CHAPTER 1

Background

I. THE REVOLUTION

The French Revolution (1789–1799) formed the background to the life of Basil Moreau who was born as it ended and grew up in its aftermath. A quick glance at what it did to the Church and her institutions is indispensable for an understanding of the needs to which his life was a response.

From the very year of the proclamation of the Republic (1789), the new government began to confiscate Church property and outlaw religious communities. Within two years it had imposed on priests the oath of the civil constitution of the clergy. Many took the schismatic oath; many refused. Of those who took it, some did so with mental reservations, and others later retracted. Those who refused to take it, the "nonconstitutional" clergy, were exposed to imprisonment, deportation, or execution, while the members of the constitutional clergy were considered intruders by the people.

The constitutional bishop of Le Mans, installed in 1791, was opposed by his entire cathedral chapter and most of the clergy and people of the department of La Sarthe.[1] Though he remained there until 1802, it was the vicar general who really ran the diocese in secret, even sending men to Paris to have them ordained to the priesthood by bishops there who formed part of a complex secret organization dating back to the beginning of 1792. Not one

of the eight hundred parishes of the Le Mans diocese was left without spiritual assistance from the nonconstitutional clergy during the Revolution, though these priests often had to disguise themselves as peddlers, shepherds, farmers, and the like to be able to minister secretly to the people.

Throughout the Revolution, the Republic never controlled more than half the department of La Sarthe. Furthermore, even the local officials and the courts set up by the new government often proved halfhearted about applying the sanctions of law to nonconstitutional priests. At times—for example, in 1794—the laws against Catholics assembling were relaxed. But there were martyrs in the vicinity from the early years of the Revolution until as late as September 1799.

The confusion all this could produce is illustrated by an incident which occurred at the very beginning of 1800.

> The mayor [of Grand-Lucé near Ruillé-sur-Loir, where the church was in schismatic hands] had tried to appease the Catholics by having an altar transferred from the church to a barn. It was there that Fr. Jacques de la Haye [the priest in charge at Ruillé-sur-Loir, where he had Fr. Jacques Dujarié as an assistant] or one of the priests attached to his mission came to celebrate Mass. The justice of the peace . . ., a former assistant pastor at Grand-Lucé, a priest who had taken the oath and then married, could not tolerate this infraction of the laws . . ., which stung all the more under the disgrace of his apostasy. He had Fr. de la Haye arrested by the National Guard just as he finished celebrating Holy Mass. There was a scuffle. The guards dragged the priest away by the hair. The mayor hurried to the scene, followed by the Catholics who succeeded in freeing Fr. de la Haye. He took refuge in the mayor's home, but the justice of the peace had issued a warrant for his arrest which was still hanging over him at the moment of the Concordat.[2]

After Napoleon came into power and negotiated a concordat with the pope (1802), Catholic worship could be resumed with impunity. However, in many places the Church remained humble, poor, and despoiled. Religious communities remained without legal recognition (except the Christian Brothers from 1808)—a situation which was to raise doubts about the force of the vows of such communities in the minds of bishops and even in the minds of these religious themselves.[3] Napoleon attempted to invalidate the superiority of papal power by his unilateral addition to the concordat of the Organic Articles, an official reassertion of the "liberties of the Gallican Church."[4] In fact, however, this step encouraged the development of ultramontanism, which vigorously stressed papal supremacy, and there arose a tension between the ultramontanists and the Gallicans among the clergy—a tension not fully resolved until the definition of papal infallibility in 1870.

The new bishop of Le Mans chosen by the government and accepted by the pope, Michel-Joseph de Pidoll from Trèves, was installed in 1802. He found himself faced with the needs and problems created by the Revolution—needs and problems that it would take decades to solve.

Perhaps the fundamental need was the re-Christianization of the people. Missions had been organized for this purpose at Le Mans in the brief lull of 1796. They were organized on a larger scale especially after the concordat and above all after Napoleon fell from power and the Restoration monarchy replaced the Empire in 1814. They encountered opposition, as the young Fr. Moreau's description of the Paris missions of the early 1820s shows:

> The mission, which is to make the rounds of all the parishes of Paris, is succeeding as well as could be expected. This initial success is not passing unnoticed in the law faculty. Fr. Duponceau, who came to see me, told me that the students

> passed notes around during classes inviting one another to go to hiss the missionaries. Recently one anticlerical was bold enough to shout at Fr. de Rauzan: "You're a liar!" but the trouble did not last long. When firecrackers were set off in the same audience, the preacher remarked: "All this trouble is coming from individuals who cannot make any noise in the world with their talents; so they try to attract attention with their firecrackers!" On another occasion they threw around the room a drug that could have asphyxiated the entire audience, but fortunately there were some druggists present and in a short time they produced a still stronger odor to counteract the first, which was already beginning to make people dizzy. These are the things that we learn from those of the missionaries who come to see us occasionally.[5]

Another need, hardly less great, was the restoration of Church institutions, especially the schools.

