



BASIL MOREAU

Founder of HOLY CROSS



GARY MACEOIN

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Contents

Foreword by Hugh Cleary, C.S.C.	7
One..... A Chosen Instrument.....	13
Two..... Youth in Revolutionary France.....	27
Three..... Grace Builds on Nature	41
Four..... Teacher, Organizer, Leader.....	51
Five..... At Loggerheads with a Saint	65
Six..... Holy Cross Takes Shape	77
Seven..... Assembly at Sainte-Croix	95
Eight..... First Foundations in America.....	113
Nine..... The Enigma of Father Sorin.....	135
Ten..... The Foundation at Notre Dame.....	141
Eleven..... Trial and Division in France.....	163
Twelve..... The Undermining of Authority	185
Thirteen..... The Supreme Sacrifice.....	203
Fourteen..... The Cross Leads to the Crown.....	221
Afterword by Joel Giallanza, C.S.C.	231
Chronology	243
Index	247



CHAPTER ONE

A Chosen Instrument

Basil Anthony Mary Moreau was one of the rare men who alter the course of history. Born into a peasant family in northwest France on February 11, 1799, he never possessed wealth or power. His path through life was strewn with failures. But he had one asset: he loved God. And that love drove him to a total utilization of vital resources such as perhaps many possess but few discover.

In his lifetime he made a major impact on France, Canada, and the United States. His zeal expressed itself in noble works in places as widely scattered as Italy, Poland, Algeria, and India. And his death began a yet more fruitful apostolate. Over a century later, his foundations still grow, spreading his spirit and achieving the aims to which his being was dedicated.

Basil Moreau's principal contribution consisted of a group of more or less closely interrelated religious communities, which he either established himself or developed from previously founded organizations. The first was the Good Shepherd convent at Le Mans—an orphanage and home for penitents, which he played a leading role in starting while a young priest of the diocese of



Le Mans, and then directed as ecclesiastical superior for twenty-one years.

Next came the Brothers of St. Joseph, a group begun by a fellow priest to teach elementary schools and handed over to him by the founder who recognized that his age and circumstances were handicapping the growth of an organization for which a desperate need existed. The third step was an association of Auxiliary Priests to act as superiors for the Brothers, give missions in the diocese, and teach secondary schools.

The Brothers and priests were gradually transformed into the Congregation of Holy Cross, and in the process yet another congregation of women was established, first as a part of Holy Cross and with the initial purpose of housekeeping for the men, later as a separate organization with a broad teaching and nursing function of its own. As it developed, it broke into three administratively separate units, one in France, one in Canada, and one in the United States.

Basil Moreau's genius was that he could get people to come together and pool their efforts to accomplish the purposes he proposed. The drama of his life is to be found on his desk, from which went forth year after year proposals, plans, and projects to capture the imagination and win new helpers as well as to retain the interest of those already committed. But he had not only to create, he had also to finance. And here again we see his organizing techniques, expressed in the broad-based Associations of the Good Shepherd and of St. Joseph, which enlisted the continuing support of thousands of lay people.

His life is, accordingly, less a chronology of personal incidents than the story of the development of his works. When conflict develops, it is not so much the clash of right and wrong or good and evil as that of good people differing honestly as regards the best way to reach the goal on which all are agreed. The work is endangered not through an innate weakness but through an excess of vitality, which impels it beyond its capabilities.



The more I reflect on Basil Moreau, the more I liken him to Ignatius of Loyola. It would be hard to think of two men of God farther apart in their human characteristics than the Spanish nobleman and the French peasant, differences which were projected in the formal discipline of Loyola's Society of Jesus and the atmosphere of relaxed spontaneity which the visitor observes in communities of Moreau's Congregation of Holy Cross. There is, nevertheless, a basic similarity in their analysis of the world circumstances which led each to found a religious order.

Ignatius at thirty in the year 1521 resolved on a total dedication to God. Prayer, meditation, study, and earnest search for the divine will led to the foundation of the Society of Jesus thirteen years later. He saw the Church threatened through deep-seated internal corruption and fossilization of institutions, and challenged in a death struggle by the formidable external foe of Protestantism.

