

EARLY 20th CENTURY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE ROLE OF THE BROTHERS OF HOLY CROSS

by

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Background

The French Revolution bears an ironic responsibility for generating works of charity. To counteract the devastating social effects of that late 18th century uprising, numerous religious communities were founded in France, among them the Congregation of Holy Cross.

In 1820, conditions then permitting, the bishop of Le Mans and several diocesan priests prevailed upon P. Jacques François Dujarié, one of their number and a veteran of the difficult days of clerical persecution, to organize some laymen into a teaching force designed to assist in restoring Catholic elementary education to the scattered parishes of the diocese. For fifteen years Fr. Dujarié supervised the growth of this small band, known as the Brothers of St. Joseph, and managed, with the aid of one or two among their number and the collaboration of the LaSalle Christian Brothers and the Ploermel Brothers, to provide them with some fundamental religious training as well as with the minimal academic background needed to begin their apostolic work.

Illness, however, forced Fr. Dujarié to hand over his fledgling group to someone else. Ready to assist was P. Basile-Antoine Moreau, also of Le Mans, who himself had organized a small number of diocesan priests to specialize in preaching missions and substituting where necessary throughout the diocese.

Fr. Moreau's dream was to establish not only priests, but brothers and sisters as well, in one united family of apostolic religious. Fr. Dujarié's request was seen as a providential moment, and Fr. Moreau readily accepted responsibility for the brothers. Merging them officially in 1837 with the priests, Fr. Moreau called the group the Association of Holy Cross. In 1857, when through Propaganda Fide papal approbation was granted to the community, the title became the Congregation of Holy Cross.

From 1835 Fr. Moreau enhanced the religious formation of the brothers and saw to their continuing effectiveness in small parish schools throughout the area.

But Fr. Moreau's horizons spread far beyond the diocese of Le Mans in France. He had a zealous missionary spirit that prompted him to begin almost immediately to send his best religious to respond to the cries of bishops in four needy areas of the world--Algeria, India, Canada and the United States. It was to this latter country that in 1841 he sent a small contingent of six brothers and one priest to assist Bishop Céléstin de la Hailandière of Vincennes, Indiana, in establishing parochial schools and auxiliary services for the diocese.

Presence in Elementary Education

Beginning that year and expanding its vision as well as its presence over the next fifty years, the small missionary group began apostolic ministry in the south-central area of Indiana, and then a year later in the northern part of the state at the

present site of the University of Notre Dame near South Bend. During these fifty years the brothers spread throughout the midwestern part of the U.S. and even ventured to the eastern seaboard, taking on at various times and for various periods responsibility for some seventy-six elementary schools in thirteen states. (1) The need for Catholic elementary education was great in this pioneering era of U.S. development, and the Brothers of Holy Cross were able to respond by reason of their numbers, their sacrificial generosity and their capability to recruit willing young men not only from among the French immigrant families they came to serve, but from among lads of Irish and German extraction as well.

Despite the significant and effective growth of the brothers' presence during the last half of the 1800s in elementary education, the turn of the century found them paradoxically closing or withdrawing from almost all of the seventy-six apostolates undertaken between 1841 and 1893.

Reasons for Change

Three compelling reasons contributed to this turn of events. Fr. James A. Burns, C.S.C., an eminent educator and administrator in the first part of this century, and Mr. Ralph E. Weber, biographer of Notre Dame's Fr. John Zahm and observer of Holy Cross congregational development in the early part of the 20th century, both point out two of the reasons that the brothers' involvement in primary education did not continue. (2)

The first was that Catholic sisters were, in their numbers, becoming available for and engaging in primary education up to the eighth grade for such a meager stipend that men simply could not compete. Burns noted in 1912, "A number of the teaching brotherhoods that came to the country during the Immigration Period have grown and prospered; but they have not, generally speaking, kept pace with the growth of the communities of women which were established here at the same time. Vocations to the religious life appear to be more plentiful among women than among men." (3) He added, "Brothers who teach in the parish schools generally receive from \$300 to \$400 per year. Notwithstanding this, the per capita saving in their schools is not much, if any, above that in the schools of the Sisters. The living expenses of women are not so high as those of men. Nor do men understand as women do the art of economizing." (4) He noted: "The salary most commonly received by Sisters engaged in parish-school work is \$20 per month, or \$200 per year...." (5) And Weber states: "The teaching Sisters replaced the Brothers because of the great savings involved. One estimate is that one Brother taught for one-half the cost of a male public school teacher and that a Sister taught for one-half the Brother's salary. An increase in vocations to the Sisterhood, together with permission for the Sisters to teach boys up to the age of thirteen, also began the decline of the teaching Brothers' power." (6)

