

Basil Anthony Moreau (1799-1873)

Beginnings

Basil Moreau was born on February 11, 1799, in Laigné-en-Belin, a small French village south of Le Mans. He was the ninth in a family of fourteen children, three of whom died at an early age. Basil's father, Louis Moreau, and his mother, Louise Pioger, were farmers. Louis Moreau was also a wholesale wine merchant.

The pastor of Laigné-en Belin recognized quickly the signs of a priestly vocation in the young boy and encouraged him to pursue studies that would lead him to the priesthood. Basil began his studies in 1814 at the seminary college of Château-Gontier and in 1817 at the diocesan seminary of Le Mans. He was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 22 on August 12, 1821. Following ordination his bishop sent the young priest to Paris where under the direction of the Sulpicians he received further training in theology and spirituality. Basil Moreau returned to the seminary in Le Mans in 1823 where for thirteen years he taught successively philosophy, dogma and Sacred Scripture.

Foundation of Holy Cross

Endowed with an active and enterprising nature, while still a seminary professor, the young priest sought to respond to the pastoral needs of the time. In 1835, Basil Moreau formed a group of auxiliary priests who would preach parish missions and retreats throughout the countryside. That same year, his bishop asked him to assume the direction of a fledgling community of teaching brothers, Brothers of Saint Joseph, founded fifteen years earlier by Father Jacques Dujarié, pastor of Ruillé-sur-Loir. In Le Mans, in 1837, Basil joined these two groups into a single entity, whose aim was to provide quality education for the youth and to evangelize the people of the surrounding country parishes. The educational institutions undertaken by the priests and brothers quickly acquired a reputation for excellence that extended beyond the confines of the city of Le Mans.

On August 15, 1840, Basil Moreau professed the vows of religious life along with several of his followers. With the arrival in 1841 of Léocadie Gascoin, who took the name of Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours, he laid the solid foundation for the women's branch of his congregation, the Marianites of Holy Cross, thus realizing the fulfillment of his plan to establish a community consisting of three distinct societies of priests, brothers and sisters. It was at this time that Basil Moreau added a missionary dimension to his community. In 1840, a small group of religious was sent to Algeria; the following year another group left for the United States. In 1847, another group of priests, brothers and sisters went to Canada and in 1853, the congregation was established in East Bengal which is today Bangladesh. In 1869 the Marianites of Holy Cross in Indiana received their autonomy and became the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross; in Canada, in 1883 the Marianites in Canada became the branch known as the Congregation of the Sisters of Holy Cross (Soeurs de Sainte-Croix).

Basil Moreau's Vision

Spirit of union

What Basil Moreau sought most often to instill in his religious was a **spirit of union**. He often repeated the statement: "In union there is strength; dissension leads to ruin." He desired union not just because of the challenge of three religious societies existing together; he believed that the members of any religious community if it is to survive must imitate the first Christians

who had but *one heart and one soul*. Following this line of thought, he gave as examples illustrating this spirit of union the Holy Family of Nazareth and the union of the Three Persons in the Trinity. He wrote in one of his first circular letters: “Since we form with Him (Jesus Christ) but one body and draw life from the same Spirit, he urges us to remain united among ourselves in Him in order to be one like the branches and the vine, borne by the same root and nourished by the same sap, and forming together but one plant.” It was for this reason that he consecrated the priests to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the brothers to Saint Joseph and the sisters to the Heart of Mary, and the entire congregation to Mary under the title of Our Lady of Sorrows.

Divine Providence

In addition to the spirit of union and mutual collaboration, Basil Moreau strove to promote among the priests, brothers and sisters of Holy Cross a firm **reliance on divine Providence**. Seeing himself as merely a tool in the hands of a provident God, he wrote: “Holy Cross is not a human work, but God’s very own. ... I beg you to renew yourselves in the spirit of your vocation, which is the spirit of poverty, chastity and obedience ... If such is our conduct, we can rely on the help of Providence ... Providence never fails to provide for all the necessities of those who abandon themselves to its guidance in accomplishing their duties ... The Congregation of Holy Cross is God’s work, and by the very fact that He has not permitted its ruin despite the many terrible attacks of the enemy of all good, he wants it to continue in existence and to develop in even greater proportions.”

Apostolic zeal

Linked to this reliance on Providence, the founder of Holy Cross saw flowing from it the growth among his religious of an apostolic spirit that is best described as a zeal for the mission. In his book *Christian Pedagogy*, published in 1856, Father Moreau writes, “By zeal is understood that flame of burning desire which one feels to make God known and served and thus save souls. Apostolic activity is therefore the essential character of this virtue, and (ministers) who are animated by this virtue will fulfill their duties with eagerness, affection, courage and perseverance ... Our zeal is always guided by charity, everything is done with strength and gentleness; strength because we are courageous and unshakable in the midst of pain, difficulty and trials ... and with gentleness because we have the tenderness of our Divine Model.”

Ecclesiastical Approbation

It was in 1857 that Basil Moreau attained the height of his career. That year Pope Pius IX granted official approbation to the men’s congregation. This special moment was marked by a thanksgiving celebration that took place in the church of Our Lady of Holy Cross. Ten years later papal approbation was granted to the Marianites of Holy Cross. This was also the beginning of his greatest period of trial which ended with his resignation as superior general in 1866.

Death of the Founder

Forced by his congregation to live apart from the community, Basil Moreau spent his remaining years preaching retreats with great success in the country parishes surrounding Le Mans. He was taken ill on January 1, 1873 and died twenty days later in the small house where he had been living with his two sisters. Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors was with him at the

time of his death. The Marianites of Holy Cross never abandoned him and always remained faithful to him.

It was not until 1893 that subsequent superiors general strove to revive veneration of Basil Moreau and devotion to his memory. During this time, the congregations founded by Basil Moreau grew and spread throughout the world.

Holy Cross Today

Today the men and women of Holy Cross have established and still maintain educational institutions as well as important social and pastoral ministries in France, North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. It is through their commitment to the vowed life, their zeal for the mission and the diversity of ministry that the priests, sisters and brothers of Holy Cross continue to live out the vision of Basil Moreau.

Beatification

Although his cause for beatification was introduced in the diocese of Le Mans in 1946, it was not until 1994 that the study of the virtues of the founder of Holy Cross was presented to the Vatican Congregation for the Cause of the Saints. The study was approved and on April 12, 2003, Pope John Paul II declared Basil Moreau's practice of virtue to be heroic thus bestowing upon the servant of God the title of Venerable. Two years later, on April 28, 2006, His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, authorized the promulgation of the decree regarding the miracle attributed to the intercession of the Venerable Servant of God, Basil Moreau.

Finally, even if the name of the Congregation of Holy Cross does not spring from the founder's special devotion to the cross of Christ – Holy Cross (Sainte-Croix) was the name of the Le Mans suburb where the congregation was founded – Father Moreau did not fail to make use of this title when insisting on the role of the cross in the spiritual life of his sons and daughters. He gave as a motto to his community the verse from the liturgical hymn: *O Crux ave, spes unica!* Hail, O Cross, our only hope.