

**Christology of Basil Anthony Moreau
Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross**

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The purpose of this work is to research the Christology of the Venerable Anthony Basil Moreau, CSC, founder and first Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Beginning in the 1830s, Moreau set about the work of re-evangelizing the countryside of LeMans, France. He stated his mission succinctly, "We are committed by our vocation to extend the reign of Jesus Christ in the hearts of all people."¹

Of secondary interest are the Marian aspects of his Christology. A particular focus here is the transmission of Father Moreau's Mariology to the Communities which he founded. Specifically, for a future project, not included in this research, is interest in the relevance of Moreau's Marian piety on the Marian devotion of Servant of God, Patrick J. Peyton, CSC.

From his writings we learn that Father Moreau had intense devotion to Mary. In the following meditation his comprehensive Marian spirituality is clearly expressed.

With respect to God, the Heart of Mary is, after that of Jesus Christ, the most precious object of the whole of creation, and consequently the object most worthy of its complacences. The adorable Trinity made it the masterpiece of His power, of His wisdom and of His love; from all eternity the father predestined Mary to be the tabernacle of His divinity; the son chose her among all possible creatures to make her His Mother in time; and the Holy spirit, in Whom resides the fullness of charity, reserved the heart of this Virgin as the sanctuary where He wished to dwell.²

Given his understanding of Mary in the overall role of salvation it would not be possible to study Moreau's Christology without the inclusion of his Marian devotion. Moreau was schooled in Sulpician spirituality which included devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin, and they were intimately associated one to the other.

The Manual tells the seminarians: "Look upon devotion to the Blessed Virgin as the most important of all after devotion to the Sacred Person of

¹ Web page www.nd.edu/vocation, Director of Vocations, Notre Dame, "Our Founder's Legacy."

² Bernard I. Mullahy, CSC. The Spirituality of the Very Reverend Basil Anthony Moreau., p.61

Our Lord. It is necessary to have an unlimited filial confidence in the Blessed Virgin and to go to her in temptations and trials and needs. Each day renew your consecration to her service. The visit to the Blessed Sacrament given in the Manual includes a visit to Mary."³

Father Olier, the founder of the Sulpician Order in Paris, France states that for him the interior of Jesus is inseparable from the interior of Mary; the two hearts are quickened by the same life and the same love.

The main focus of the Basil Moreau's Christology is the cross, subsequently Mary as the Mother of Sorrows is essential in his understanding of Jesus Christ. Moreau in the Circular Letter 28 to the Congregation writes:

The Cross is God's choicest grace, a grace reserved for purifying and strengthening the saints.... After the example of the saints, let us thank God for having initiated us into this secret of providential action on those God loves, because, as you well know this is how God's goodness deals with us.⁴

Integral to his faith in the cross was his understanding of the resurrection as hope of new life. His Christology was Pauline and so he lived in Paul's shadow and proclaimed with him the belief that to die with Christ is to live.

The times in which Moreau lived were difficult for France and especially for the Church. The absence of leadership and education in the faith resulted in Catholics doubting doctrine regarding the mystery of Christ. His realization of the need for correct teachings regarding Christ and the relevance of the gospel were motivational for him as he set about to form communities that would provide faith formation and education. In a Sermon to the Congregation he expresses his convictions regarding the meaning of Christ in the life of the members.

It is Christ who prays, Christ who teaches, Christ who labors, Christ who thinks and wills. Holy Cross religious life is simply cooperating with the

³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴ Circular Letter No. 28. Archives Holy Cross, North Easton, MA.

Head who lives by means of the parts. "Your whole life should have only one purpose, that is, assimilating more and more the thoughts, judgments, desires, words and actions of Jesus Christ." (Sermons 144-145)⁵

At the celebration of the Centenary of the foundation of Holy Cross (1938), the Protonotary Apostolic and Vicar General of Le Mans pays tribute to Father Moreau. His words are clear in the expression not only of Moreau's love for the cross but also of his association of the cross with Mary.