> For some idea of the neglect experienced by the generation born since the outbreak of the Revolution, it is sufficient to recall what Chaptal wrote in his Report on Public Instruction in 1801: "Public education is practically nonexistent everywhere. The generation now reaching the age of twenty is irrevocably sacrificed to ignorance. Primary schools exist nowhere and as a result the bulk of the nation is without instruction."
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> We know the causes which had brought on this lack of schools. Teaching had been "one of the first victims of the social upheaval of 1789." Before that date, there had been in all the dioceses a large network of schools, which for all practical purposes were exclusively in the hands of the Church.
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> The lack of schools was not the only element which could have endangered the future of the generation born during the Revolution. The few wandering teachers to whom the chil-

> dren were entrusted were often incompetent or unworthy. "I know," wrote the grand master of the university in 1809 in a circular letter which opened an investigation on teaching personnel, "that there are in their ranks some whom crass ignorance should bar from teaching, or whom evil habits make unworthy of this profession."[6]
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> The government of the Restoration, like that of the Empire, allowed congregations to organize and to function without any legal authorization. There still remained, however, the question of legal recognition, without which they were incapable of holding property or of receiving donations. Such recognition could be obtained only through direct action by the government. . . . [The unauthorized congregations were] obliged to have recourse to third parties or to those "charitable associations" which were set up by an ordinance of February 29, 1816, for the establishment of primary schools, and which could receive legal recognition by simple royal decrees. This stratagem, however, did not touch the problem of the acceptance of gifts and legacies. Only the [state] University had the legal right to receive donations intended for such associations. These few facts bring into relief some of the practical difficulties encountered under existing legislation by the founders of religious congregations devoted to teaching. It was, nevertheless, under just such a regime that many religious congregations were founded and went through stages of rapid development.[7]

Other Church institutions besides the schools had been destroyed by the Revolution—for example, hospitals. The state was unable to replace them adequately. In these areas too, the need was great.

The anticlerical and anti-Catholic forces unleashed by the Revolution did not subside with the concordat. Many government officials continually harassed attempts to re-establish organized

religion and Church institutions. In particular, the absolute monopoly of the state university over secondary education made Catholic efforts to solve the school problem most difficult. In addition to the lycées and university colleges, only diocesan minor seminaries and certain schools granted the privileges of royal colleges—"full teaching rights"—could engage in secondary education and this only from 1821 on. Newspapers frequently stirred up active opposition to Catholic efforts by editorializing or reporting in such a way as to arouse the suspicious or the bigoted.

Within the Church, the Gallican struggle moved toward its denouement. Government officials expected seminary professors to teach the Organic Articles. Fr. Bouvier, professor and later rector at Saint Vincent's Seminary in Le Mans, had signed a commitment to do so in 1818. In such circumstances Rome could hardly issue a formal condemnation of Gallicanism. But the ultramontanist forces were growing stronger and more outspoken. The books of Fr. Félicité de Lamennais helped. His Essai sur Tindifférence stirred great discussion as early as 1817. His De la religion considérée dans ses rapports avec l'ordre politique et civile even got him into trouble with the police in 1826. The struggle sometimes caused sharp divisions in a diocese. This is what happened at Le Mans.

II. FAMILY, FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES

Basil Moreau's parents were simple country people. His father, Louis Moreau, was a wine merchant who probably could not write. His mother, Louise Pioger, came from a family of farmers. They married five years before the outbreak of the Revolution and spent their life at the little village of Laigné-en-Belin, about ten miles from Le Mans.

Basil was born on February 11, 1799, the ninth of fourteen children, eleven of whom survived infancy. The family was not wealthy. The children had little opportunity for an education.

Basil wrote later to his sister Cécile, "washwoman at Laigné": "I address my letter to you because in writing to you I write to my parents, and because you are the only one at home who can answer me, since my other sisters are, as you say, working out all day, or rather are afraid that their brother will make fun of their handwriting."[8] But they were a close-knit family, and their simple and unsophisticated faith had kept them loyal to the Church throughout the trying years of the Revolution. Basil, according to the Laigné records, was baptized by a "Catholic priest" the day after his birth.

