

HISTORY OF THE VOICE OF MOREAU

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The *Voice of Moreau* is a website dedicated to the spirit and mission of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Begun on September 15, 2018 by Phil Smith and Ben Rossi, who were teaching together at Archbishop Hoban High School in Akron, Ohio at the time, it has been visited by some 5,000 people from 72 countries. This brief history will offer a window into the vision and intention behind the project.

Beginnings

Br. Phil and I both happened to attend a Russian Orthodox cultural and food festival in Mogadore, Ohio with a group of teachers in the fall of 2017. We chatted about the current political situation in our country and lamented what we both considered to be the fall of Western Civilization. It was an intelligent conversation that invigorated me and prompted more informal conversations between the two of us throughout that school year on topics such as politics, philosophy, literature and education. In the meantime, I was doing a lot of vocational soul searching - spending time as an observer at a local monastery and completing an application for a doctoral program in catechetics - but my heart was not satisfied with either option of full-time monk or academic as I was gradually coming to the awareness that I had come to Hoban specifically to be a Holy Cross Educator and that Holy Cross was simply central to my life and my life's work. And so, in the summer of 2018, I reached out to my new friend Br. Phil to see if there was a way that he and I might be able to partner on some Holy Cross project that would satisfy the desire that both of us felt to be an agent of change in our increasingly complicated and broken world.

We did not know what our project would be, so I made the first volley, emailing a document that I had written which outlined my own philosophy of religious education, entitled the *Catechesis of the Resurrection*. Bro. Phil liked the vision of pedagogy that the document articulated, and wondered if it might be updated to speak specifically to Holy Cross Educators, rewritten under the mantle of Blessed Moreau's vision of education, as laid out in *Christian Education*, and titled "The Work of Resurrection," the last line of that treatise. I rewrote the text, and again he liked it, but it seemed so long and theological and potentially irrelevant to busy professionals every minute of whose days were already filled with lesson-planning, grading, meetings and family life! Then we began to talk about a website that could serve as a forum for Holy Cross Educators to share their experiences, challenges and vocational aspirations, while our role would be to manage the online space for such a dialogue and frame it using Holy Cross language and imagery. So, after consulting with a local website designer (Joe Jorgenson of Robintek of Akron and Columbus), who was incredibly generous to us with his time and expertise, we settled on Wordpress as a platform and, after \$300, began to experiment with a website!

Format

Again, in the background of all of this, I was doing some spiritual soul-searching in addition to the vocational soul-searching previously mentioned. Even though I was steeped in all sorts of spiritualities at this point in my life - mystical theology, Zen meditation, Twelve Step recovery to name a few - my spiritual life really did not take off in a serious way until I came across the book *Imitation of Christ* at the local public

library. Of course, this book, aside from the Bible, is considered to be the most popular text in the entire history of the Christian tradition, but apparently I was not yet ready for it, because up to this point I just kept thinking of it as an antiquated devotional that was out of touch with my real spiritual needs. Nevertheless, what I discovered within this classic was a perfect description of the drama of my own interior life especially because of the dialogic format in which Christ calls and the Disciple responds. This living and organic literary style, used also to heighten the emotion between Lover and Beloved in the Song of Songs, was immediately my choice for our format for the website and Br. Phil agreed to it.

Our first post, published on the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, September 15, 2018, is written in this dialogic style: the Voice of Moreau, composed by me, calls the reader to ponder the mystery of the Cross (the centerpiece of Blessed Moreau's own spirituality), while the Holy Cross Educator, composed by Br. Phil, responds with some practical way to apply the wisdom of the Cross to the life of a teacher in the school-house. Below is an excerpt from our very first post of which we both continue to be very proud (though we both have come to recognize such entries as too long given our vision of readership among busy teachers!) - notice the dynamic between the spiritual meditation and the practical application:

