

THE VOICE FROM THE ISLAND:
FATHER BASIL MOREAU'S VISIT TO SAINT MARY'S 1857 1992-8

by

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Father Basil Moerau arrived at Notre Dame the morning of August 26, 1857. The church bells were rung to announce the arrival. The Sisters at Saint Mary's heard them and guessed the reason. It was an exciting time.

Two different accounts exist of the Superior General's first arrival at Saint Mary's. They are both supposed to be eye-witness accounts. Father Moreau wrote his own account on the Arago on the way back to France.

The Superior, who had been ill in LaPorte from the fatigue of preaching the Sisters' retreat in Chicago, arrived some hours later. I went with him and the other brethren to Saint Mary's, [where] we saw the entire community of Sisters lined up in procession with the boarding students in the lead, and after them the orphans carrying their banner and holding flowers in their hands. It was a touching scene when they all fell on their knees to receive the blessing of the poor pilgrim, and then intoned the Magnificat, which was followed by several French hymns. Then it was that tears betrayed my emotion! I marvelled at the work of God and blessed His Providence.¹

Mother Elizabeth, who was also present in person, remembers it differently. According to her memoires, Father Moreau did not come to Saint Mary's the first day. Instead, Father Sorin sent word that they would all come by carriage the next day and remain for dinner. Mother Angela thereupon informed the cooks that a grand dinner would be required, including a ragout and wines. She then turned her attention to the Sisters, the pupils, the Children of Mary, the white dresses, the banners, the flowers, the music, covering every detail.

Before starting, Mother Angela said the youngest children should be nearest the gate and should scatter roses on the path where the Very Reverend Father, after alighting from the carriage, would walk toward the house. The choir and pupils should begin the Magnificat, the community singing the alternate strophes. After, if there was time, to sing the Ave Maris Stella and O Sanctissima until they arrived in front of the academy, where chairs would be placed for the guests, and the procession to form in circles; then Miss Sweeney would read an address of welcome in French.

By this time the Brothers, most of them being of the earliest bands who came from France, asked where they should take their position. "Oh,"

said Mother Angela, "you must be the very first to greet him when he is outside the gate, and then I shall with the oldest Sisters welcome him next."²

The wealth of detail in this account gives it plausibility. Mother Elizabeth continues that the procession formed and waited an hour, with Mother Angela "once in a while sending Sisters outside to see if there was sign of a carriage."³ Nothing appeared but the bread wagon. The children were allowed to sit down on the grass.

Then a Sister near the front saw a stranger walking toward them through the Notre Dame woods. He was reading a black book and not looking up, but when he came to the stile, he closed the book, sat down, and looked uncertain. Sister Emily called out, "Father Rector!" and ran toward the stile "followed pell mell by all the French Sisters and the Brothers."⁴

He was too overcome to speak when all the old Brothers and Sisters surrounded him....But when the children began to strew flowers before him, he turned to Mother Angela shaking his head, and cried, "No, no! I am but a poor pilgrim -- flowers only before the Blessed Sacrament."

But here he was interrupted by the sound of carriage wheels stopping near the river bank, and Father Superior and all the clergy from Notre Dame came forward and knelt...for Father Rector's blessing -- to the astonishment of the pupils, who never dreamed anyone less than the Pope could possibly be above their Father Superior.⁵

Father Sorin then invited Father Moreau and "those who did not wish to smoke" into the academy parlor. There he asked Sister Elizabeth to play the piano. She asked what she should play, and Father Sorin told her to play the Marseillaise, and with spirit. She speaks of herself in the third person:

When she was through, the Very Reverend Father Rector came to the piano. Of course she stood, but, not understanding a word he said, was surprised at his long speech. [She] listened attentively, and when by the inflection of his voice she recognized the termination of a sentence, bowed in assent.⁶

Reporting a later conversation with Sister Emily, she moves to first person.

I asked Sister what Reverend Father said to me. She burst out laughing. "He was so astonished you played that piece. If you were in France, you would be put in prison, and he really scolded....He must think you very aimable, for you bowed just in the place you were being so severely admonished, and looked so calm."⁷

The next day Father Moreau visited all the buildings, stables, and sheds, the dairy and the Brothers' house. "He saw we were poor enough."⁸ The Sisters were still without bedsteads, sleeping on pallets on the floor, and in most of the old buildings from Bertrand, seeing how light came through the cracks in the walls and roof, he knew that rain and snow would do the same.

Father Moreau's account says that he first completed his work at Notre Dame, and then turned his complete attention to Saint Mary's. Mother Elizabeth's sounds as if he went back and forth every day.

