HOLY CROSS BROTHERS GRADE SCHOOL APOSTOLATE; TO 1910 1995-5

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The Brothers of Holy Cross first came to the United States at the invitation of Bishop Hailandiere of the Diocese of Vincennes, primarily to teach Catholic children of that rural and frontier-like area. As is rather well known, their superior, Father Edward Sorin, pushed on from Vincennes to found the University of Notre Dame at South Bend. The epic struggles and indispensable contributions made by the Brothers to that project have received at least some recognition by those who have written the ;history of the university. What has been relatively ignored, it seems to me, are the even greater efforts made by the Brothers to fulfill their original purpose here, the education of Catholic children. It is a story that deserves telling. Without claiming to do justice to it, I would like to examine, at least in cursory fashion, the Brothers' educational efforts in parish schools (excluding orphanages) from their beginning in 1841 to the closing of the last schools in 1910.

There were approximately sixty-five of these Brothers' schools at one time or other, and we have roughly accurate dates for the opening and closing of fifty-nine of them. Their average life expectancy was just under ten years, but one, Cathedral Grade School in Fort Wayne, lasted fifty-one years and then became Central Catholic High School. The largest number open at any one time was nineteen; that occurred in 1859, 1877 and 1878. By 1900 there were only three, and in 1910 the last two disappeared.

The earliest schools were the most short-lived, which is not surprising. They were typically one or two room schools taught by one or at most two Brothers, who usually had to struggle manfully against primitive conditions, little or no equipment, and often enough considerable parental indifference. A normal Hoosier school, Catholic or otherwise, was a log cabin heated by a wood fire, the wood for which was supposed to be supplied by the boys. The seats and desks were split logs into which pegs had been driven for legs. The seats were backless. Another normal feature was the twin pegs about the teacher's desk on which his whips were kept. For the Brothers coming from France, the schools provided something of a culture shock. Wrote one Brother to Father Moreau concerning St. Peter's in 1842: "I doubt if you can correctly visualize a schoolhouse in America. . . and I shall try to picture one for you. Imagine a huge pile of logs lying one above the other, with openings necessary to let in the air and light; for there are no windows. From this, you can easily conclude that the log house is not very comfortable in summer and also very cold in winter." Even that was something of an understatement.

Brother Francis de Sales, writing to Sorin from Vincennes in 1846, observed that his class room was little better than a cave, and some of the children were already sick. Three-fourths of them had no shoes and were without books or paper. The ordinary French beggars, he noted, were considerably better off than his students. Nor could the children furnish wood for a fire because there simply wasn't any for miles around. As Father Sorin noted, the classroom was half underground, and, during a rain, the water poured in. An unsympathetic Bishop Hailandiere, however, wrote Sorin in 1845 that his

Brothers had no spirit of sacrifice and were always complaining about something. His successor eventually gave them an old frame house to teach in, but, when he died, the diocesan administrator decided that one Brother was adequate to teach the eighty students. Father Sorin would not agree to that, so the school was closed in 1848.

To be sure, Vincennes was apparently not atypical. In Madison the school was a room dug out under the church for that purpose and had only two windows. Water pouring in rotted out the floor boards. One Brother taught over a hundred students ranging in age from six to twenty. "I tried," wrote the harried Brother, "to get along without whipping them, but to no purpose."

Conditions couldn't have been a great deal better at St. John's, an isolated German mission parish in Lake County, Indiana. There a Brother and two nuns taught in a log church. An eighteen-by-twenty foot addition provided four rooms for the parish priest, Brother and two nuns. Each room must have been about four by five feet.

Although we lack descriptions of other schools and living conditions of the Brothers, there are hints that, as the urban Midwest grew and "modernized," so did the schools and living conditions of the Brothers. In 1869, e.g., Father Alexius Granger noted that the school in Alton, Illinois was a good one. The Brothers were able to live in the school but they did have the inconvenience of getting their meals in town, which was apparently some distance away. In 1873 Rev. Peter Cooney noted that it was a good brick school house, and the Brothers were living by then in a boarding house. The same year a visitor noted that the school in Springfield, Illinois was a miserable little wooden building not large enough for two-thirds of the students attending it. But in 1876 a large eight-room schoolhouse was built which was described by the visitor that year as "splendid." On the other hand, the Brothers there also had to walk a good distance for their meals, where, according to Rev. Louis L'Etourneau, they met all kinds of people who "filled their minds with worldly views and robbed them of that religious simplicity and humility which are the charm of religious life." The school in LaSalle, Illinois was so run down that the provincial council resolved in November that it should be closed by Christmas if repairs were not made. Apparently something stopgap was done because it stayed open another two years. In Logansport, Indiana Brother Daniel wrote Father Sorin that, when he took over the school in 1880, he had to replace 120 panes of glass in the windows as well as other equipment. The fact that there were 108 to replace suggests a school of some size. The pastor was quite pleased with the Brother but not the boarding house he lived in where there were persons of the other sex who "act rather freely."