The will to follow Christ on the road of His spiritual conquests means first of all accepting His Cross of Sorrow. This was the counsel of the Master during His lifetime; in our own day it remains His unchanging password. "Father Basil Moreau was well aware of this, he who in his pious longing to unite in his heart the love of Mary to that of Jesus, had dedicated his entire priestly and religious life to the Sorrowful Mother, Our Lady of the Cross."⁶

In the fall of 1855, Father Moreau had an experience which writers refer to as a mystical crisis in his life, a "dark night of the soul". During this crisis he experienced the devil throwing him out of bed and he envisioned the loss of the community. Jacques Grise, CSC, reflects on the renewed strength that Moreau experienced following the "Crisis of 1855". "In vain will we look for another way...than that of Calvary. 'All the Gospel doctrine,' he says, 'is summarized in this science of the foolishness of the cross.'"⁷ While he was in the greatest crisis of his life he continued with his prayer. He later told his followers that when the community retired he remained in the chapel to pray. He said he went from station to station looking for light, and that he would knock on the tabernacle door, waiting for a response. Since this crisis of the "dark night of the soul," occurred toward the end of his life, it exemplifies the consistent depth of his spirituality, relating all to Christ crucified.

⁵ Joel Giallanza, Ed., *A Simple Tool*, 1998, Rome, p. 112.

⁶ Circular Letter of Congregation of Holy Cross, No. 25, 1939, Archives Holy Cross, North Easton, MA.

⁷ Jacques Grise, CSC, *A Simple Tool*, 1998, Rome, p. 46.

Loyalty, fidelity and unity were characteristics of Moreau spirituality. These virtues expressed the Trinitarian aspect of his Christology and his understanding of the cross as an expression of love which has its source in Trinitarian life and communion. For Moreau the cross was God's answer to the healing of the wounds brought about by the disorder of sin. By sanctifying suffering through the expression of love (man's will in conformity with the Divine Will) there would be created a loving espousal such as that enjoyed by the Trinity.⁸ This point of union of wills, and unity of spirit were basic to Father Moreau's spirituality. This oneness of spirit was best expressed in the going forth with united hearts in mission.

Of all the sufferings which the Founder experienced in bringing the Congregation to birth, those which involved the union of the three groups, priests, brothers and sisters, were the most embraced and sustained by his followers. Living in times when families were distressed by a societal revolution, Moreau, knowing of the values of love, loyalty, unity and fidelity which he experienced in his own family was determined to create a religious family which would model these values. Sister Mary Kay Kinberger, M.S.C., of the Marianites of Holy Cross, writes about Moreau's understanding of Trinity and family:

The relationship that the members have had and still have with their own families is brought to the family of Holy Cross. However, the life of God that is in Christ elevates, transforms, and energizes them, so they become a relationship within the family of the new Adam. Moreau saw Holy Cross not as a human family but as a Trinity: "... (Letter 143)⁹

⁸ Kruse, p. 29.

⁹ Mary Kay Kinberger, "Leadership Style of Reverend Basil Moreau," *A Simple Tool*, Rome, 1998, pp. 97-98

Moreau's sense of loyalty was evident in his zeal for the restoration of the Church, especially in France. He passionately labored for the evangelization and restoration of the Church, so devastated by the Revolution. A brief review of the social and political situation in which he lived will help toward appreciation of Moreau's vision for the Church and his emphasis on the cross as its only hope.

Basil Anthony Moreau was born, February 11, 1799, in Laigne-en-Belin, ten miles to the south of Le Mans, France. The French Revolution, (1789-99), was drawing to a close. Basil was the ninth of fourteen children. His father, Louis Moreau, was a wine merchant and his mother, Louise Pioger, came from a family of farmers. The family was not wealthy and the children had little opportunity for an education. A first biographer of Moreau states regarding the family, "Fear of God, love of the Church, prayer in common, a hard working life, filial obedience, respect for authority were for Louis Moreau and his virtuous wife family traditions which they tried to hand on to their children as the best part of the family inheritance."¹⁰ This family inheritance, coupled with the cultural environment of personal and community suffering, influenced Moreau's attitudes toward the cross. When he was born, France had already gone through ten years of revolution. Moreau's formative years were colored with tragedies. "The trauma caused by the Revolution remained with French Catholics for many years."¹¹ The area in which Basil lived was especially affected by the ravages of war. Loyalty to the state was placed above loyalty to the Church. In 1792, 150 priests were put in jail at the Le Mans Mission and later taken, like galley slaves, to Angers and Nantes, and from there deported to Spain. In 1798, there was a second deportation of 55 priests to Rochefort, LaRochelle and

¹⁰ Etienne Catta and Tony Catta, *Basil Anthony Mary Moreau*, Milwaukee, 1955, The Bruce Publishing Co., p. 13.

