

## **THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF GILBERT FRANÇAIS**

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For more than fifty years members of the four Holy Cross congregations have looked to Basile Moreau as the spiritual mentor whose writings would reveal the charism and the distinguishing characteristics of Holy Cross spirituality. The impending beatification of Father Moreau only makes him more the focus of attention. However, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Brothers and Priests of Holy Cross, at least, were more likely to have looked to their superior general, Rev. Gilbert Français, for guidance in the religious life. Français's influence among the men of Holy Cross, was exerted through his circular letters and his 1895 book, Directions for Novitiates of the Congregation of Holy Cross, which laid out a systematic program of instruction in the discipline, practices and spiritual exercises as well as the cultivation of the virtues of religious life in Holy Cross. It was reprinted in English with only minor changes in 1943.<sup>1</sup> His spiritual legacy to his congregation lasted well into the middle of the twentieth century, especially in the houses of formation.

### **2.**

When the twenty-one delegates to the 1892 general chapter of the Priests and Brothers of Holy Cross gathered in August in the presbytery on the University of Notre Dame campus, the superior general, Edward Sorin, was in the next room, lying on what everyone assumed was his death bed, too ill to attend the sessions of the chapter. Occasionally, someone would go into Sorin's room to get his consent or opinion on some

matter before the chapter. Sorin asked the chapter to accept his resignation as superior general, but the delegates declined to do so. Instead they elected a coadjutor superior general with the right of succession to the office when Sorin died. The man chosen, by a vote of nineteen to two, was Rev. Gilbert Français, 43, of the Province of France, the superior of the college at Neuilly.<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, Sorin recovered and lived for another fourteen months, until October 31, 1893. The telegram announcing Sorin's death and his own accession to the office of superior general reached Français in Paris where he had continued to serve as the superior of the college at Neuilly. He would serve as superior general for the next thirty-three years, until 1926, longer than anyone else before or since.

Gilbert Français was born in 1849 in the town of Loudéac in the department of Côtes-du-Nord, in northern Brittany. At age eleven, he went to boarding school at the College of St. Charles, conducted by the Congregation of Holy Cross in St. Brieuc, twenty-five miles from his home. In November 1867, when he was eighteen, he entered the novitiate in Le Mans. His younger brother, Adolphe, followed him into the community in 1882. When Gilbert Français came to Le Mans to begin his novitiate, Basile Moreau had resigned as superior general but was the chaplain to the students at the Institution Notre Dame de Saint-Croix, the motherhouse. By the time that Français was ordained in May 1872, the mother house had been sold at auction and Basile Moreau was living with his sisters.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Gilbert Français would almost certainly have come into contact with Moreau, but if the founder of Holy Cross had any appreciable influence on the young Français, the latter never mentioned it in his circular letters.

As a novice, Français must have been simultaneously engaged in study because he earned a baccalaureate in November 1868. He would later promote a yearlong

novitiate during which the novices were given no assignment that would interfere with the novitiate program. Assigned to teach at the college in Neuilly, Gilbert Français, 31, and in vows only ten years, was picked by the French provincial, Joseph Rézé, to succeed Louis Champeau as head of the college when Champeau died suddenly in February 1880. It fell to the new superior, in office less than six months, to cope with the situation that resulted when the Ferry decrees of 1880 forced all the Holy Cross priests and brothers to withdraw from the college in Neuilly by the end of August 1880.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1881, Français went to Wales with the intention of entering the Jesuits, but becoming nostalgic for Holy Cross, he returned to France after only six months. The new provincial in France, Father Julien Gastineau, received him coldly and forbade him to return to Neuilly. Français was assigned to the missions in America and was in Le Havre preparing to board a ship when Gastineau arrived and assigned him to the novitiate in France instead. After Gastineau died in April 1882, Français returned to Neuilly and once again became superior of the college.<sup>5</sup> As a delegate to the general chapters of 1886 and 1892, Français had made an impression by his incisive reports on religious formation and on the intellectual preparation of young Holy Cross religious.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.

