques des Soeurs Marianites, p. 36.
- (10) Bishop Bouvier to Basile Moreau, August 15, 1840.
- (11) Mother Mary Dosithee to the first novices. Cf. Catta, op.cit., p.34
- (12) In the Constitutions given to the Sisters in 1847, their mission was defined as follows: "In foreign lands, they may open and direct boarding schools, day schools, workhouses ("ouvroirs"). etc.
- (13) Mother Mary, Circular 69, January 6, 1886.
- (14) For this period, see Catta, op. cit., p. 35-39; 74-75; also Father Moreau's various "Ordonnances".
- (15) So, from 1849 to 1863, cf. Mother Mary to her father before her leaving for Canada, May (?) 1849.
- (16) Basile Moreau to Mother Mary, May 26, 1847.



- (17) Cf. Mother Mary's Circular letter No. 13, August 2, 1869.
- (18) Cf. Mother Mary's Circular letter No. 1b), May 3, 1867. This approval was granted for ten years, on an experimental basis.

To all the difficult situations mentioned above, we must add the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871), the German troops' occupation of Le Mans and its repercussions upon the Marianite's daily life and service. For that purpose, see Mother Mary's letter to the Superior General of "La Congregation de Notre Dame a Montreal". January 25, 1872, and Catta, op. cit., p. 394-399.

- (19) Cf. Father Sorin to Mother Mary, November 28, 1868.
- (20) Mother Mary of Egypt, Circular letter to the Congregation, November 8, 1868.
- (21) On August 5, 1873, Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours, with the agreement of her council, sent to the liquidators of the civil corporation of Holy Cross a lengthy statement in which she gives a full account of the litigation between the Marianites and the congregation of Holy Cross. All the elements of the situation are presented therein. On November 26, the General Councillors of Holy Cross addressed an Answer to the Marianites Statement, to Cardinal Barnabo. These are two major documents in this dossier.
- (22) Mother Mary to Basile Moreau, April 19, 1869.
- (23) Annals of the Congregation of the Marianites Sisters of Holy Cross. p. 127.
- (24) Id.
- (25) Ibid., p. 129.
- (26) Mother Mary to Sister Mary Alphonsus-Rodriguez. January 25, 1873.
- (27) Mother Mary, Circular letter No. 21, February 8, 1873.
- (28) Especially in her letters to Sister Mary Alphonsus-Rodriguez and Mary of St. John the Baptist, both at St. Laurent.
- (29) Mother Mary and her Council never considered this aspect while dealing with the Canadian Sisters before their secession.
- (30) For example: Father Charles, a few days after Basile Moreau's death told Mother Mary in regard to the Constitutions: "This precious deposit must be kept faithfully, nothing must be changed, not a word, not a syllable, not a letter, not even a comma..."

- (31) Annales des Soeirs de S.-Croix et des Sept-Douleurs, III  
p. 398.
- (32) Mother Mary to M. Alphonsus-Rodriguez, January 25, 1873. On the  
influence of Father Charles, see Catta, op. cit., p. 409-410.
- (33) Basile Moreau to Mother Mary, October 16, 1867.

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