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Holy Cross in the Eastern United States Before 1948: 1997-7
Tracing the Roots of the Eastern Province

by

Augustine J. Peverada, C.S.C.

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On May 3rd, 1948 (The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross), Fr. Albert Cousineau, Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross, published a letter announcing the establishment of a Vice-Province for those members of the Priests' Society in the United States who were working in the eleven eastern states. (1)

The Authorities of the General Administration felt that such an arrangement was an equitable division of the ecclesiastical make up of the United States for half of the Catholic population of the country resided in this area. The decision to form this Vice-Province was not one made in haste. Documents in the Archives of the General Administration in Rome and in the Indiana Province Archives at Notre Dame show that preparations and plans undertaken for this move date back at least two decades. Fr. James Wesley Donohue, the previous Superior General (1926-1938), had been a vocal proponent of the idea as documented in his letters during his administration. Fr. Albert Cousineau was very much aware of the need for administrative subdivisions in the American and Canadian provinces of the Congregation, which had grown very rapidly in the thirties and forties. The Canadian Province had already been divided in the mid-forties.

In this paper I would like to briefly review the development of Holy Cross in the United States and show how diligently the Superior General, Fr. Albert Cousineau, and the American Provincial, Fr. Thomas Steiner, worked to bring about the formation of the Eastern Province. Both these men were warm personal friends and when the Generalate was located at Notre Dame they met quite often and shared their thoughts about the development of the community in the United States.

For background, it might be well to trace the development of activities of the members of the Congregations of Holy Cross, Priests, Brothers and Sisters, within this area of the United States. It is a well-known fact that the Congregation of Holy Cross came to the eastern part of the United States as early as four years after the signing of the "Fundamental Act" which created the congregation. In 1841 Fr. Edward Sorin and the first group of six Holy Cross Brothers landed in New York. They stayed at St. Peter's Rectory for a few days and continued their journey to Indiana. Holy Cross personnel were not at this time destined to stay in the east, but went to southern Indiana and later to northern Indiana to begin the University of Notre Dame du Lac in 1842.

Fr. Moreau in Le Mans and Fr. Sorin in Notre Dame were receiving letters from eastern bishops as early as 1844 requesting permanent Holy Cross presence in the eastern part of the country. (2) Letters in community archives of Priests, Brothers and Sisters show that in 1848 a group of CSC Brothers opened Assumption school at York and Jay Streets in Brooklyn, conducted it for a year, and then turned it over to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This foundation makes them the first of the teaching brotherhoods to become permanently established in the United States. (3) Disagreements over teachers' salaries caused the Holy Cross Brothers to withdraw.

Holy Cross Sisters in the East

Holy Cross Sisters, all three congregations - The Marianites, The Sisters of the Holy Cross and The Sisters of Holy Cross and the Seven Dolors - began their continuous stay in the Eastern United States in 1854, when the Marianites came to conduct an industrial school in the French parish of St. Vincent de Paul on 23rd Street in New York City. Six Sisters, two each from France, Canada and Louisiana, pioneered the project. It became a rather thriving institution and focal point for the Congregation. Because of internal dissension between higher superiors, the nuns were withdrawn and the Postulants and thirteen Novices who had received the habit were transferred to Philadelphia on May 7th, 1856. The community of nuns returned in 1861 and established another threefold work; an asylum, a workroom and a school for French speaking children in Our Lady of Marcy Parish, New York, and in 1865 they were asked to staff the French Hospital. (4)

The second group of nuns, the Sisters of the Holy Cross from Notre Dame, operated schools in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore in the 1850's and 1860's. The first school established in Philadelphia was the House of the Immaculate Conception, an industrial school and later also an academy. In the ensuing years, other parish schools were opened in Philadelphia. Then suddenly "because of difficulty with Bishop James Wood," Fr. Sorin closed all these schools in 1864 and a controversy arose between Le Mans and Notre Dame. The Holy Cross Sisters from Notre Dame conducted several schools and academies in the Washington, D.C. areas in the 1870's and 1880's. In 1875 they founded and operated St. Catherine's Normal Institute, the first Catholic Normal School in the United States. (5)

The third group of nuns, the Sisters of Holy Cross and the Seven Dolors, also worked in the East, especially among the French speaking immigrants from Canada. Between 1881 and 1900 they accepted the direction of fifteen parish schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. The first mission was St. Joseph's Convent School, North Grosvenordale, Connecticut in 1881. The work of these Sisters spread throughout New England and this branch of the Sisters confined their work to the elementary level. The quality of this effort was, on the whole, recognized as excellent. Working on the elementary level is not glamorous. It demands love, self-effacement, and persevering effort. It was a major contribution of the Sisters to the growth of Catholic education in New England. In addition to elementary schools, the Sisters also staffed six secondary parochial schools between 1934 and 1972, as well as two commercial schools. The crowning achievement was the establishment of Notre Dame College in Manchester, New Hampshire, which was chartered by the State of New Hampshire in 1950 as a four year liberal arts college. In 1975 it instituted a Master's Degree program.