Basil Moreau made his total dedication somewhat earlier in life than Ignatius. One cannot fix a precise date, but most probably he took the crucial decision while a seminarian, perhaps no more than twenty. A longer interval separated him from the logical goal of his reasoning and action. It was harder for him than for Ignatius—a soldier and member of the ruling class—to see himself in the role of founder. But the facts drove him inescapably. The Church in France was in crisis. Gallicanism had for two centuries restricted the arteries through which flowed its lifeblood from the heart of Christendom. The Revolution had cut off its sources of material and intellectual nourishment by seizing its property and closing its schools, and the prophets of the Age of Reason were plausibly announcing the proximate interment of the corpse.

Sometimes one is tempted to wonder why a founder starts a new religious order rather than draft one already dedicated to the aims he seeks. In this case, the reason is clear: Religious orders had been stamped out in France by the Revolution. Those that survived underground or precariously re-established themselves



lacked legal status. Not only were they harassed by the civil administration, but even some bishops were strongly opposed to the creation or restoration of organizations entitled to canonical exemption from diocesan control.

France was thus a country where everything had to be begun anew, from catechism teaching in the villages to the conquest of scholastic freedom, from the hasty recruiting of a depleted clergy to the re-establishment of the religious life under varied forms, from the apostolate to the masses by means of missions and retreats to the methodical introduction of well-organized studies in colleges and seminaries.

Basil Moreau was inspired to take a big part in all of this. He did not seek the role of founder. What he was conscious of was needs, a broad spectrum of needs affecting every aspect of society, but particularly a need for educators to form Christian minds and hearts, and of priests to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments.

To meet these needs, he created instruments, each of which had to have two characteristics. They had to be able to perform the required function. And they had to be capable of existing within the legal and political environment. The logic of events did the rest. It pushed them gradually into the pattern in which the religious life had traditionally flourished in the Church. Few founders have left so many religious families, and yet Basil Moreau can to a considerable extent be called a founder by accident.

This, however, is far from suggesting that his work lacked a purpose and personality. The purposes of the Congregation of Holy Cross are described in the Constitutions in terms, which permit a very broad range of work, and historically the members have been and are involved in activities so disparate as not to fit in any neat category. Yet such universality of purpose makes perfect sense in the context of their origin. Basil's idea was the same as that of Ignatius, who in 1538 brought his first six companions to Rome to place them at the Pope's disposal. His purpose was as wide as the needs of the Church.



Like Ignatius, too, he was acutely conscious that it belonged to the Pope to determine which needs deserved priority. Obedience to Rome was one of his most developed characteristics, and many of his trials were to stem from his determined defense of papal rights.

The purpose of the Congregation of Holy Cross is similar to that of the Society of Jesus, but the personality or spirit of the two orders is very different. Ignatius thought of social groupings in terms of the army, a strong esprit de corps supported by a strict discipline. Basil Moreau took the family as his model, and the strengths and weaknesses of his organization were those of a family bound more by common aspirations, common experience, mutual affection, and sharing of sufferings than by the cold words of a contract.

It has been my privilege to intimately know members of many religious orders and to observe from the inside the workings of not a few communities. But never have I had such a sense of family as in the mother house of Holy Cross. The relationship of the religious to each other, to their superior, and to the wider grouping of the laity who attend their church mirrored the informality, the affection, and the sense of common ends unselfishly pursued which one hopes characterize one's own family.

The Benedictines have something of this, but the stress seems to be greater in Holy Cross. That the founder was responsible for this spirit, no one who has studied his life and read his letters to his spiritual children can ever doubt.

To note just one aspect, Father Moreau in an early circular described his plan for a family or a community of three societies of priests, Brothers, and Sisters dedicated not merely to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but to the hearts of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The heart is the symbol of love, and love is the bond of union. As Father Thomas Barrosse, C.S.C., stresses in a study of Holy Cross spirituality, Father Moreau did not propose these hearts as objects of special devotion but rather as symbols of the union



of love which he wished to keep vividly in the thoughts of his religious.