¹¹ Jean Proust, CSC, "The World in Which Basil Moreau Lived," *A Simple Tool*, p. 1.

the Isle of Re. Forty-two priests were guillotined, massacred, or died in exile. Some abandoned the priesthood and married. Many hid themselves and exercised their ministry underground.¹²

Two significant movements, Gallicanism and Jansenism impacted on both Church and state. Basic to Gallicanism was the belief that the French King and his government possessed the right and privilege to fill ecclesiastical positions, to tax Church property, and to have full authority in the Church courts. Rome had lost the power not only to influence politically but more importantly spiritually and morally. The theories of Gallicanism and the disunity which it created within the Church was cause of great suffering for Moreau throughout his life. The teachings of Jansenism flourish in this atmosphere of split loyalties. It was used by unscrupulous fanatics, both religious and political, to control the people. Jansenism pervaded society as an insidious influence. It taught that due to original sin, human nature was depraved; and that sin was irresistible and grace was only achieved through mortification. Its teachings offered challenge and struggle to any Christian living at this time and were especially problematic to Moreau, who so highly valued traits of unity, loyalty and fidelity. His faith in these values brought him through the sufferings of body and spirit and strengthened his dependence on Divine Providence and confidence in Jesus Christ as companion in suffering.

The devastating effects of the Revolution brought poverty of body and spirit to the Moreau family and to the Church, which they loved so dearly. It was especially during these times in which young Basil suffered and witnessed the suffering around him that he learned dependence on Divine Providence and confidence in Jesus Christ as a companion in suffering. A reminder of the cross would have been daily meditations for

¹² Ibid. Proust, p. 2.

all involved in this period of French history. In a reflection, regarding his Mother, he gives evidence of the source and practice of fidelity to the cross in times of great suffering.

"My poor mother is no longer of this world. She died as she had lived, with sentiments of lively faith and perfect resignation to the will of God. I can say that her last moments were singularly edifying and have left us with precious memories. She had long borne many crosses, following Jesus Christ and imitating the patience of our good master more and more. Her devotion to the Virgin was great, and I have no doubt that Mary stood before her judge as her patronage.... Her piety showed itself especially when I had her venerate a particle of the true cross which we had the good fortune to possess in those moments so decisive to her eternity."¹³

This same devotion to the Cross of Christ which influenced Moreau was expressed in the accounts of the death of Louis Moreau, Basil's father. Basil writes, "As the end approached, he clasped his crucifix, kissed it repeatedly, and answered amen to all the prayers."¹⁴ His parents obviously modeled the spirituality of the cross, which Moreau would carry throughout his life.

In 1816, at the age of seventeen, Basil entered St. Vincent's Major Seminary at Le Mans, France. Fortunately his studies in theology did not end with his ordination in 1821 at the age of twenty-two. In order that he might teach in the major seminary his bishop sent him to Paris for two years to study with the Sulpicans. His understanding of redemptive suffering, which began in his home was enhanced by his contact with the Sulpicans. During these years Moreau intensified his interest and in Sacred Scripture, especially in the writings of St. Paul.

From 1825-1836, Moreau taught at the major seminary, first as a professor of dogmatic theology and later of Sacred Scripture. Since 1833 his activities reach beyond

¹³ Thomas Barrosse, *Moreau*, Indiana, Fides Publishers, Inc., 1969, p. 6.

¹⁴ Etienne Catta and Tony Catta, *Basil Anthony Mary Moreau*, Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Co., 1955, p. 13.

his duties at the seminary. He was appointed ecclesiastical superior over the monastery of the Good Shepherd at Le Mans. In preparation for this assignment he studied Ignatian spirituality. His exposure to the Ignatian exercises provided a method that guided his prayer life in the daily practice of union with Christ. His later experience of retreat and contemplation with the Trappists complemented his exposure to this Ignatian method of prayer. The Benedictines fostered his appreciation of liturgical prayer and admiration for the Mass and Sacraments.

Moreau came under the influence of the French school of spirituality propagated by Cardinal Berulle (1575-1626). The Berullian understanding of the Doctrine of the Incarnation was that the humanity of Christ has no personality save that of the Word eternal. This understanding places the humanity of Jesus in a state of servitude to the Word Incarnate. Thus the ascetical practices favored are denial of self and adherence to Christ.¹⁵ Other characteristics of the School included emphasis on Scriptures, especially St. Paul and St. John; a relationship with Jesus Christ lived out in the mysteries of His life; devotion to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ; surrender to the Spirit's action; a high contemplation of Mary's mysteries; and a sense of the Church as the Body of Christ. Significant in the French School is the spiritual doctrine of identification with Christ through the sharing in His mysteries. The School did not have a positive sense of humanity and usually emphasized the fallen nature of man. For Moreau the imitation of Christ's life is the model for the Christian. He believed that the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus provide the way in which Christians are to experience their own passions, deaths and resurrections.