Holy Cross Priests, Brothers and Sisters worked together in the diocese of Philadelphia in the pre-Civil War years. In 1852 two Holy Cross priests from Notre Dame, Fr. Richard Shortis and Fr. Dennis Wheeler, took over the operation of St. Joseph College in Susquehanna. Holy Cross sisters from Notre Dame operated our academy in the same location. A disastrous fire in 1864 put an end to the operation of the college. But the Holy Cross presence was ended there in 1858 when Fr. Sorin withdrew the priests to Notre Dame as well as the nuns.

Fr. Moreau's Visit, 1857

In 1857 Fr. Moreau visited the area that was later to become the Eastern Province. His companion was a newly ordained American Holy Cross priest, Fr. Louis-Job Letourneau. He acted as Moreau's interpreter. Moreau first visited Archbishop Hughes of New York and then went on to Montreal, South Bend and Chicago. This visit concluded, as it had begun, in the Eastern part of the United States. Moreau visited all of the Congregation's schools in Philadelphia and found things to be in good order. Nothing but complete trust in Sorin's ability to manage the day-to-day supervising of the houses in America obtained. (8)

The necessity to insure the separation and autonomy of the Holy Cross Sisters from the Priests and Brothers, according to the desires of the Holy See, was the proximate occasion for the events which happened next. In connection with the complicated details, there existed the tension between Sorin's desire for complete supervision of all Holy Cross personnel in the United States and the wishes of the founder for a different distribution of authority. (9) On the latter score, there is a clear indication of Moreau's plan in a letter he wrote to the Project of Propaganda in Rome, dated January 7th, 1864. In this communication, he suggested that, "At the time of the retreat, erect the three (American) vicariates (10) into one sole province with headquarters in New York, conformably to the desire of the general chapter, and on this occasion appoint a Provincial chosen from outside the three actual vicars." (11) Moreau and Sorin had differing views as to how the community should develop in the United States. For many years the chief thrust of Holy Cross activities in America would center around Notre Dame.

The over-concentration of the community in the Midwest was often commented on by Fr. Donohue, Superior General from 1926-1938. In his circulars he repeatedly suggested "decentralization of the community from Notre Dame." It was largely due to him that Holy Cross was to move eastward. (12) Those urges of Donohue to decentralize the community were not to remain empty theoretical ones. It was due to his initiative that a permanent move eastward for Holy Cross and the eventual establishment of an Eastern Province was effected. The first foundation in the East was made at North Dartmouth, Massachusetts in 1934 when Bishop James Cassidy of Fall River wrote to Fr. Donohue, whom he had met a few years before when Donohue had conducted a parish mission in Taunton. The bishop directed our Superior General to purchase the Old Crary Hospital on Tucker Road in North Dartmouth. (13) Even though this property and property purchased later at North Easton were houses of the U.S. Province of the Congregation, the General Administration had been heavily involved in their establishment and their funding. North Dartmouth became the site of Holy Cross Seminary and the headquarters of the Eastern Mission Band. The title to these properties was held by the General Administration, a corporation in its own right, and the operation expenses of the seminary were subsidized by the General Administration. (14) So it would seem that the Superior General had plans to establish a group of houses in the East which were more dependent on the General Administration than on the province to which they belonged. The Priests assigned to these houses all had the fourth vow which pledged them to go anywhere in the world that the Superior General might choose to send them.

Donohue's term of office came to an end with the Chapter of 1938, a meeting that discussed at length the possibility of establishing an Eastern Vice-Province. He was succeeded by

Fr. Albert Cousineau from the Canadian Province. The actions of the Chapter of 1938 brought to the fore the developments in the community that would lead to the establishment of the Eastern Vice-Province.

Chapter of 1938

The Chapter was held at Notre Dame, starting July 5th. Many subjects of interest to the capitulants were brought up and five of the twenty-one days of the Chapter were devoted to the discussion of an Eastern Province. The Superior General addressed the capitulants and spoke favorably of a move to establish an Eastern Province. (15) He spoke of the rapid growth of the community in the past four or five years:

As long as our founder, Fr. Moreau, directed the destinies of Holy Cross, our institute spread rapidly, sinking its roots in many lands and, thriving in all of them, in France, Italy, Algiers, the United States, Poland, Canada and India...