The early seal of the Congregation consisted of an anchor entwined by a banner bearing the initials of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and surmounted by three hearts. To some, the symbolism may smack of a sentimentality we associate with plaster saints and overcommercialized religious art, but one must recognize it as a valid communications technique in nineteenth-century France. Its basic soundness is evidenced by its success in infusing into the members of the Congregation a spirit that made them consciously model their mutual relations on those of the Holy Family. To that end, Father Moreau called his priests "Salvatorists," his Sisters "Marianites," and his Brothers "Josephites" after their models, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Of course the Holy Family started with an important advantage. Not all members of Father Moreau's family were saints. Some understood but poorly the obligations they had assumed. Family differences led to family estrangements, to challenges against parental authority. Father Moreau was crushed precisely as a father. Many of his children rejected him.

Children can be very cruel, and Holy Cross was cruel to its father. But it sinned the way a family does, and in due course it made amends as a family does. An estrangement seldom breaks family ties. The family remains so long as there is a sense of common purpose, of shared experiences, of affection transcending legal obligation. The more real these elements, the more violent the clash, but also the more certain the reconciliation—and, needless to add, the tighter the resulting family bonds.

If, as was suggested, the family looms large in Father Moreau's view of social organization, this attitude was the result of no accident. He came from a long line of French peasants whose community had the characteristics of a widespread family and whose lives were ruled by personal loyalties and obligations deriving ultimately from a sense of membership in a family group. From this lived and shared experience, he could draw countless

examples to demonstrate that such an organization of life was suited to bring out the best qualities in a man.

A fugitive priest with a price on his head baptized him. He grew up among memories and living examples of those who had succumbed to persecution and those who had withstood. The pastor who taught him catechism, reading, writing, arithmetic, and Latin had secretly exercised his ministry throughout the Reign of Terror. Such memories would make Basil regard heroicity as almost normal.

He was fortunate in his parents, too. In a time of war and separation, they lived together and at peace. His father was drafted neither into the Vendean armies, which vainly sought to defend religion against the new irreligion, nor into the legions, which carried the Emperor's ambition into a score of conquered capitals and finally buried it under the snowdrifts of a Russian winter. Both Louis and Louise Moreau gave their children the example of a Christian life and trained them in the natural virtues, which form the substratum of supernatural holiness.

This is not an uncommon background. Rather it is the traditional social context in which vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life develop. Additional factors must be isolated if we are to offer a logical explanation of why Basil Moreau not only became a priest and a religious but dedicated all his energies throughout his life to the single purpose of promoting the Kingdom of God.

One fairly constant natural characteristic of the saints is a strong personality. This may to some extent be a result as well as a cause of their holiness. A man totally dedicated to God's service will not let anything stand in his way if satisfied that a course of action is God's will. But strong natural qualities usually precede holiness in those who become saints, and Basil Moreau seems to have been endowed with such qualities.

A strong will and an ardent temperament, however, make a two-edged weapon. Under the influence of grace, they urge the person who possesses them to devote himself unreservedly to



the service of God. But almost immediately they begin to constitute an obstacle to the execution of this purpose, since the candidate for perfection must learn to divest himself of his own will and curb his impetuosities.

All this occurred in the early stages of Basil Moreau's efforts to acquire holiness. The period of graduate study spent at the seminary of St. Sulpice, Paris, immediately after his ordination, played no less decisive a part in his spiritual than in his intellectual formation. It is ironic that he himself was grievously disappointed at the decision to send him to St. Sulpice and that the man who singled him out for special training was later as bishop to test severely the virtue there acquired.