In addition to less than desirable living and working conditions, the Brothers also had a problem supporting themselves with their teaching. The First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 ordered that schools be established in connection with all parish churches and the teachers be paid from the revenue of the church. No doubt the pastors tried to obey the decree, but the financial side of it was more often honored in the breach. The same was true of provincial council decrees that Brothers receive a uniform salary. For the most part the Brothers appear to have survived on what they could get from their

students.

Brother Bernard, e.g., wrote from Madison in 1847 that he liked his appointment well enough but was discouraged by the necessity of going from door to door to collect his fees. The situation was no better in Brooklyn, where Brother Basil wrote that the Brothers were really slave labor since they were not getting as much in fees as their room and board cost. Father Cooney, the provincial visitor, complained of the situation in Lafayette, Indiana in 1873 where the pastor's attitude was: "Here are the children and get what you can. I'll have no responsibility for your pay." He noted that the efforts of the Brothers to collect their monthly dues from the students, in turn, angered the parents and negated the good they went there to do. The situation was even worse in Chicago, where three Brothers were promised $200 each and got none of it. When they held a fair to raise the money themselves, the bishop took all the proceeds for himself. Two schools in Philadelphia were closed in 1864 and 1865 because the pastor refused to assure a fixed salary and Brothers were not earning enough to meet their expenses. It was noted that, in Lafayette, when the Brothers were paid, they were required to buy fuel for the school from that scanty income.

Money for the Brothers may have been hard to come by, but it wasn't because they didn't work enough to earn it. Father Cooney noted in 1875 that the Brothers in Fort Wayne were under some strain, since they were with the students ten hours a day and had no time for exercise. No matter how cold the weather, their students were taken to Mass in a heatless church at 7:00 A.M. The teaching day ended at 5:00 P.M. Besides teaching ninety students, the Brother sacristan also had to serve two Masses in addition to other church duties.

Not all the schools had schedules that demanding. More typical were the two schools in Cincinnati, where the school day began at 8:00 in the morning and ended at 4:00 in the afternoon. The Brothers were to be up by 5:00 in the morning for spiritual exercises and in bed by 9:00 at night. Saturday afternoons included an hour of adoration, confession and a walk. In a number of the schools, Sunday school for public school students or those who went to no school at all was also the responsibility of the Brothers. Father Cooney noted that Brother Barnabas in Lafayette had to walk to school more than a mile each day, eat a cold lunch, and walk back to his boarding house when the day was over. What made it a bit more difficult was that he had to do the same thing on Sunday - morning and afternoon. Brother Gatian noted that the Brothers in Brooklyn disliked Sunday school because it was made of one hundred "extremely wicked boys" who didn't come to school on weekdays but who mingled "with our own boys in the schoolroom and Church."

Very often the Brothers taught about fifty or sixty students each, although it often ran to more than that. The pastor of St.Paul's parish in Philadelphia wondered how three Brothers could teach 250 boys; Brother Ignatius, one of the three, admitted that he really couldn't do justice to his ninety students. Two Brothers taught eight elementary grades of between 115 and 135 students in Austin, Texas between 1885 and 1910. Some of the lack of individual attention was made up for by ending the school day at 5:00

and giving extra hours of instruction on Saturdays.

Perhaps if teaching were their only responsibility, the load might not seem quite so outrageous, but they also often had other obligations. A Franciscan priest in Louisville wrote to Father Sorin suggesting that the two Brothers there could use the help of a third to cook and look after the sacristy. As it was, the two looked after two schools, one German and the other English, the sacristry and the choirs of both schools. The problem was that they had to do too much at the same time. At High Mass one played the organ while the other took care of the sacristy and watched the students. During the week there were funerals, baptisms and other functions which disrupted the Brothers' teaching -- no small disruption inasmuch as they taught 200 students between them.