The second reason for the decline in the brothers' presence in primary education was that the University of Notre Dame, from

its founding in 1842 a principal focus of apostolic presence for both the priests and brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross and its motherhouse in the U.S., required both money and manpower to support its continuing growth and development. Much of the funding and many of the brothers formerly assigned to primary education elsewhere were husbanded by provincial superiors to contribute to the enhancement of the various programs at Notre Dame, including the primary, preparatory and college levels. In Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer, C.S.C.'s, unpublished 1937 manuscript, "The First Hundred Years," a brief history of the Holy Cross Brothers in the United States, he notes, "Schools were given up for various reasons, not the least among them being the need for more Brothers in various capacities at the expanding University of Notre Dame." (7) Burns also remarks: "Most of these parish schools were eventually relinquished. The chief cause of this was the scarcity of vocations to the teaching brotherhood, together with the remarkable growth of the College of Notre Dame, which necessitated an even greater concentration of the Community at home." (8)

It must be borne in mind that though the University of Notre Dame has traditionally been associated with the priests of Holy Cross, the brothers, as proper to the egalitarian nature of the congregation, have been an integral factor in its founding and staffing--especially the first hundred of its hundred and fifty years--in campus roles ranging from highly effective professorships to prefecting and teaching on the primary and

secondary levels, to clerical skills, and to the most common but necessary maintenance tasks. The brothers were effectively in total control of the "minims" (the primary school section) and the preparatory department of the university. It was at great sacrifice to the independent development of the society of brothers in the congregation that so many of them were withdrawn from various apostolic commitments and returned to the stateside motherhouse to shore up its manpower force and assure its fiscal well being.

A third reason contributed to the decline of the brothers in primary education, a reason that with hindsight was perhaps fortuitously beneficial. As the 20th century began, bishops were beginning with some urgency to seek male religious to conduct boys' secondary school departments in their dioceses. This new and ready market for the brothers' talents thus became a prime focus of apostolic activity. Unfortunately, few Holy Cross brothers had as yet been adequately prepared to engage in secondary school administration or teaching. Fr. John Zahm, provincial superior in 1905 wrote, "We have only to look around to see that, in every country, the Governments are tending to exact official grades of those destined for the mission of teaching. It is prudent to take immediate measures to that effect, so that we may be ready for any eventuality. Besides, if solid piety already possesses...an efficacy so deeply rooted that nothing can take its place, how much more would not the same piety effect, when armed with profound knowledge and

requirements, slowly and perfectly acquired, and amply sufficient for all branches of learning, rather than those superficial attainments, vague and disconnected and hastily and incompletely stored in mind." (9) This situation was also alluded to by Br. Ephrem in his manuscript, "The First Hundred Years." (10)

The problem of vocation recruitment affected the brothers' potential for an adequate response to the needs of the dioceses. In 1917 Burns stated, "...It remains that men teachers are, by common consent, preferable for boys of high-school age. We would have a larger number of Brothers' high schools if we had more teaching Brothers. One of the greatest needs in Catholic education at the present time is an increase of vocations to the teaching brotherhoods." (11)

These three reasons--the emergence of religious sisters, the recall of brothers to Notre Dame, and the urgent request for male religious as secondary school teachers--precipitated events in the first part of the 20th century that were destined to determine the apostolic directions of the brothers for the next fifty years.

Internal Complications

However, clear as all these portents seemed, the change was not achieved without difficulty at times verging on near catastrophe.

Internal tensions concerning equality between the priests and brothers of Holy Cross had by the turn of the century

provoked a critical juncture in their relationships. Some brothers, with what they felt to be adequate reason, incited enough rancor among their number to cause dissension and even prompt a formal request to Rome that the brothers and priests be separated juridically on all levels of government to permit them freely to seek their own independent fortunes. This request was denied out of hand, but the Vatican insisted that the clearly valid complaints of both brothers and priests must be effectively addressed at once. Province superiors saw the resolution to tensions to be found in the equal but independent development of the brothers' capacities to receive higher education and independently to conduct their own institutions. Many of the priests were supportive of the brothers' attempts at seeking redress, but they also realized that the apostolic development of the priests' society was in some sense restrained by the needs and concerns of the brothers. They too yearned for some degree of autonomy.