Father Moreau praises "the spirit of faith, the winning simplicity, the admirable docility" of the religious in Indiana, but says also:

I felt as if some invisible force were working against me. I encountered a mysterious kind of stubborn resistance from his bitter enemy of all God's works. This resistance became the more painful when, eight days later, I began the Regular Visit of the Community at Saint Mary's. There, as at Notre Dame...there had been many cruel trials and much physical and moral suffering. None of this surprised me, however, when I beheld the marvels accomplished by zeal and religious devotedness in the midst of these age-old forests.⁹

Father Moreau was not, of course, mistaken in sensing a certain amount of resistance in Indiana. It was not to him personally; in his person he was as highly revered by his American daughters as by any elsewhere. This was demonstrated by their enthusiastic reception of him, and there was more to come. But an undercurrent of discomfort with the Visit existed, arising from three sources.

First, there was fear. The Reverend Father Rector had five years before tried to take Father Sorin away, and the very thought caused flutters of panic to the American Sisters. Second, a widening gap of incompatibility was beginning to show. Things were not always done in America the way they were in France, and the American Sisters, who found out during this Visit that they were no longer members of the same congregation as the priests and Brothers, had no wish to be placed under a Rule and government that failed to understand and make proper allowances for the difference.¹⁰

Third, there was some division among the Indiana Sister themselves. This was largely, but not entirely, along French-American lines, with the "American" group more than half Irish-born. But Sister Ascension, French born and bred, was strongly pro-American, and was only now beginning to share her leadership with Sister Angela. And much of the opposition from the motherhouse had recently come from that very source.¹¹ So it is true that while Father Moreau was doing his own evaluating, he was also being silently evaluated.

Nevertheless, the Sisters' genuine respect for him and pleasure at receiving his attention were to be expressed symbolically in a great celebration. Meantime there was work to be done. Father Moreau says he appointed Mother Angela as Provincial. Mother Elizabeth says there was an election, and adds convincingly that four ballots were taken before the tie was broken between Sisters Angela and Ascension. Mother Ascension was then named "Mother Superior" or local superior, and Mother Elizabeth Mistress of Novices. All three were ceremoniously installed after Mass the next morning. Then the steward from Notre Dame presented his account books and Father Moreau went into the matter of temporalities. "And then we learned," says Mother Elizabeth,

Rome would never approve the Rules of the Sisters under the existing union of the three branches. And by a special favor we were allowed by the Bishop of the Diocese to be under the guidance of the priests of Holy Cross as confessors. ... And therefore the Sisters were to retain one third. ... Then came the difficulty.¹²

Notre Dame needed the services of Sister cooks, laundresses, clotheskeepers and infirmarians. Saint Mary's needed the priests as chaplains and the Brothers as gardeners and maintenance crew. The solution reached would never have satisfied a later generation -- equations proclaiming that five Sisters equalled one priest, and three Sisters equalled one Brother. Even this did not meet the demand. "In a few years the college [Notre Dame] increased so rapidly [that] girls (old ones) were hired to work in the kitchen and laundry."¹³

Writing with the hindsight of many years, Mother Elizabeth found in this separation the re-founding of the American Sisters.

[They were] days of deep reformation and I might almost say the beginning of our community life. We had to make our living and do for ourselves in all temporal affairs. But for our spiritual guidance the Bishop of the Diocese ... still gave us the privilege of being under the priests appointed by the Reverend Father Sorin. This was a favor few can understand. Our own Holy Cross Father perfectly understand, for the spirit of the Rule is the same. And those privileged to remain at home cannot be thankful enough, and only find the difference when sent to other places, where the clergy of other orders, or secular clergy, become their spiritual guides.¹⁴

On September 8, Mother Angela asked Father Moreau if he would bless a little island in the St. Joseph River that evening. A full moon would give plenty of light to see their way down the bluff. She then asked Father Sorin to bring as many priests and Brothers as could come from Notre Dame.

Sisters and girls had been working to make archways covered with flowers, and illuminated by Japanese lanterns. These were placed at intervals all along the path leading to the river. Tin candle holders had been nailed to trees, as had brackets for religious pictures. Old Joseph and his helpers had raked piles of brushwood together for bonfires at suitable distances from the path. The rustic bridge to the island was covered with red, white and blue bunting. An altar was erected under a great tree on the island, and decorated with candles and wild flowers.

At four in the afternoon, Mother Angela sent a carriage to the sacristy at Notre Dame, and the Sister sacristan loaded in the surplices of all the priests. The Sisters at Notre Dame had an early supper and set off for Saint Mary's.