Under the circumstances it isn't surprising that keeping discipline in the schools was a major problem. Nor is it surprising that Bishops, pastors and religious superiors who had no experience in the classroom and no intention of getting any thought one way about it, and those on the battlefield thought otherwise. Brother Boniface, for example, ordered the Brothers in Cincinnati never to dismiss a boy for bad conduct until the parents were consulted and after that only with the consent of the pastor. Pastors, of course, were sometimes the cause of the problem rather than the cure. A priest in Milwaukee was put in charge of the school there and spent his time going about the city collecting all the boys he could find to send to the school. The problem was that the boys had no books and apparently no intention of getting any. The practice had to be stopped by the Brothers because of the disorder that ensued. "Imagine," wrote an indignant Brother Benjamin to Father Sorin, 'fifteen or twenty boys of this kind in the school and what kind of order we could keep."

The method of keeping order favored by the teachers was the traditional whip. Brother Modestus in Hamilton, Ohio, found less painful methods totally useless. The Brothers there tried giving good seats and taking them away, tasks, detention, kneeling down and sending the boys to the Brother director, all to no avail. The boys were neglected at home, he observed and did what they pleased. "By making use of strap," he added, "I enforced order."

The practice was eventually prohibited by the Superior General, but in a provincial visit in 1878, Father Granger was horrified to find it still very much in use. He reinforced the strict prohibition on all unless a written dispensation were received rom the Superior General himself.

Apparently even that warning wasn't sufficient because in 1884 Bishop Dwenger of Fort Wayne issued a circular letter forbidding the corporal punishment. That brought near rebellion from the Brothers, and an apologetic Sorin was soon writing Dwenger that, "the Brothers here say positively that they cannot govern their classes without using some sort of corporal punishment, especially in the lower grades which are so crowded.... The Brothers say they would rather tramp home than remain in such a terrible position among bad boys and unable to correct them... I fear it will be the breaking up of our schools as no one will teach unless forced to do so." The bishop bent to the extent that the Brother

superior was allowed to do the whipping, but no one else. Whether official frowns had much effect elsewhere is impossible to say, but it may well be doubted. The first rule of any profession is survival.

Poor facilities, very little income and often very little appreciation, overcrowding and disciplinary problems were all severe handicaps, but harder and more humiliating to bear than any of these was the lack of training and preparation for either teaching or the religious life experienced by many if not most of the teaching Brothers. To be sure, the subjects they were expected to teach were basic in the extreme. In the early days they rarely went beyond the traditional reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and catechism. As time went on, geography, single entry bookkeeping and occasionally history were added. On a higher level the Brothers also operated several academies or high schools where the so-called "higher branches" of learning were taught. When the schools were in German parishes, the teaching had to be done in German.

The practice of sending Brothers to teach without adequate training, particularly in the religious life, began almost as soon as they arrived in this country. Brother Anselm, aged sixteen, began teaching in Vincennes in 1843. He was then sent to teach in Madison, Indiana, where he died at the age of nineteen, still a novice. In January of 1848 Brother Thomas was sent to teach the novices in Indianapolis and to make his own novitiate. By March, however, he had been recalled to Notre Dame to teach and prefect full time.

The following year three young Brothers, probably novices, and a postulant were sent, under the direction of the veteran Brother Vincent, to teach in Brooklyn with predictably bad results. The outspoken Brother Gatien visited them there and found them quite downhearted with the results. He let Father Sorin know in no uncertain terms who was to blame for that. Sorin was the cause of the dejection, he wrote. The young Brothers "were and are not able to teach. They have not the least experience or knowledge of the plan of instruction." He added: "Permit me to speak frankly: You generally do things by halves and you require real miracles from you subjects and then blame them when the miracles are not really wrought." He suggested that the school be closed for two or three years while the Brothers were "taught by some experienced professors or sent to college."

Nevertheless, the training continued to be on-the-job and hit-or-miss. Young Brother Daniel wrote from Louisville in 1855 that the director (probably Brother Ambrosia) was out visiting, but when he came home around 9:00, he would put Brother Daniel to work learning his arithmetic, geography, etc. Perhaps what bothered the young Brother most was that he would still have to be up first in the morning to do the cooking.