General chapters in the early years of the 20th century, therefore, mandated the establishment of programs to assure the higher education of the brothers and to permit them to be as independent as possible in the operation of the few secondary schools at which they ministered. The latter, however, were diocesan schools, in which bishops habitually placed "business superintendents" from among their priests, although the principal was a brother. At times the superintending was more akin to governing, and the brother administrator felt he had little or no

authority in his own school.

Several brothers influential in implementing the goals of these decisions toward greater independence in apostolic ministry became highly regarded educators and administrators over the years. Among them--and there were many--were Brothers Justin Dwyer, Aidan O'Reilly, Agatho Heiser, Englebert Leisse and Ephrem O'Dwyer. It is to the latter figure that we are more indebted than to the others for his role in promoting the identity, image, and independence of the brothers in the apostolate.

Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer

Br. Ephrem, Dennis O'Dwyer, was an immigrant, recruited in Ireland by two native Irish Holy Cross religious to come to the U.S. to join the community. This he did in 1907 at the age of nineteen and at the height of the crucial period of intracongregational tension. His intelligence and shrewdness and a bold and energetic aggressiveness set him apart early as a capable teacher, administrator and defender of the rights of the brothers. He joined almost at once after his perpetual profession of vows in seeking a resolution to the problems the brothers were encountering. Assigned in the years after his novitiate to work in the few secondary schools among the brothers' apostolates, he gained experience in both classroom and office. In 1923 he was, as part of the effort by the community since 1906 to foster professionalism among the brothers, given time to complete his undergraduate work and earn a masters in

education.

It was during this sabbatical that Br. Ephrem, responding to the state of Indiana's recent emphasis on accreditation of teachers, and recognizing the still inadequate organization of the brothers' talents toward certification, engaged in a study of the heretofore relatively neglected educational records of the brothers at Notre Dame and prepared a roster of men and their status. The result was the immediate accreditation of some brothers and the establishing of concrete educational goals for others toward secondary classroom or administrative licensing.

Br. Ephrem described this period: "The General Chapter of 1906 formulated plans for a revival of teacher-training, and the Very Rev. Gilbert Français, Superior-General, whole-heartedly supported the movement. Improvement began under the provincialship of Rev. Andrew Morrissey. Dujarié Hall was built as a new House of Studies and opened on August 15, 1907. Fort Wayne grade school became a standard high school in 1909, and the next year Holy Trinity in Chicago assumed high school status. The [General] Chapter of 1912 promulgated further decrees for the welfare of the Brothers and the advancement of their educational aspirations. Sacred Heart Preparatory College, Watertown, Wisconsin, was converted into a Juniorate for postulants to the Brotherhood. This provision for high school work at Watertown removed the postulants from Dujarié Hall, making that building a residence for college students only. The Brothers were given direction of Holy Cross College, New Orleans, a preparatory

boarding and day school."

He continued, "The State of Indiana does not claim jurisdiction over private schools; but, when requested, it recognizes and 'commissions' private schools which meet the standards of public schools as regards teachers and equipment. Because of college entrance, this recognition is rated as desirable, and has been so considered since the plan first originated in 1913. It has meant much to the Brothers of Holy Cross, for it has provided a sufficient reason for the thorough training of teachers." (12)

New Directions

Fr. Gilbert Français, superior general, wrote in a letter circulated to the congregation in 1912 that a new future was open to the brothers--that although they had lost the parochial schools, Catholic high schools had grown and become more indispensable. "From this time forward," he proclaimed, "the High School is the outstanding vocation of our Brothers!" He felt that instead of being buried in the general works of the congregation, a new field with ample scope for personal initiative and opportunity was opening to the brothers. "In a word, the High School furnishes an element of durable and holy peace between the two branches of our society. Both will hereafter march unitedly forward like two distinct forces that make but one, and that aid each other mutually." (13) Fr. Français was overjoyed that in finding a resolution to the issue

of apostolic thrust for the brothers, internal congregational tensions could, he hoped, simultaneously be laid to rest.

Jay P. Dolan of Notre Dame in his book The American Catholic Experience, notes that "in the first half of the 20th century, brothers became especially involved in high school teaching."