Mother Angela and her helpers kept the priests entertained outside or in front of the house until all was ready. Then just as it was growing dark, she invited them all into the academy parlor, where each was surprised to find his own surplice ready to be donned. Finally she led them through the house

and opened the back door. The Sisters and girls were drawn up in a long procession, each one with a lighted candle. The candles twinkled on the trees, and the bonfires leapt on either side. The lighted arches showed the way down the bluff, and the altar on the island nearly a mile away blazed with candle-light; and, says Mother Elizabeth, "the river in the moonlight glimmered as a broad silver band enclosing the whole in St. Joseph's protectling arms."¹⁵

Father Moreau followed the procession in a sort of trance. It took half an hour to reach the rustic bridge, and when they did the procession halted and parted, and only the clergy passed over to the island. Father Sorin and Father Shiel, Provincial of New Orleans, assisted at the blessing, and Father Moreau named the spot Saint Angela's Island. Afterwards he tried to make a little speech, translated by Father Shiel, "who had a loud voice," but gave up, saying "The American night birds sang so loud it was impossible to make himself heard."¹⁶ Even years later Mother Elizabeth was getting some enjoyment out of the memory.

Father Shiel shouted...and explained [that] Father Rector had mistaken the katydids and tree frogs, who were too frightened at the unusual light to move....Poor little things, they no doubt handed down to their posterity the wonderful unheard of event of the year 1857....It has often been a wonder...what Katy did? But that night revealed she was a scold, and she certainly proved it by out-talking the head of a community.¹⁷

It could be taken as the central metaphor of the whole relationship between Father Moreau and his American daughters. The scene had been prepared with reverence and love, and was filled with beauty and blessing. But it came down to the saintly founder trying to get his message across from an island, at night, in a foreign language, against an insistant chorus of local voices. And when it was over, only one permanent thing was left, the name on the island. And that was Angela.

Both accounts seem to agree that the separation of temporalities had been accomplished. Actually, the principles to be followed had been laid down, but otherwise the process in Indiana was barely started. It would continue past the

founder's lifetime, twenty years into Father Sorin's administration as Superior General.

Unaccustomed to the distances in the United States, Father Moreau had left himself no time to visit New Orleans. He met with Father Shiel and with Sister Mary of the Passion, who had come north to consult him. On September 12, he and Father Sorin went to Chicago, where Father Moreau made the Visit in four days. He then returned to Notre Dame, took leave of the religious in Indiana, and, accompanied by Father Sorin, took the train and arrived September 17 in Philadelphia.

Most of the American religious never saw their Founder again.

ENDNOTES

1. Rev. Basil A. Moreau, CSC, Circular Letters #90, Sept. 25, 1857, in Circular Letters of the Very Reverend Basil Anthony Mary Moreau, trans. Edward L. Heston, CSC, 2 vols. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1944) 2:33. Hereafter CL 90.
2. Mother M. Elizabeth (Lilly), CSC, unpublished memoirs, Congregational Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, 3:455.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 456.
5. Ibid., 456-7.
6. Ibid., 459.
7. Ibid., 459-60.
8. Ibid., 460.
9. CL 90, 33.
10. Speed and haste, for example, are not necessarily the same thing, but the American preference for speediness was often seen in France as unthinking haste, which it was not. Practicality and efficiency were not prized in France as in America. The Americans spent more time traveling because they had greater distances to cover. Because teamwork between bishops and religious, men and women, religious superiors and subjects, was absolutely necessary in a frontier diocese, American women religious were much more ready to accept responsibility and voice their conclusions than their European counterparts: a legacy the Roman authorities are only now beginning to be aware of. Also a neat French system of accounting did not always fit into a place where the barter system was still in partial operation; within the next few years, one man would pay for his daughter's tuition at the academy by putting windows into the new building.
11. In 1856 Father Moreau had sent to Indiana "a colony of Sisters who could no longer get their living at Sainte Croix." [Sister M. Emerentiana (Nowlan), CSC, unpublished chronicles, Congregational Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, 1:143.] Two or three of these turned out to be good acquisitions, notably Sister Ursula (Salou). Most of the others, according to the chronicle, were guilty of "jealousy, indiscretion, levity, and especially of the itching to talk of the miseries of Sainte Croix, which they made contemptible, especially in the person of the Very Reverend Father Moreau, whom they represented as a man who wanted to do everything himself, and who embroiled whatever he meddled with, who could keep no one near his person, and with whom it was enough to be intimate to be dismissed from the Society. Amongst other things they spoke of his temptation as a proof of mental aberration, rather joking about the effects than grieving for the

cause. Such were the dispositions of these...Sisters...until Father Sorin ...put them all in absolute silence for an indefinite period....[They] changed all the sympathies and compassion for the Mother House in its distress into indifference and even disgust. [Emerentiana, 1:144-45.]

12. Elizabeth, 3: 463-4.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 466.

15. Ibid., 468.

16. Ibid., 469.

17. Ibid.