By 1858 there was at least the recognition of a need for reform. The provincial chapter that year decreed that a model school be created at Notre Dame to give the postulants and novices some training before sending them out to teach. In addition to learning how to keep discipline and other teaching techniques, they were to learn spelling reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, grammar and single entry bookkeeping or, in other

words, those subjects they would have to teach others. Further, for those who could pass examinations in grammar and arithmetic, there would be training in algebra, geometry, history, English composition and double entry bookkeeping.

It seems likely that the decreed normal school was more utopian wishful thinking than reality, and the need for greater training in religious life was not even addressed. In 1860 alone six postulants were "given the holy habit" so that they could be sent out to teach as Brothers. A novice, in fact, was the superior in a house with six professed Brothers. A Father Dalton noted in a letter to Sorin that the situation was awkward, and the novice would be made to feel it. Another of the novices, Brother Gregory, wrote Sorin to say that he was doing the best he could with his studies and that he had taken his students all the way to square roots. On the other hand, when the pastor asked him if he could teach geometry and algebra, he had to admit that he could not. "You know," he told Sorin, "there are very few among the Brethren who can or do teach these branches."

The lack of religious training was on the mind of Brother Philip when he wrote Sorin in February of 1860 begging to be allowed to return to Notre Dame to begin his novitiate year because: "I do not or cannot feel happy in my present state, as I am neither a religious or a worldly person."

Reform was once again on the minds of the provincial chapter delegates in 1861 when they decreed that no new foundations were to be made so that as many Brothers as possible might make their novitiate. It was also decided that both priest and Brother novices would take their courses at the university. Again, it appears that the decree was utopian. Five more schools were opened before the next provincial chapter.

In 1865 the provincial chapter again recommended that all Brothers destined to teach in parochial schools be solidly grounded in the subjects they were to teach. On the other hand, the chapter delegates found that, when some young people were too well educated, they soon realized they were well equipped to get along in the world and left. The recommendation was made that only those who were professed or twenty-five years of age be allowed to study the "higher branches."

Father Sorin seems to have been aware enough of the need for change that in a circular letter of 1870 he announced that the chief object of the next General Chapter would be to raise the standards of the schools even at the cost of closing some, in order, he said, "to fill our scholasticates." What scholasticate he was referring to isn't clear. What is clear is that nothing much changed as a result of the chapter.

In 1872 Brother Gabriel was writing despairingly to Sorin that" "I am afraid our community will not succeed as a teaching body. A Brother cannot teach what he does not know. Yet it frequently happens that he undertakes it." Something of what he had in mind is evident in a letter from Brother John Chrysostom in Galveston to Sorin that same year. He commented that one of the teachers, Brother Maurice, was not competent to teach German. "The little boys bring their duties to me to show the corrections he

makes and then they will say that he should learn to spell and that they can teach him themselves."

One can almost feel the rage in Father Cooney's report on the untrained Brothers in the schools. "The practice of sending out such subjects to teach," he argued, "cannot be blessed. They are a curse to the community. They should be kept in the novitiate....How sending them out this way, not even 'half-baked' but before they were put into the oven, can be justified I fail to see....discontented, discouraged, complaining against superiors are the fatal consequences of such a policy. Where there are so many unavoidable causes of dampening their ardor in the work of God, they justly complain of the avoidable cause." His exhibit "A" was St. Joseph College in Cincinnati, where he found that many of the classes were as advanced as their teacher, who, because of their teaching load, had no time to study. Even worse was the situation in Lafayette, where one of the teachers, Brother David, had no idea of what teaching was. Said Cooney, "Without experience either in teaching or in the ways of the country, without vows, without even the opportunity to learn his assumed duties and what they require, how could he be expected to succeed and be anything else but a weight on the community?"

There was certainly no clear improvement when, in 1877, Father L'Etourneau noted that three Brothers at Alton were not qualified to teach properly. They couldn't pronounce or cause to be pronounced correctly the English language. "We should insist upon regular study among the 'mission' Brothers,"" he remarked with some understatement, "for they are much in need of improvement." Father Sorin responded in a way again in 1878 by announcing that no novice should leave the novitiate without having acquired an education to teach a class.