As superior general, Gilbert Français made it clear from the beginning that his highest priority was the tenor of religious life in the Congregation of Holy Cross. As he put it in one of his circular letters to the Congregation, “a Community possessing riches, popularity and learned men has only a splendid exterior, which, without the foundation of a profoundly spiritual life will invariably fall to ruin.”<sup>7</sup> For Français, the holiness of its members was as important as any work that the Congregation might be involved in and

he assumed that a work would not prosper if the people engaged therein were not striving to be holy. In his second circular letter he launched his assault on the weaknesses that he saw in the Congregation. Extolling “the sentiment of admiration which captivates the soul,” and which is inspired by a “true Religious”, he described the “lax Religious” as

perform(ing) a work of destruction and nothingness. He is a bitter deception to all who see him. Instead of possessing religious virtues solidly based on the grace of God, his are but superficial virtues quickly unmasked. Instead of belonging to God, he gives himself to himself. Instead of living for his soul, he lives for his body with its innumerable sensualities; instead of courageously confronting a sacrifice, he draws back full of cowardly fear; instead of being the joy of his superiors, he is their most distressing torment; instead of being happy, he lives in a pathetic and agitated state. His words, his actions, his manners, his physiognomy characterized by an air of languor and irregularity, reveal the profound uneasiness of his interior. The example of such a religious is most baleful; it turns us away from Jesus Christ and the sublime counsels of His gospel; it poisons and even kills the germ of vocation already springing in the souls of youth; by its pernicious influence it stops some who were on the way, who were approaching, who had, as it were, arrived.<sup>8</sup>

Français’ circular letter of January 3, 1895, his fifth, was a short treatise on how members of the Congregation should seek and respond to the grace of God. Several months later he announced that if “thus far ... I have discussed little else than the spiritual life,” it was because the spiritual life was “the bed rock upon which must rest the foundation of any work that can prove either solid or stable.”<sup>9</sup> Later that same year, Français addressed a treatise to the Congregation entitled Our Threefold Life<sup>10</sup> in which he distinguished between “the material life, the intellectual life and the spiritual life.” The first two, he said, needed to be taken into account, but the third was most important for members of a religious community. Français envisioned the houses of the community as structured, self-contained entities wherein, whatever the work of the members, the day was punctuated by gatherings of the whole community for prayer, liturgy and other spiritual “exercises,” as he called them. Everyone was expected to rise and retire at the

same time. Meals were to be taken in common and in silence with one of the members reading from a spiritual book while the others ate. None of the members was to leave the house without the superior's permission. He described the daily schedule of a Holy Cross community as prescribed by the Rule of the Congregation.

We have, every day, Meditation, celebration of the Holy Sacrifice [of the Mass] or the assisting at it, Holy Communion, Thanksgiving, Particular Examen [examination of conscience], Spiritual Reading, Recitation of the Beads [the rosary], and other prayers at different hours under various forms. Every week we have the Way of the Cross, the hour of Adoration, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Français singled out four of these exercises, "which unite us most closely to our Lord."<sup>12</sup> These were the mass, the weekly hour of adoration before the blessed sacrament,<sup>13</sup> visits to the blessed sacrament,<sup>14</sup> and "above all" reception of the eucharist and thanksgiving, "the most precious (moments) of our lives."<sup>15</sup> These four, he declared, were "the exercises which make us live more closely with Jesus and, consequently, the spiritual exercises by (sic) excellence and those we ought to practice with a jealous care."<sup>16</sup>

In 1906, while on route to the general chapter at Notre Dame du Lac, Français visited all the houses of the Congregation in North America. At the conclusion of his visit to the houses in Canada and before he continued on to those of the United States, he had already seen a number of things that bothered him and he did not hesitate to deal with them. In a circular letter dated March 17, 1906, he described the true religious of Holy Cross, "the only men who count and are fit to carry on God's work."

They are detached from goods that pass away....They are detached from self....They attach themselves to God alone....

Unlike those who, lacking the mastery of themselves, are a prey to the caprices of their imagination; who desire the unattained and no longer want what has been obtained; who, by some strange illusion, imagine that a change of abode, of external conditions, means a change in themselves; the true religious are fixed in their path

and their only preoccupation is to advance therein steadily and surely. They have put their hands to the plough; they have opened the furrow; they wish to continue it and to finish it without looking backward, for it is only at the end of a well turned furrow that they will receive the eternal crown.