In the Voice of Moreau: The Cross is our truly unique hope. It is not just another thing among a myriad of things to put one's hope in, but instead it is an altogether different project. Think about it - there is a difference between putting our hope in a football team, a politician, a career or even a spouse and putting our hope in the crucified Christ. The football team wins and loses, the politician rises and falls, a career comes and goes, a spouse is not always faithful, but the Cross does not change! The Cross cannot change! The Christ who has been stripped of everything cannot win or lose, rise or fall, come or go, or be unfaithful - he has made the decision to hide nothing, to leave nothing to the imagination. We can trust the Cross precisely because we

know what we are getting!....*Holy Cross Educator's Reply*: Blessed Basil Moreau believes that "effective teach[ing]" is the result of a call from God. It is more than a vocation: it is "an orientation, a posture, a way of relating". How do teachers and administrators in Holy Cross schools assess whether or not they are truly called to teach, to lead? In *Christian Education*, Part One "Teachers and Students" (Moreau, 1856) Moreau lists nine virtues that Holy Cross educators need to cultivate: faithfulness, knowledge, zeal, vigilance, seriousness, gentleness, patience, prudence and firmness. For the teacher in a Holy Cross school, faithfulness is far more than showing up each day ready to present the lesson. "It is the virtue that draws us to fulfill faithfully our duties to God". It is the virtue that develops Christians not just scholars....*Ave Crux Spes Unica!*

Posts, such as this first one, came out every Saturday afternoon for the first several months, and we simply emailed or texted colleagues and friends the web address, inviting them to visit the site. The feedback was generally positive, but the folks to whom we were reaching out did not seem to share the same level of enthusiasm that we felt regarding the project. That is precisely when Br. Phil had a stroke of genius: What if we also included profiles of important figures in the Holy Cross tradition - sisters, priests and brothers - whose inspiring stories would serve to illustrate what it means to be an "educator in the faith"? Accented with a colorful photograph and published in the middle of the week, these brief biographies, all researched and composed by Br. Phil, instantly became popular and would soon replace "Holy Cross Educator's Response;" thus, Moreau's meditation on the Cross on Saturdays would come to be linked with Wednesday's story of a Holy Cross person whose life itself would serve as a meaningful response to the founder's call. Our first profile was of Stella Maris Kunihiro, a Ugandan sister who served in the congregation as a catechist, teacher, librarian, head mistress, vocation director and minister to female prisoners (providential given that our society would soon be voicing a strong desire to see equality for women and people of color). These Wednesday figures would come to include

missionaries, scholars, engineers, dorm prefects, archbishops, military chaplains, nurses, a miracle man, a university founder, and a weight-lifting priest among others!

Outreach

By the standards of other weekly blogs, we have a rather low readership, a mere 143 subscribers after over two years of publishing. Nevertheless, we have made the decision again and again that this project is highly personal and that we are not driven by such statistics. We have thus stripped the website of the social media mechanisms which are typically used to promote blogs across the internet (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) and have chosen not to accept outside advertising in exchange for directing internet traffic to our blog. Instead, we have come to see our work on the *Voice of Moreau* as primarily missionary, that is, because we have encountered the risen Christ through our experiences as Holy Cross Educators, we both feel called forth and in fact compelled to share this Good News with our fellow “educators in the faith” (*Constitutions*, 12). Though the website has been included in a couple of congregation-wide emails inviting our fellow religious to read the blog, most of our outreach is the old fashion way - paper and ink, totalling some 4,500 mailings! During the winter break of 2018, for instance, we wrote to fifteen hundred faculty, administrators and staff at the fifteen Holy Cross high schools around the country, with each hand-addressed envelope containing a personalized note and a sample blog post (which resulted in Br. Phil slicing the tip of his finger off and my hand being so fatigued that I could barely write anything more after the garbage bag, bulging with envelopes, was finally dropped off at the post office!). At the beginning of the next school year, the fall of 2019, we commissioned an art teacher from Hoban to design a postcard that

highlighted the major aspects of Holy Cross education (sports, high academic standards, sound pedagogy, sacramental life, spiritual formation and Christian service), while this past year, the pandemic year of 2020, we made, signed and sent off Holy Cross prayer cards for each school's administration, faculty and staff.