¹⁵ Kruse, pp. 188-189.

“And the Christian’s life involves a triple Passover, a Passover to which he is committed by his baptism in Christ’s Death. First, it involves the actual passage each day from death to life affected by every conflict sustained in imitation of Christ and in union with Him. Such suffering is a daily, and hourly, reality, and will most frequently find its origin in the struggle between nature and grace which arises from the presence of the triple concupiscence.”¹⁶

The Berullian understanding of the Doctrine of the Incarnation being that the humanity of Christ has no personality save that of the Word eternal provided its followers with insight into the ascetical life. This understanding places the humanity of Jesus in a state of servitude to the divinity and the teaching is that we also should place ourselves in this state of servitude to the Word Incarnate. Thus the ascetical practices favored are denial of self and adherence to Christ.¹⁷

The position classic in the French School was distain for all that was merely natural. In laboring for the mortification of the self so the person would be able to live in the spirit. These were central ideas of spirituality during Moreau’s times and they would have dominated his understanding of Redemption. “For him the cross arose precisely where fallen nature came into contact with that grace of God which would elevate man to divine life. That is why the triple concupiscence played such a considerable role in Father Moreau’s conception both of Redemption as accomplished by Christ and as accomplished in Christians.”¹⁸

Father Moreau’s total life experience was marked with struggle and sacrifice. If the normal events of life didn’t provide a sacrifice he would impose one on himself. In Father Kruse’s book, Basil Moreau, (A Study in Spiritual Theology), he sketches a picture

¹⁶ Ibid. Sermon 475 (Moreau), p. 179.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 188-189.

¹⁸ Kruse, pp. 184-185.

of the spiritual personality of Basil Moreau as one in which the mystery of the cross and the Providence of God stand out as predominant characteristics.¹⁹

In his account, after studying the Sermons and Meditations of Father Moreau, Father Kruse concludes that in Moreau's treatment of Divine Providence he found nothing original or deeply speculative. But what is significant in Father Kruse's study is Moreau's connections between Divine Providence and suffering. He states that for Father Moreau the cross is the mystery of fallen nature's meeting with grace, or disorder meeting with order. Divine Providence provides the order to man's disordered life and world. It is the work of grace to restore the order. In restoration of order the soul experiences conflict and suffering.²⁰ Kruse declares that Moreau's participation in the mystery of the Cross was both mystical and ascetical. He says that confidence is the quality par excellence which suffering inspire in the soul.

The risen Christ is the Model of Christian perfection, to be defined in terms of peace, that peace which is consequence of death to concupiscence and of life to God... The mystery of the cross is likewise a mystery of death and life, death to disorder, life to order. God is order by essence. By His holy Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Christ becomes the exemplar of Christian conduct.²¹

For Moreau, Christian conduct was motivated by his understanding of Christ's mission and he transported this understanding into the formation of educators in the faith. He envisioned the educator as an artisan of the work of the resurrection. Moreau believed that, "Once Jesus is known and loved in the world, everything will be renewed. The light

¹⁹ Ibid. Kruse, p. 183.

²⁰ Ibid. Kruse, p. 178.

²¹ Ibid. Sermon 474 (Moreau), p. 179.

of His Gospel will scatter the darkness of the times; His doctrine will regulate the mores and justice will reign.²²

The topic of Redemption brings us full circle in the exploration of the Christology of Father Basil Anthony Moreau. He held a comprehensive understanding of Jesus Christ and he integrated this into his daily life and ministry. His Christology was inclusive of Trinity, Mary, the Cross and Resurrection, the Church and mission.

Richard McBride, in critiquing Catholic Christology before 1950, writes that Catholic Christology from the time of Aquinas to the middle of the twentieth century hasn't changed essentially. He writes that it focused more on the ontological questions regarding the nature of Christ in himself and only secondarily on the soteriological questions regarding who Christ is for us. He writes that even in the treatment of redemption, the discussion was limited to the crucifixion as the act by which indebtedness to God for sin was fully satisfied.²³ To a degree this description is true of Basil Moreau's Christology, although his spirituality gives expression to his understanding of who Christ is for us. This is especially true in his understanding of the cross, not only as a means of indebtedness to God, but as a sign of hope. It is this understanding of the cross that Moreau passed on to his community of priests, brothers and sisters.