The use of the novitiate as a teacher training institute, however, meant that either teacher training or training in religious life would receive a good deal less attention than it deserved. Indeed, Father Alexius Granger noted in 1884 that a good deal of good that had been expected from community schools was not realized, very often because of the number of defections from the Brotherhood. He ascribed the losses to the poor novitiate-schoolhouse. "They have been expected," he observed, " to study and at the same time to follow the strict rule of the novitiate. But, as a matter of fact, they have done neither. Both studies and Novitiate have been unsatisfactory."

Historians have long noted that the latter part of the nineteenth century was the period in which the United States became or began to become a modern nation. One of the characteristics of that process was the professionalization of a large number of occupations, from government civil service to civil engineering. Included in the movement was teaching, albeit at a somewhat slower pace than some of the other professions.

The Brothers soon got a taste of what the changes could mean when Bishop Dwenger of Fort Wayne in 1879 established a system of diocesan supervision by a school board made up of eleven priests. The board would prescribe studies, textbooks, and, most ominous of all, the qualifications of the teachers, all of whom were to be examined by the board. The situation was not so threatening for newly minted teaching

Brothers, inasmuch as Rev. Thomas Walsh, president of Notre Dame, was made a member of the board and given the task of examining them, a process not unlike putting a fox to guard the henhouse. Those already teaching in Fort Wayne, however, faced acute embarrassment. Wrote Brother Ephrem in 1882: "Every year demands more from our teachers, but instead of these demands being satisfied, I find that like the crab we are going backwards. We will be required to give a public examination and exhibition. I dread the exposure.. Exam! And not one off us competent to read a sentence correctly. No accomplishment. And still we are expected to compete with cultured ladies and gentlemen who direct the public schools."

Brother Daniel, writing from the school in Bay City, Michigan, also noted the growing professionalization that was taking place. "Schools are not now what they were many years ago," he observed. "There are improvements in the art of teaching as there are in other arts and sciences, and the teacher who wishes to excel must know them. We see the great teachers of the country well supplied with professional books and periodicals.... We find all the leading physicians, lawyers and men of all the arts and sciences with their professional literature. Why should teachers be without it?"

The community did, indeed, recognize the seriousness of the situation and begin to make more strenuous efforts to improve the training of Brothers, at least in the secular subjects, in the 1880's and 90's. Between 1884 land 1886 Sacred Heart College at Watertown, Wisconsin was used as a normal school for Brothers, but the expenses were too great for the small number involved, and it had to be closed. In 1890 the community created a board of examiners made up of Father Walsh and the superiors of the schools to certify Brother teachers by examination. In 1895 the Provincial Chapter decreed that the program of studies for young Brothers would be the same as the preparatory classes for the University of Notre Dame except that commercial course would be substituted for Latin and Greek. Clearly the instant panacea was found; in the next chapter of 1898 the committee on foundations urged that no new schools be opened until "we are better equipped."

The committee need not have worried about opening new schools. By that time the trend was clearly and sharply in the other direction. The depression-ridden '90s saw the Brothers closing or relinquishing to much lower paid nuns ten schools. By 1901 only three were left. In the next decade one would close and two, Holy Trinity in Chicago and Central Catholic in Fort Wayne, would become harbingers of the future for the Brothers of Holy Cross by becoming high schools. In 1909 a Brothers house of studies would be opened on the Notre Dame campus. The Brothers were preparing to join the ranks of the professionals with a vengeance.

For something over sixty years, then, Brothers of Holy Cross had struggled against enormous odds to bring a modicum of basic skills, discipline and, most important of all to them, religious awareness to the struggling church in America. The children they taught were primarily the children of the poor because Catholics in general were among the hewers of wood and carriers of water in the 19th century America. Often enough the young religious worked in ramshackle buildings too small for the number of students they

taught, tried to teach without adequate books or other school supplies, and without adequate training to perform the duties they were sent to accomplish. Even worse, they were rarely afforded the opportunity to assimilate adequately the values of their religious calling and yet were sometimes sent to live lonely lives in boarding houses filled with strangers. Still, there were always laborers for the vineyard. The final decades of the 19th century, however, must have been disheartening in the extreme for the teaching Brothers as they saw their numbers dwindling, their schools closing and their apostolic usefulness apparently coming to an end. Small wonder that many did not persevere in the community. Perhaps the miracle is that some heroic individuals struggled on in the darkness, unable to see much hope for the future, but willingly giving of themselves until they were finally laid to rest in the community cemetery. Whatever else they may have accomplished or failed to accomplish, those Brothers surely left their successors food for thought and precedents to ponder.