(14) Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer was an integral component in the expanding role of the Brothers of Holy Cross in this educational evolution. A more thorough description of his involvement is to be found in my book, soon to be published by the University of Notre Dame Press, entitled, A More Perfect Legacy: A Portrait of Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer, C.S.C., 1888-1978. As a councilor on both the provincial and general administrations in Holy Cross in the early to mid-century development of the congregation, Br. Ephrem worked toward the practical distribution of teaching brothers and administrators into diverse areas of the United States, planning for and undertaking not only day secondary schools but boarding institutions, boys' homes and colleges. Just before the Second World War the brothers taught in only seven secondary schools in the U.S. and provided fewer than a hundred religious for their faculties.

In 1945 the general chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross took the momentous step of declaring the societies of priests and brothers autonomous and homogeneous on the provincial level, though united still in their constitutions and in a common governmental council on the general level. This move paved the way for virtually independent development in both societies.

Responding to critical post-war needs, Br. Ephrem, not surprisingly elected to serve as the first provincial of the autonomous province of brothers, had in mind a concrete plan of expansion and entrenchment for the brothers as initiators and operators of quality institutions of secondary education throughout the United States. In ten years as provincial, he not only solidified the brothers' presence in the diocesan owned high schools, but he also opened fifteen new institutions, most of them province owned, and managed the subdivision of the one United States brothers' province into three separate governmental units headquartered in different areas of the country.

The impetus of expansion continued beyond Br. Ephrem's term of office, and, according to statistics available in Holy Cross community directories and the Catholic Directory, by 1967 there were thirty-two secondary schools in the U.S. staffed by the brothers, who numbered over five hundred and fifty directly involved in those institutions, about five percent of the over twelve thousand brothers of all congregations in the U.S. at that time. By contrast, in the early nineties, some fifty years after the serious effort began to broaden their presence in secondary education, and some twenty-five years after the peak of their influential presence, the Brothers of Holy Cross had remaining only nineteen of their secondary schools, and their numbers in them were decreased to fewer than two hundred, an even smaller percentage of the equally decimated total number of some six thousand brothers in the U.S.

Forced by circumstances out of primary education as the new century dawned, affected by intracongregational tensions and difficulties as efforts were made on all levels to enable the brothers to merge into the secondary educational level of the early 20th century, and impacted by the requests of bishops and pastors attempting to meet the needs of their people in education, the Congregation of Holy Cross, led by its general and provincial superiors and by such notable individuals in that field as Fr. James Burns, Fr. William Cunningham, and Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer, facilitated the transition of the brothers from largely rural or small town Catholic primary educational ministry to that of urban secondary schools.

Today and into the Future

The presence of the brothers in education remains visible and tangible, if decreasingly so. To offset this phenomenon, the spirit of their educational ministry is being absorbed and perpetuated by those whom they have educated and who have responded to the needs of today by collaboratively assuming the burden of assuring Catholic education for their own children and grandchildren. Thanks to the dogged determination and creative and generous adaptability of the pioneering men of Holy Cross, the congregation has played a significant and effective role in the fostering of Christian education in the United States, a role that continues, if not as noticeably in its physical presence, at least in its perduringly enviable spirit.

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Notes

(1) See research of Br. Thomas Moser, C.S.C., "A Chronological Listing of the Schools, Activities, etc., Conducted by the Brothers of Holy Cross in the U.S." Midwest Province Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana.

(2) See Rev. James A. Burns, *The Growth and Development of the Catholic School System*, Benziger Brothers, NY, 1912; James A. Burns, *Catholic Education: A Study of Conditions*, Longmans, Green and Co., NY, 1917; and Ralph E. Weber, *Notre Dame's John Zahm*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1961.

(3) Burns, *Growth and Development*, p. 97.

(4) Ibid., p. 282.

(5) Ibid., p. 280.

(6) Weber, *Notre Dame's John Zahm*, p. 157. Weber also derived some of his material from Burns and from interviews with Fr. Thomas Crumley, C.S.C., in 1953.

(7) See Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer, "The First Hundred Years," unpublished manuscript as quoted in "Bulletin of the Educational Conferences of the Brothers of Holy Cross, Vol. I, No. 8, June, 1937, p. 12, Midwest Province Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana.

(8) Burns, *Growth and Development*, p. 104.

(9) Fr. John A. Zahm, Circular Letter of October 15, 1905, as quoted in notes of Br. Aidan O'Reilly.

(10) O'Dwyer, p. 13.

- (11) Burns, *Catholic Education*, p. 89.
- (12) O'Dwyer, p. 13.
- (13) Weber, p. 165.
- (14) Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*,
Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1985, p. 399.