The Church in 2003 has supported the belief that a Founder's grace and blessings are past on not only to the members of the Congregation of Holy Cross but to the whole Church in the Communion of Saints. In April 2003, Pope John Paul II recognized the Founder of the Congregation of

²² T. Moreau, Rev. Pere Basile-Antoine, fondateur de la Congregation de Sainte-Croix (1799-1873), *Sermons publies par ordre du Chapitre general (1920) de la Congregation de Sainte-Croix*, Montreal, Cong. Sainte Croix/Oratoire Saint Joseph, 1923, xv, p. 608.

²³ Richard McBride, *Catholicism*, (Study Edition), 1981, Harper and Row Publishers, San Francisco, Chapter XIV, *The Christ of the Twentieth Century Theology*, pp. 470-471.

Holy Cross, Father Basil Moreau, for his service to God and humanity by declaring him venerable.²⁴

The years 1841-57 were years in which Father Moreau witnessed tremendous growth for the Congregation. While the group was still small its field of ministry spread beyond France to other countries of Europe, to Africa, India and North America. In 1841, the University of Notre Dame was founded, under the direction of Father Edward Sorin, CSC. A ten-year period from 1850-1860 marked the culmination of Father Moreau's efforts to build the work of Holy Cross.

Following upon these years various difficulties within the community, conflicts with administration, poor management of finances and leadership arose. Father Moreau began to be the victim of criticism from those within the Congregation who resented his reprimands for their administrative irresponsibility. The issues involved in the conflict are too complex to even outline in this brief biography. What is significant to the topic of this research is the manner in which Father Moreau responded to this crisis. His response expressed his deep appreciation and practice of Pauline theology regarding Christian suffering with Christ. On March 8, 1861, Father Moreau wrote to Father Sorin: "O God, what a trial for the end of my life!"²⁵ For Father Moreau this was a dark period in his life. For the good of the Congregation, in 1866, he removed himself from the conflict and resigned as the Superior General of the Congregation. Estranged from the Community, with the exception of some personal friendships and the support of the Marianites, he resumed his pastoral ministries in the Diocese of LeMans. On January 19, 1873, he died, while in exile from the Congregation.²⁶

²⁴ Stonehill: Alumni Magazine, *Our French Legacy*, Volume 32, Number 1, Summer 2004, p. 15.

²⁵ Ibid. Archives of HCFM

²⁶ Kruse, p. 4.

The time from 1873, until the appointment of the Very Reverend James Donohue, CSC, in 1926, as Superior General of the Congregation was a period of silence regarding the Founder. After five years studying the history of the Congregation, Father Donohue wrote a Circular Letter addressed to the General Capitulants from Canada. In the Letter he compared the Founder to "the trunk and the roots of a tree," and that "cut off from him, the members find themselves...deprived of the life-giving sap of Divine grace."²⁷ Through Father Donohue's efforts, Father Moreau was restored to the preeminence that is rightfully his in the history of the Congregation of Holy Cross.

In 1947, the Congregation of Holy Cross initiated procedures for the Canonization of Basil Anthony Mary Moreau. His life and works and spiritual heritage are an essential focus of the formation of each of its members. The General Chapters of the Congregation state that the religious shall study the doctrine and the lives of their founders and shall strive to imitate their virtues. In each house their pictures or statues shall have a place of honor.²⁸

When this research began, one of the secondary purposes as stated was to explore the Marian dimension of Father Moreau's Christology to see what influence this had on Peyton. Father's Peyton's love for Mary was begun with his family, in his home in Ireland, but from this research it can be shown that it was significantly enriched, not so much by his early formation with regard to Moreau, but by the legacy, developed later in the Congregation regarding the Founder's Marian charism.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 4.

²⁸ Proceedings of the General Chapter of 1962, Congregation of Holy Cross, March 19, 1963.

In concluding this research, the words from the present Superior General of Holy Cross, Father Hugh Cleary, CSC., are inspirational as they brought the Congregation into the celebration of the Millennium 2000. They emphasize that fundamentally and ultimately the Founder's Christology was one of hope.

Hope in the cross is a dynamic charism of Holy Cross. It identifies our mission; it focuses and solidifies our teaching. It is of the very soul of Holy Cross. Basil Moreau saw the sufferings of the cross in the Congregation's life as a clear sign of God's favor. He believed with all his might that the bearing of the cross was the instrument to strengthen the life of the Congregation. Suffering was a gift, a sign of Divine favor. Hope in the cross is the means to new and fuller life. This hope remains at the core of our Congregation's identity.²⁹

²⁹ Hugh Cleary, *Crossing the Threshold into a New Millennium*, Letter of the Superior General, Rome, 1999, p. 12.

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