What men of this strongly religious temperament do, must be, and is (sic), stamped with a special mark of perfection and of life, since, to the natural means which are common to all men, they add the powerful resources furnished them by their spiritual life, always in contact with God.<sup>17</sup>

Apparently, Français found the American houses equally disedifying in a number of particulars. In his notes prepared for the Committee on Regular Discipline at the 1906 general chapter, he cited numerous instances of what he considered a general relaxation in the quality of religious life in the Congregation. His remarks offer a glimpse of the daily routine in the houses of the Congregation. People were allowed to go to the theater. The hour for retiring was left to the discretion of the individual. If priests could not be present for the community meditation at 5:30 a.m. because of having to celebrate mass in a convent at that hour, then everyone should rise at 4:30 a.m. for a 5:00 meditation. Night prayer and spiritual reading were often confused with one another. A weekly hour of adoration for each religious was not being observed. The common meditation prescribed for Saturdays was often omitted. There was too much writing of letters and religious would end their day smoking and drinking together. Moreover, it was disedifying to visitors to see religious smoking and chatting around the front door to the house. There was a general tendency to shorten the length of the common exercises. Local communities should have their own dining room and there should be reading during the meals. Each house should have a common recreation room lest the members scatter during the times appointed for communal recreation.<sup>18</sup>

Français was not remiss about attending to larger issues beyond the details of the daily schedule. There were repeated exhortations in his circular letters to be faithful to



the vowed commitments of religious life. The vow and the practice of obedience were central. “The unique infallible sign that we are true religious is obedience and obedience alone,” he declared in a 1911 circular letter, and disobedience was the hallmark of “those weak and fragile Congregations which from year to year and day to day drag out an existence that is burdensome, languishing, and unceasingly menaced with dangerous shocks.”<sup>19</sup> Those who wielded authority in the Congregation were, in Français’ view, placed in office by God and should be obeyed as such. “You should give the full measure of your respect and love to this authority localized for you in the Superiors whom Providence has chosen to march at your head and clear your way to Heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

The vow and practice of poverty were also treated at length by Français in his circular letters. He described poverty as “the rampart which protects the sum total of religious life”<sup>21</sup> and he did not hesitate to declare that courageous reformers of almost extinct religious orders began their task “by the restoration of poverty.”<sup>22</sup> Curiously, Français seldom mentioned celibate chastity in his circular letters.

Cultivation of the virtues that made life in a religious community fruitful was another theme in Français’ circular letter. He singled out three dispositions as essential to religious life: “humility, the spirit of sacrifice, and joy.”<sup>23</sup> Among these, humility was “at the root of all virtues, and of all acts of virtue” just as pride was at the root “of all vices and all sins.” “In the religious life,” Français declared in a circular letter that he devoted entirely to a reflection on humility, “whether it be a question of entering it, of staying in it, of persevering, or of culling from it all the fruit with which it is laden, one can never dwell too insistently upon humility.”<sup>24</sup>

Français addressed more than seventy-five circular letters to the Congregation during his years as superior general. As he grew older and more infirm, the letters became less frequent, only four in the last four years before his retirement in 1926, but he was determined that his efforts to promote a striving for perfection, as he called it, should not be forgotten. He devoted one of his last letters to a summary of the “various counsels which I have given you in my different circular letters, counsels attention to which I deem indispensable to the assured future of our Congregation.”<sup>25</sup> Whether Français kept encouraging the members of the Congregation to strive to be holy because the quality of religious life in the community was indeed poor, cannot be determined. The discipline and religious exercises that he promoted in the Congregation, however, were part of life in Holy Cross until the latter 1950s, more than thirty years after Français’ death, as this writer can attest.