This zeal for "crossing borders of every sort" (*Constitutions*, 17) in order to make God known, loved and served has continued to inspire us to look for creative ways to reach out to our sisters and brothers in the mission, including the production of 13,500 tiny paper paper crosses with the words "Ave Crux Spes Unica" handwritten on each one for every student at the Holy Cross high schools around the country, producing a bound booklet of Holy Cross religious profiles from the website for the young men in formation in the community, daily reflections on the Gospel posted to the website as videos, a monthly newsletter for Holy Cross educators on topics such as classroom instruction, lesson planning, the psychology of teenagers and building community in the schoolhouse, as well as participation in a webinar sponsored by the Holy Cross Institute for Holy Cross educators across the country. Perhaps the most exciting moment on this journey of sharing this project with others, however, came in the form of Bishop Bill Wack, CSC's response to our outreach efforts with the following reflection that he, upon his own initiative, posted to the *Voice of Moreau*:

A reporter from a Catholic magazine recently asked me: "Why did you say 'Yes' to the Apostolic Nuncio when he asked you if you would accept the appointment from Pope Francis making you a bishop?" I told him that during that fateful phone call nearly two years ago, I said, "Yes" because I am first and foremost a Holy Cross religious; and as such I have taken a vow to go wherever the Lord calls me to go. I never wanted to be a bishop or to work outside the confines of Holy Cross, but I have to trust that God knows better than I what I should do and where I should go. It is in carrying the cross and being obedient to the Lord that we experience the hope of the resurrection. When I was appointed bishop I was dispensed, in a sense, from my vows of obedience and poverty. However, I am still a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, and this brings me no

small amount of joy every day. Blessed Basil Moreau, writing to the Congregation in 1868, spoke about the announcement of our first bishop (Bishop Peter Dufal, CSC), reminding him and his brothers in Holy Cross that despite his new ministry in the Church, he remained a member of the Congregation always. I take great comfort in these words of our beloved founder, and I entrust my episcopacy to his prayers and intercessions.

This beautiful post was both a wonderful affirmation of the validity of the website and a witness to the enduring spirit of the Holy Cross community which we were desperately seeking to promote.

Future

As an unexpected partnership between Br. Phil and myself, the *Voice of Moreau* continues to unfold in creative and surprising ways. Here are ideas that we have discussed and hope to explore in the coming months: personally visiting each of the fifteen schools and handing out Holy Cross-themed bracelets, stickers, or temporary tattoos to students in the cafeteria, in the hallways or at the main entrance; gathering information on legendary teachers from each of the high schools, writing profiles about them, and publishing them as a booklet that could be distributed to inspire other Holy Cross Educators; and designing a one-semester religion class for freshmen that traces the history of the Congregation of Holy Cross, invites students into the charism and spirituality of the community, and highlights the unique characteristics of each of the Holy Cross high schools. The goal of all of these efforts, as with the website, would simply be to build solidarity in the Holy Cross tradition among the various stakeholders from religious to administrators to faculty to staff to students.

Conclusion

Beneath the many email exchanges, text messages and meetings between Br. Phil and myself was a providential conversation at a Russian cultural festival in Mogadore, Ohio in 2017, and beneath that encounter was the Spirit who had prepared each of us for the mission of making God known, loved and served in the Holy Cross tradition. We therefore invite all of those who are searching for hope in a broken world to look with us, and “the great band of women and men who have passed this way” (*Constitutions*, 5), to the Cross. Indeed, the voice of Blessed Basil Moreau continues to speak to our sleepy hearts today that we might awaken to our deep desire for resurrected life not despite, but precisely through the challenges and difficulties of the times in which we live. By responding to this calling with our very lives, we will all become “women and men with hope to bring” (*Constitutions*, 118), partners on a common journey “into the mystery and the grace of this life that springs up from death” (*Constitutions*, 118). Ave Crux, Spes Unica!