The first thing St. Sulpice did was place him in a stimulating intellectual atmosphere. The academic preparation of candidates for the priesthood in France was then far below what would today be an acceptable minimum. The Revolution had disrupted the seminary system and decimated the clergy. Priests were desperately needed for pastoral work, and few qualified professors were available. To complicate the situation, the theology taught in the seminaries was usually infected with the historically allied heresies of Jansenism and Gallicanism.*

These heresies were not without influence on Basil's life, but for the moment it suffices to say that as a seminarian he seems to have shied instinctively away from them. It was important, however, that he should acquire a theoretical justification for what he felt to be right, and such grounding in theology was supplied at St. Sulpice, where he was fortunate enough to build for himself a defense against Gallicanism without following Lamennais into the contrary error at the other end of the intellectual spectrum.

* Jansenism was the popular religious movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries begun by theologian Cornelius Otto Jansen and characterized by extreme personal piety and a belief in predestination. Gallicanism was the religious philosophy popular in France beginning in the seventeenth century, which sought to curtail papal authority by defining it in a much narrower way by granting more importance to bishops and civil leaders.



Still more decisive was the spiritual formation given him by St. Sulpice. For the first time he felt the influence of a school of piety in the strict sense of the term. Sulpician piety, derived from Father Olier, founder of the Sulpicians, has two major characteristics—a purgative element of severe mortification and a unitive element of adherence to Christ and participation in his mysteries. Mortification was already present in Father Moreau's life. What he needed was a counterbalance to prevent development of a self-centered and stultifying masochism.

It is not easy to put the penances of the saints in proper perspective. To begin paradoxically, one might say that deliberate acts of self-punishment characterize every saint yet are of their nature only remotely related to sanctity. Most people are terrified of physical pain, though it is no harder to train the body to endure physical punishment than to acquire a new intellectual discipline, like learning a language. Neither grace nor supernatural intention is any more a necessary prerequisite in the one case than in the other. History presents many examples of this, from the warrior classes of pre-Discovery Mexico to the firewalkers of modern India.

Father Moreau's personal regime of penance and self-sacrifice frightens the imagination unless placed in perspective. He scourged himself and wore metal girdles with sharp points that dug into the skin at each movement. His instruments of penance can now be inspected at Sainte-Croix and Notre Dame. I do not want to discount this self-conquest, but I do insist that it can be achieved in a few months and will subsequently prove no more irksome than the appliances many wear happily to ease a physical defect or discomfort.

I am somewhat more impressed by Father Moreau's abstemiousness and still more by the rigor with which he limited his sleeping hours. In the middle of his active life, he stopped going to bed altogether, and for his last twenty-five years he slept sitting in a deep armchair, at least in part because of an accident



that damaged his leg, a practice abandoned only on the doctor's insistence a few days before his death.

By themselves, nevertheless, these things would not prove much. Comparable self-control is a matter of daily observation on the part not only of persons suffering from certain illnesses, such as diabetes, but also on that of thousands of people with no higher motive than to stay slim.

What such disciplines demonstrate for me is the presence of a strong motivation, of a decision by a determined man to gain complete mastery over his body in order to use it with maximum efficiency for the ulterior end. To achieve notable success in any order, a man must learn to drive himself. The successful business executive works a seventy-hour week to win the wealth and power he covets. What self-denial demonstrates in the case of one who seeks holiness is that he is serious enough in his quest to take the first preparatory step.

Immediately, however, a temptation arises to identify the means with the end, to measure progress in holiness by the intensity of the self-discipline achieved. A remarkable priest who took charge of him at St. Sulpice helped Father Moreau over this hurdle. He was Father Mollevaut, superior at the Solitude of Issy, a man who combined personal spirituality with an understanding of human nature. The Solitude, an annex to which Father Moreau transferred from the main college in his second year, lived up to its name. The students followed a routine similar to that of a novitiate, removed from outside distractions, with long hours of silence, and with much of their time devoted to meditation and spiritual exercises.

Father Moreau brought with him such habits of self-restraint. His boyhood had been spent in a home in which poverty was normal and each member trained to make his or her contribution. Social attitudes reflected the rigid Jansenistic code common in France at the time. The priests he knew best had abandoned their comforts, risked their lives, engaged in menial works, endured prison.