When Français became superior general in 1893, the constitutions entrusted the office to him for life. By 1920, he was 71 and in poor health and asked the general chapter of that year to elect a coadjutor superior general with the right of succession. The chapter chose Andrew Morrissey, but before Morrissey could begin to relieve Français of the burdens of office, he died in France on May 27, 1921. The following year, 1922, would be the fiftieth anniversary of Français’ ordination, an anniversary that had been celebrated with the utmost solemnity by Edward Sorin in 1888. Français informed the members of the community that because of his infirmities “it is with extreme difficulty and with real fear that I still succeed in celebrating Holy Mass” and asked that there be no external celebration of his golden jubilee, only “the assistance of their prayers.”<sup>26</sup>



The Holy See finally allowed Français to resign his office in 1926 and he lived the next three years in retirement “in his poor but beloved cell” at St. Joseph’s Farm in Granger, Indiana, near Notre Dame. He was eighty years old when he died on September 15, 1929. At his funeral, Bishop George Finnigan, C.S.C., of Helena, Montana, called Français “the second founder of the Congregation in the order of spirituality, studies and formation.”<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Français, Circular Letters, December 4, 1893: 17-21. The English translations of Français’ circular letters to the Congregation from November 3, 1893, through August 8, 1912, were collected as Series I in a bound volume, Circular Letters of the Very Rev. Gilbert Français, Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross (Notre Dame, Indiana: Congregation of Holy Cross, 1913). The English translations of Français’ subsequent circular letters from March 1, 1913, through June 26, 1926, were not published in a bound volume. The numbering of these later circular letters, 1913 – 1926, is not the same in the English and French editions. This latter group of letters is described as Series II in the English translation and Series II, Number 1, in English is Number 48 in French. Unless otherwise indicated, reference is made to the English edition of the circular letters and by the date rather than by the number. A revised edition of Directions for the Novitiate in English was published at Notre Dame, Indiana, by Ave Maria Press in 1943 with only the chapters on “Order of the Day” and “Conferences” omitted because of developments in the novitiate schedule.

<sup>2</sup> Régistre du Chapitre Général de l’Association, chapter of 1892, sessions of August 16, morning, and August 20, afternoon: 139, 159-160. General archives of the Congregation of Holy Cross, University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Library. [hereafter CSCG]

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Français, “Circular Letter of the Very Rev. Superior General, Series II. No. 26,” (Quinquagesima Sunday 1922): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Mariné to Edward Sorin, September 28, 1880, CSCG.

<sup>5</sup> “Q.q. [Quelques] notes sur le T.R.P. Gilbert Français, C.S.C., Sup. gén.” [name of the author is illegible] February 6, 1909. Folder 232.5. CSCG.

<sup>6</sup> Régistre du Chapitre Général de l’Association, chapter of 1886, session of August 18; chapter of 1892, session of August 19: 125-126, 155-156.

<sup>7</sup> Français, Circular Letters, August 8, 1912: 448.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., December 4, 1893: 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., April 24, 1895: 58-59.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 383-447.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 392. Français does not indicate what the “etc.” refers to.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>13</sup> This was a practice that Français would repeatedly promote and insist upon. See Ibid., 397-398 and 412-415, and Circular Letters, January 3, 1895:53; June 18, 1910: 341.

<sup>14</sup> The Threefold Life in Français, Circular Letters, 415-416.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 396, 415-416.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>17</sup> Français, Circular Letters: 222-223.

<sup>18</sup> "Diverses observations faites par le R. P. Supérieur Général à la suite de sa visite dans les établissements," file 232.81, "Français, Gilbert: Correspondance," CSCG.

<sup>19</sup> Français, Circular Letters, February 2, 1911: 347-350.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., September 14, 1906: 232ff.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., January 13, 1896: 95; September 14, 1906: 238ff.; and June 18, 1910: 338-339.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., January 13, 1896: 98ff.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., December 23, 1897: 112-116.

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert Français, Circular Letter, Series II, No. 5, February 15, 1915: 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Series II, No. 28, April 12, 1923.

<sup>26</sup> Français, Circular Letters, Series II, June 18, 1921, and Quinquagesima Sunday, 1922.

<sup>27</sup> James W. Donahue, Circular Letter, November 10, 1929: 3; Bishop Finnigan's funeral oration is reported in Bulletin des Études (Scholasticat Saint-Joseph, Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal), Volume 12, No. 1, September 1929.