The piety of Basil's parents is noted by his nephew and first biographer: "Fear of God, love of the Church, prayer in common, a hard-working life, filial obedience, respect for all 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. In fact, they had no other means of satisfying their many obligations, after their trust in God, than a little property which Louise Pioger cultivated while her husband sold wine in the neighborhood of Le Mans."[9]

Their son wrote a brief account of their deaths. Of his mother he wrote:

> 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 Blessed Virgin was great, and I have no doubt that Mary stood before her judge as her protectress. The joyful expression on her face during the twenty-four hours that her body was exposed to the numerous persons who came to pray for the repose of her soul indicated to everyone the peace of her conscience. Some, on seeing the smile on her

> lips and the peace on her face, could not refrain from kissing her. Without any agony, she was conscious to the end, and as she died, her eyes fixed themselves on me for a last time. She entered admirably into the dispositions of Jesus Christ at his death, repeating three times interiorly the "Into your hands" as I recited it. 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 for her eternity. Fortified with the bread of the strong some days before I arrived, she received extreme unction the day before she died with a presence of mind as great as if she had been in full health. . . . I did not know what it was to lose a mother who sacrificed herself for her children, but I know today.[10]

Of his father's last days, he published an anonymous account in 1846 as "notes found among the papers of a priest concerning the death of his father." Louis Moreau died in 1830, having patiently suffered blindness for more than five years. His son wrote:

> "My children," this good father said to us, "I pray the good God to bless you, and I bless you myself with all my heart in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Then we asked him to forgive us, and he answered us: "Everything is erased from my heart." Later in the day he begged my brothers to go to confession and made them promise they would. The same day he asked us to recite the Litany of the Dying and answered each invocation: "Pray for me."
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> [The next day] Mademoiselle de [Boismont], who had come to see him, asked how he was. "*I* must go to see God," he said. And in the evening: "My God! why did I have to begin to love you so late?" Then, "May your gospel be announced everywhere on earth, may all my children sing your praise, and may your missionaries be accepted everywhere. That is what I wish, as you know, Lord; that is what I want. . . ."

> [The following day] he urged us to remain united and to love God. "Oh, if you serve God well when you are young, how happy you will be when you die! . . ." "Do you believe that the good God will give me his paradise?" he said to me. And when I told him I hoped so: "What a gift he is going to give me!"
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> [The day after, he said] to me and my brothers: "Goodbye, my children; here at last is the moment I am longing for, because it is going to put an end to my sufferings and unite me with God." Then as I offered him a little syrup, he refused; when I gave it to him and asked him to drink it out of obedience, he then took it and said: "He took gall, and you give me syrup. . . ."
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> On Sunday, at ten o'clock he lost consciousness while the Salve was being sung at high Mass for a lessening of his sufferings; then he became delirious, and coming to his senses toward evening, he said: "God does not want me; death passed over my bed twice and left me. Lord, have mercy on me! My God, take my soul!" In the middle of the night: "God has forgotten me." Later: "Let's go! Courage! Let's be firm, and this time let's try not to miss."
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> On Monday morning: "Now at last the time has come. I am going to rest tonight." He took his crucifix in his hands, kissed it from time to time, answered "Amen" to my exhortations. At about 11:30, as I was reciting the Litany of the Dying and the following prayers, at the moment when I was saying, "Give your soul into the hands of God; may the angels come," etc., his chest filled up, his arms stiffened, and he expired.[11]

In his boyhood, Basil knew priests and laymen who had been heroes during the days of the Revolution, and he heard stories of persecution and fidelity to the Church from their lips. Fr. Julian Le Provost, the pastor at Laigné, ministered in Le Mans at the risk of his life during the 1790s. With the help of Mademoiselle Dufay de Boismont, who had hidden priests during the

Revolution, Fr. Le Provost operated the simple boys' and girls' schools where the Moreau children received the little education they got. Basil wrote of them later to his sister when he learned of their ill health: "I am anxious to get news of the rectory. You are certainly right to tell me how much you regret so great a loss! I share your alarm and your affliction! He is my father. She is my mother. I am their son in Jesus Christ. They raised us and taught us when we were children! How many lessons, how much helpful advice and encouragement they gave us all in their charity! . . . Our entire family . . . will have to mourn the misfortune about to befall us . . . I will never forget them, and I hope to see them, if not during my next vacation, at least in eternity."[12]

Fr. Huard, pastor of the church of Notre Dame de la Couture in Le Mans, who had suffered imprisonment for refusing the constitutional oath, was a frequent visitor of the pastor of Laigné. He, Fr. Le Provost, and Mademoiselle de Boismont seem to have helped finance Basil's education, and it was with Fr. Huard that Basil spent his vacations while he was in the seminary.[13] Fr. Horeau, principal of the little college at Château-Gontier, where Basil received his first really formal schooling (it had only 198 students when he arrived in 1814), had also been imprisoned during the Revolution.[14] The superior of the seminary of Saint Sulpice, where Basil spent a year of study in Paris immediately after his ordination, had helped negotiate the concordat of 1802.[15]