As a student, after receiving minor orders and with his spiritual director's approval, he anticipated by a private vow the celibacy to be imposed with the subdiaconate. He bound himself to an obedience which would accept all assignments and seek none and to a poverty which would accumulate no riches and wear only unostentatious dress. He pledged himself to fast on Fridays and in the seminary to drink only water at the collation on fast days.

Father Mollevaut did not take long to recognize the quality and characteristics of the material with which he was working. Here was a man progressing toward holiness by using the very formula prescribed by the Sulpician school of spirituality. He was conscious of the danger of an excessive development of the purgative element of penance, and he moved to balance and humanize it by an attitude of adherence to Christ and participation in His mysteries.

Simultaneously, he counseled moderation in public acts of mortification, which might create a reputation as an ascetic and encourage spiritual pride. His success may be judged by the fact that, while Father Moreau always observed self-denial, he gave his religious families a comparatively mild rule on mortification. He set before them an ideal as high as his practice, to deny themselves in everything they could do without, but the specific restrictions and prescribed acts of penance he made less demanding than those of many other religious orders.

Another problem with which Father Mollevaut dealt firmly was Father Moreau's tendency to be carried away by his enthusiasms. When he looked at the extreme shortage of priests in rural France, he wanted to take charge of a country parish. When he meditated on the lives of the Fathers of the Desert, he felt impelled to become a Trappist. Reading about the vast lands still in the darkness of paganism, he believed he heard God call him to the foreign missions.

For such impetuosity Father Mollevaut had a simple antidote. God has called you to your present functions, he would say, and



you must continue them until obedience orders you elsewhere. He had to repeat this counsel many times over the years, for Father Moreau was continually haunted by the vision of all the good works that were crying out to be done. It seems obvious that Father Mollevaut was not formulating an absolute rule of conduct. He was concerned with a particular case, and his judgment told him that Father Moreau needed a longer period of training and of instruction in piety before he could launch out on the original works to which he was being called.

If Father Mollevaut's direction succeeded in injecting a supernatural element into Father Moreau's actions, it did so without altering his natural attitudes. Among the reproaches later lodged against him by those who clashed with him over his administration as head of the Congregation of Holy Cross, there are frequent references to a violent temper. He himself did not challenge such criticisms. "I recognize my faults of this kind," he once wrote with disarming frankness to a colleague, who apparently had reported to him that Bishop Bouvier of Le Mans was complaining of his temper. However, he immediately added a justification which is admirable for its objectivity. "But at the same time, without this 'temper,' is it not true that Sainte-Croix would have been wiped out of existence the day the Bishop told me at the bottom of the stairs in his house: 'If you teach Latin, I will never again set foot inside Sainte-Croix'? This temper has stood firm against all his opposition, just as it also resisted his theological teaching. Is there anything wrong with that?"

What Father Mollevaut sought, and what he achieved, was simply to establish control over his natural impulses so that he could channel them to good ends. It is noteworthy that in all his correspondence, even in reply to the most insulting and provoking charges, Father Moreau's words are always tempered with patience and affection. This all followed from the pattern of Father Mollevaut's direction, which sought principally to encourage his pupil to model his life on that of Christ and acquire through meditation on the mysteries of Christ's life a deeper



understanding of the plan of redemption and his own part in it. A gradual transformation of the man thus took place, an emptying out of his defects and selfish impulses, a substitution of the attitudes, motives, and purposes of Christ.

The final result was an ability to view events through Christ's eyes and to react to them with Christ's reaction. The intention of Sulpician piety is to saturate the man in Christ, to familiarize him so completely with the incidents of Christ's life and His method of dealing with them that he reaches the point of thinking and doing as Christ would have thought and done in like circumstances.

Such a regime produces a complicated and well-rounded man. It is certainly far removed from negative and do-nothing acceptance of the divine plan, which is what some people erroneously consider holiness. The value of this kind of training was to be demonstrated in Father Moreau's life, since less could hardly have carried him unscathed through the trials he endured. For, like Christ, he would be betrayed and rejected by his own.