I plead with you, to help every proposition which would foster our development and expansion as a congregation. Let us realize that our first responsibilities are to the tree of Holy Cross. If it be vigorous and healthy the branches will be also...I plead with you, therefore, to favor recommendations which will make for the international development of Holy Cross. Over centralization not only means the death of a religious institute, but also the consequent decay of the branches, however healthy and vigorous they may be. (16)

The American Provincial, Fr. James Burns, also spoke up to defend the proposal. He felt that such a proposal would help the recruitment of vocations in the East and that an on-site Provincial in the East would better supervise activities of the community. (17) Then Fr. George Sauvage, the Procurator General, spoke in favor of the new province citing what he called "supernatural reasons." (18) Much heated and emotional debate followed and the effects of the establishment of an Eastern Province upon the fortunes of the University of Notre Dame were assessed. Bro. Ephrem O'Dwyer proposed and Bro. Agatho Heiser seconded the motion that the establishment of an Eastern Province be brought to a vote - the results were: yes - 14; no - 15; blank - 12. The motion failed by one vote. (19)

Fr. Albert Cousineau became the new Superior General in 1938. Membership in the Congregation was rising in all provinces and solving of problems presented by this became the first priority of the new Superior General. He shared the philosophy of his predecessor, Fr. Donahue and felt that the large province in Canada and the United States should be divided. In his visitations to the members of all provinces, he felt the pulse and probed the ideas of the members. As a result the Canadian Province was divided into the French-Canadian and the Arcadian Vice-Province on July 9th, 1943. (20)

In the United States, many members gave him proposals to ponder. Fr. Leo Flood suggested that two provinces be set up: one comprising the University of Notre Dame, the University of

Portland, Holy Cross Seminary, Moreau Seminary, the Community House, the Community Infirmary, the Novitiate in South Bend, and Chile; and the other province made up of the balance of the institutions in the United States, including the house in Washington, D.C. (21) Fr. Cousineau, in the early 40's during his visits to Holy Cross houses in the United States, continued to seek the mind of the members. He also carefully examined the financial situation of each institution. He concluded that the financial condition of King's College (established in 1946 in Wilkes-Barre, PA) would cover the deficiency of other eastern houses. (22) Although it was only two years old, the returning G.I.'s were enrolling in large numbers and with their tuitions and fees being paid by the government, the college was well in the black. The other houses within what would be the boundaries of an Eastern Province were houses of formation and the Mission Band. The Mission Band was operating in the black but what little reserve it had, the Superiors were planning to use to purchase a new headquarters and Retreat House. The Novitiate at North Dartmouth and the seminaries were supported by the Provincial Administration at Notre Dame. Interest in the establishment of an Eastern Province was actively promoted by Fr. Thomas Duffy, then Superior of the Eastern Mission Band. On February 9th, 1948, he suggested that the mission in Chile be turned over to the proposed Eastern Province as it would give the new Province a "foreign mission" as an incentive to work and obtain vocations. (23)

In early 1948 Fr. Cousineau was about to begin his visitations of community houses in the Midwest. Before he undertook this trip he asked Fr. Steiner to take a vote of his council as to the members' feelings on the formation of an Eastern Vice-Province.

The Provincial Administration at Notre Dame in its discussions upon examining the results that would follow from the separation of the East from the rest of the Province caused Fr. Steiner to write on February 16th, 1948: "Though the General and Provincial chapters approved the new Vice-Province, I question the opportuneness of erecting a Vice-Province at this time." (24) Two days later, Feb. 18th, 1948, Fr. Cousineau wrote to Fr. Steiner: "Unless the mother Province accepts to assume the expenditures of the formation of the seminarians and does not impose any salary for the priests working in the new foundation, I do not see how we can come to the erection of a Vice-Province in the East. If we wait until a Vice-Province is self-supporting, it will die before any plan of that sort is materialized." (25)

The contents of Fr. Cousineau's letter of the 18th may have disturbed some of the Provincial Council members, for on February 21st, Fr. Christopher J. O'Toole, the Assistant Provincial at the time, wrote that: "Everyone in the Western Province and the Provincial agreed in principle that a Vice-Province is in order." (26) Shortly afterwards, Fr. Steiner sent to the General a report of the conclusion of the Provincial Council. Financial and manpower matters made up the largest part of the report. It was specific and detailed. As the saying goes, all the t's were crossed and the i's dotted. On March 9th, 1948, the Superior General wrote to Fr. Steiner that the notions about finances and manpower as outlined in the letter of March 9th were very much acceptable. (27)

One last detail about the boundaries of the proposed Eastern Province was taken care of. The first proposal of the boundaries was that only part of Pennsylvania and New York should be included in the new Province. Fr. Steiner felt that the best legal divisions should be state lines, not diocesan boundaries. This meant that the Vice-Province would get all of New York and Pennsylvania. (28) Since all difficulties were being ironed out, Fr. Cousineau notified Fr. Steiner that the General Administration was agreeable to his recommendations. Thus on April 21st he

wrote that all the conditions laid down by the Provincial were accepted by him. (29)

