

Historical Note

From the Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross

In the troubled period following the French Revolution Basil Anthony Moreau, a priest of the diocese of Le Mans, founded the Congregation of Holy Cross.

To supply certain needs of the devastated church throughout the countryside, he planned to organize some clerics as Auxiliary Priests. By August 1835, he had recruited priests for this purpose. They were but few in number and they assisted the diocesan clergy by preaching parish missions. He intended also that they would be educators and that some should be prepared for that work.

Only days after this group was first assembled, at the request of his bishop Father Moreau accepted responsibility for the Brothers of Saint Joseph, who had been founded fifteen years earlier by another priest of the same diocese, James Francis Dujarié, pastor of Ruillé-sur-Loir. They were zealous laymen who had been meeting the need for elementary education in villages of the region. What led to an unusual venture in the history of the church was Father Moreau's decision to unite these two groups, which he did by the Fundamental Act of 1st March, 1837. Priests and brothers were united within a single association to minister to the pastoral and educational needs of the French church.

Events moved still further and began to display a pattern and a purpose that emerged as a distinctive proposal. In 1838 Father Moreau gave a rule of life to the small band of laywomen he had gathered to provide domestic services for the priests and brothers. He would later direct them also to the work of education. At Sainte-Croix (Holy Cross), a suburb of Le Mans, he gradually formed the three groups into a single religious congregation composed of three autonomous societies. Each had its own authority structure, but all were united under a single general administration. He introduced the practice of making vows first among the brothers, then among the priests and lastly among the sisters. On 15 August 1840 Basil Moreau himself became the first priests publicly to profess vows as a religious of the Congregation of Sainte-Croix, or Holy Cross.

The priests, brothers and sisters became known respectively as the Salvatorists, Josephites and Marianites of Holy Cross. Their founder wished them to be united in their lives and in their work as "a visible imitation of the Holy Family." He saw their union as "a powerful lever with which to move, direct and sanctify the whole world." The motherhouse and its conventual church, dedicated to Our Lady of Holy Cross, were to serve as the symbol and the center of this union. The feast of this church became the patronal feast for the entire family of Holy Cross: Our Lady of the Seven Dolors.

From the outset, Father Moreau saw in this Association of Holy Cross an apostolic religious community at the service of the church well beyond the

frontiers of his own country. During the first fifteen years, when the group was still small and organizing step by step, its fields of ministry spread beyond France to other countries of Europe, to Africa and to North America. It was the decision to accept the difficult mission of Eastern Bengal, then in India, that persuaded the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to award Father Moreau's community approval as a religious institute under the aegis no longer of the diocese of Le Mans but under the church of Rome for service throughout the world.

The Holy See decided in 1855 that the men and women of Holy Cross should function separately, and in time the sisters became independent. Provisional papal recognition of the men was given in 1856; the Brief of Praise observed: "One must praise this Institute composed of priests and laymen who mean to be united by a covenant of friendship and in such fashion that each society preserve its own nature, neither one prevail over the other, but that they work with each other...." A year later, on 13 May 1857, their constitutions were approved, and the two societies were fused into a closer unity by being organized into a shared governmental structure at all levels, not only at the level of highest authority. The areas of ministry that the priests and brothers accepted as their own were two: preaching the word of God, especially in rural and foreign missions, and Christian education in schools and training in agriculture and trades, especially for poor and abandoned children.

No sooner had his project received this endorsement than Father Moreau began to be the victim of subversion at the hands of some of his most influential priests, who resented his reprimands for their administrative irresponsibility. After a series of struggles that were frustrating and discouraging, the founder decided to stand aside and resigned as superior general in 1866. Estranged (with the exception of some enduring personal friendships and loyalties) from the community to which he had given his life, he resumed a preaching ministry of his own. It was the Marianites who stood by him most loyally during his later years and who were with him when he died on 20 January 1873.

The Marianites themselves received approbation for worldwide status in 1867, and in 1869 and 1883 sisters in two provinces in the United States and Canada acquired formal existence as independent congregations: the Sister of the Holy Cross, and the Sisters of Holy Cross and of the Seven Dolors (since 1981, the Sisters of Holy Cross).

In the long span of years that followed their final approbation, the priests and brothers of Holy Cross devoted their greatest efforts to educational ministries in the United States and Canada and (despite the difficulties caused by the suppression of religious orders between 1903-1918) France. There was some instability as well. The congregation withdrew from Africa and temporarily from Asia. Most of the European houses were closed. In spite of these disturbances a swelling number of men labored impressively and fruitfully in the spreading

network of the many apostolates of Holy Cross. A half-century later after Father Moreau's death, the congregation came to restored reverence for its founder, reacquired the church of the mother house, whose sale had been such a blow to him, and sought his canonization. The general chapter of 1945, persuaded that tension between priests and brothers was damaging the life and work of the congregation, decreed that henceforth the two societies would not only be distinct but organized in such a way that brothers and priests would have separate, not shared, government at the provincial and local levels. After the chapter Rome insisted that those non-teaching brothers who so wished might remain with the priests in their province by transferring to the society of Salvatorists.

The next years were a time of rapid growth in numbers and diversification of ministries, reminiscent of the congregation's earliest years under Father Moreau. Holy Cross returned to Africa and expanded its presence in Latin America, where it had only recently arrived. The international character of the community began to evolve extensively. Men went overseas not so much to establish new churches as to assist indigenous churches to develop.

The Second Vatican Council instructed every religious institute to reappraise its own specific character and mission and then to formulate revised constitutions. The constitutions published by the general chapter of 1986 followed two decades of deliberation and were a conscious attempt to return more closely to the ideal of Basil Moreau. Once again all lay religious became members of the society of the Josephites and intersocietal government at the provincial and local levels was made possible. Holy Cross was being persuaded to reinterpret its identity not only as a company of men devoted to a mission of service but, following the founder's guiding concern, as a group of clerical and lay religious called to become brothers, to make a common life together and to embark upon ministries in concert with one another and with our sisters in Holy Cross.

Holy Cross has endured. And in an age when God calls forth service in many new ways, the congregation may well hope that its own distinctive way of serving—priests and laymen in a single religious brotherhood—is an older planting putting forth sound new growth. The “patently imprudent” scheme is, as Father Moreau believed all along, “the work of God.”