Association with people like these could only provide encouragement for a young priest wishing to rise to the challenge of his time. Additional encouragement came from the enthusiasm of beginnings, for it must have seemed that everything was beginning all over again. The college of Château-Gontier had been reopened only eleven years before the young Basil Moreau got there. The Le Mans seminary had been installed in the old Saint Vincent's Abbey in the very year he entered: 1816. The seminary of Saint Sulpice, shut down by Napoleon in 1810, had been re-

opened in 1814, seven years before he came. The Le Mans authorities opened the seminary of Tessé as a house of philosophy after Basil finished his own philosophical studies, and so in 1823 he went to teach in a house where he had not studied.[16] A priest of Le Mans, Fr. Jacques Dujarié, had organized a community of teaching sisters which was still developing; and yet in 1820, one year before Basile's ordination, he organized a community of teaching brothers.

CHAPTER 2

Preparation (1799–1823)

I. EARLY LIFE

Very little is known about Basil Moreau's early life beyond the information which his first biographer provides:

> Among all his pupils, the pastor of Laigné took special notice of Basil Moreau because of his open and affectionate character, his liveliness, his quick and active mind, his good judgment, and his surprising memory. But what attracted the priest most of all about this child was his solid piety, his purity of life, and his precocious maturity. These things seemed to him good indications of a holy vocation. According to some of Basil's early companions who are still alive, he was the one who organized the boys' games and assigned everyone his role, taking care to exclude those whose behavior at the rectory or elsewhere had given grounds for suspicion. He was also the one who taught the more able of his companions to serve Mass and to take part in various other church ceremonies. For this purpose he used a table in his room as an altar at which he himself took the celebrant's part, not omitting the sermon, which his good mother and his sisters tried to listen to with irreproachable gravity.[1]

His sisters, however, did not always maintain the desired seriousness if we are to believe Br. Marie-Antoine, who notes that on occasion when they giggled, Basil turned to his mother and said: "Mother! Make them keep still! I don't want them to laugh."[2]

> Fr. Le Provost, after having brought his pupil as far along as his modest program of elementary education permitted, did not hesitate to inform Basil's parents of the hopes he founded on the boy's good dispositions. . . . Basil's father asked for time to reflect on Fr. Le Provost's proposals. He was afraid that his son, who was just twelve years old, would end up by losing, through his books, the habit and taste for household chores, in which he had to share outside the time of his classes. [Finally the father permitted his son] to begin the study of Latin with three young boys of the village. . . . However, only later did Louis Moreau excuse his son from pasturing the cows, which was his responsibility among the family chores. The boy worked this task in with his studies, which meant so much to him, by carrying a stool out to the pasture, upon which he did his assignments.[3]

These few lines give the impression of serious and devout youth, with some ability to assert himself, to lead others, to be determined. His seriousness and piety made Fr. Le Provost feel he had a vocation to the priesthood. His ability to assert himself and to get others to follow stands out in his organization of his companions' games and his exclusion of those whose conduct made them suspect. His determination appears as rather uncommon from his readiness to study even while pasturing the family cows.

His studies enabled him to enter the fourth class at the college of Château-Gontier, about sixty miles from Laigné, in 1814 at the age of fifteen. The college then served also as a preparatory seminary, and this is why Basil went there. His studies were certainly paid for, at least in part, by the pastor of Laigné and

Mademoiselle de Boismont. Of the latter, Basil wrote of her after her death in April 1833 in *La Gazette du Maine*: "She contributed with generosity to defer the expenses of the education of many young priests." He spoke from experience.

The boy impressed the principal of the school, Fr. Horeau, just as he impressed the pastor of Laigné if we can believe his biographer:

> Basil justified the high hopes of the principal by his exemplary behavior, constant work, and outstanding success in his studies. The esteem which Fr. Horeau had shown him from the beginning appeared more and more justified as the mind and the heart of the pupil revealed themselves. Years later, when Basil was still only a subdeacon, the venerable principal of Château-Gontier told the bishop of Le Mans of the excellent memory which the student had left at the college and asked His Lordship to assign him as his assistant, with the hope, he wrote, of being able to find in him after some years, the successor that his advanced age and infirmities suggested he prepare for himself.[4]

Basil knew of Fr. Horeau's intention. It is possible that the principal appointed Basil as one of the prefects and even entrusted him with one of the lower classes during his time at the school.[5] In any case, the request made by Fr. Horeau of the bishop shows that he noted some leadership ability in this student from Laigné.

The assistant superior, Fr. Louis-Jean Fillion, a priest ordained just the year before Basil's arrival at Château-Gontier and entrusted with the spiritual direction of the students, also formed a favorable impression of the boy. A close friendship grew up between them, and for most of the next forty years Fr. Fillion was Basil's confessor or spiritual director or both.

Letters to two of his older sisters and a little speech read to his parents in the presence of his brothers and sisters and in their