The next day, Fr. Cousineau wrote to Fr. Connerton that the General Council decided to establish the Eastern Vice-Province and the decree would become effective on May 3rd, 1948. The officers of the Vice-Province would be Fr. James Connerton, Vice-Provincial, Fr. Thomas Duffy and Fr. John Lane, Councillors. (30) On April 28th Fr. O'Toole wrote to Fr. Cousineau (Fr. Steiner was en route to Chili for a Provincial Visit): "Personally I feel that the decision of the General Council and yourself has been the finest pioneering move since the time of Fr. Sorin. A Vice-Province will be concrete evidence that we are able to expand and it will help immensely to fasten the attention of the Fathers and Brothers on the work of Holy Cross rather than any particular place." (31)

Much of the correspondence between Fr. Cousineau and Fr. Steiner and his council must have been kept quite confidential, for on April 29th Fr. Cousineau wrote to Fr. Thomas Duffy (newly appointed Assistant Vice-Provincial) in answer to Fr. Duffy's very emotional letter of April 26th: "My only answer to your letter of April 26th is to make you know that the foundation of the Eastern Vice-Province is decided and will be promulgated next May 3rd. I inform you officially that you have been appointed First Assistant to Fr. James W. Connerton and Fr. John Lane is the Second Councillor." (32)

Thus the Eastern Vice-Province came into being. As this study of the correspondence between the principals involved shows, it was the product of much planning and discussion. The religious who were born within the confines of the new Vice-Province, or those working in houses within the area, were given a year to make their choice. Fr. Connerton, in a circular letter dated May 3rd, 1949, listed 53 Priests, 10 Brothers and nearly 50 Professed Seminarians as members of the new Vice-Province.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) The States are Main, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.
- (2) Letters between Bishops and Fr. Sorin copied from the General Archives are found in the Eastern Province Archives. They are dated from March 28, 1844 and go to Feb. 4, 1876.
- (3) From Sea to Shining Sea, Beirne, CSC, p. 20.
- (4) Susquicentennial of the Pledging of the Fundamental Act Creating the Congregation of Holy Cross. Peverada, CSC, pp. 1-2.
- (5) Ibid. pp. 2-3.
- (6) Ibid. p. 3.
- (7) Ibid. p. 4.
- (8) E. Catta and T. Catta, Basil Anthony Moreau, Vol II, p. 614. ff.
- (9) History of the Province and Our Lady of Holy Cross, Fr. Desharnais, p. 11.
- (10) "Vicariate" was the term used before the word "Province" became more widely used.
- (11) Catta, Vol II, p. 613.
- (12) Desharnais, p. 12.
- (13) Peverada, p. 5.
- (14) Controversy over the legality of the actions of Fr. Donohue came up in the Chapter of 1938 and Fr. Donohue defended his actions as being within the provisions of the Constitutions and Canon Law. Minutes of the Chapter of 1938 (General Archives).
- (15) The details of the actions of the capitulants of the Chapter of 1938 relative to the establishment are discussed at length in Fr. John Connolly's excellent paper, An Eastern Province in 1938, delivered at the Eight annual History Conference held at Stonehill College in June 16-18, 1989.
- (16) Fr. Donohue's address to the Chapter (G.A.)
- (17) Fr. Burns' remarks to the Chapter (G.A.)
- (18) Fr. Sauvages remarks to the Chapter (G.A.)
- (19) General Chapter minutes (G.A.)
- (20) Fr. Cousineau's Circular Letter No. 15 (Sept. 15, 1943), p. 12.
- (21) Fr. Leo Flood to Fr. Cousineau, January 26, 1948 (G.A.)
- (22) Fr. Cousineau to Fr. Steiner, February 7, 1948 and March 8, 1948 (G.A.)
- (23) Fr. Thomas Duffy to Fr. Cousineau, February 9, 1948 (G.A.)
- (24) Fr. Steiner to Fr. Cousineau, February 16, 1948 (G.A.)
- (25) Fr. Cousineau to Fr. O'Toole, February 18, 1948 (G.A.)
- (26) Fr. O'Toole to Fr. Cousineau, February 21, 1948 (G.A.)
- (27) Fr. Cousineau to Fr. Steiner, March 9, 1948 (G.A.)
- (28) Fr. Steiner to Fr. Cousineau, March 13, 1948 (G.A.)
- (29) Stipulation accepted by the General Council April 21, 1942, for the foundation of the Eastern Vice-Province in U.S.A. (G.A.)
- (30) Fr. Cousineau to Fr. Connerton, April 22, 1948 (G.A.)
- (31) Fr. O'Toole to Fr. Cousineau, April 28, 1948 (G.A.)
- (32) Fr. Cousineau to Fr. Duffy, April 29, 1948 (G.A.)