

Meeting Basil Moreau

Given the vast span of time covered by Christian spirituality, Basil Moreau is relatively new on the scene, having lived and worked in nineteenth-century France (1799-1873). Father Moreau founded the religious brothers, priests, and sisters of Holy Cross, beginning in 1837. Originally, Moreau envisioned these men and women as a single religious community; however, that vision was modified by circumstances and church authorities.

Today, there are four religious congregations in the Holy Cross family. The *Congregation of Holy Cross* (priests and brothers) received papal approval in 1857. By that time, the original sisters, the *Marianites of Holy Cross*, had been separated by Rome and eventually received papal approval in 1867. In 1869, the United States group of Marianites became the *Sisters of the Holy Cross* and received papal approval in 1896. Similarly, in 1886, the Canadian group of Marianites became the *Sisters of Holy Cross* and received papal approval in 1910. These four congregations look to Basil Moreau as their common founder and inspiration.

Basile Antoine Moreau, commonly referred to as Basil Moreau, was born on February 11, 1799, in a small, rural village just outside Le Mans, France. He was the ninth of fourteen children. His mother ran the family farm, and his father was a wine merchant. Moreau died in Le Mans on January 20, 1873, at the age of seventy-four. Though Moreau lived and died so close to the village where he was born, it would be wrong to assume that his world was “small.” He was a man of considerable talent and boundless energy for ministry. He made friends with people in every sector of life, even those with differing political and social perspectives, because he believed they could contribute to continuing the mission that God had given him. His firm belief in the enormous potential of human nature touched and transformed the lives of many people. He was a priest and professor, scholar and spiritual director, religious founder and pioneer, educator, prolific writer, and popular preacher. His interests included education and politics, agriculture and engineering, architecture and construction, theology and art, geography and navigation, music, mathematics, and more.

Father Moreau’s many gifts found expression through the ministries and services in which the brothers, priests, and sisters were engaged. Because schools and parishes had been seriously compromised, not only by the French Revolution itself, but also by the subsequent and frequently shifting governmental policies and procedures, many Holy Cross religious served in educational and parochial settings, first in France and then beyond. The needs were enormous and he responded. The institution that Father Moreau founded, Our Lady of Holy Cross, became the school of choice in Le Mans. And, throughout his life, Moreau preached parish retreats and offered sacramental assistance as his time permitted. His direct involvement in all this reflected his desire and commitment to contribute personally to the transformation of the world in which he lived.

Though his vision for the transformation of French society—and even of the world—was personal and passionate, Basil Moreau knew he could not single-handedly do all that

should be done. Holy Cross came into existence in response to the urgent needs of the time. He surrounded himself with men and women of many talents who shared his commitment to selfless service. Very quickly, the Holy Cross family grew in numbers and by geography. Usually, Father Moreau would send the most capable among his colleagues—men and women on whom he relied—to lead and coordinate the missionaries in far-off lands, often never to return to France. In his passion to be of service, to provide education and the sacraments, and to alleviate suffering of any kind, he did sometimes overextend human and financial resources. He simply trusted that God would provide, and God did. Holy Cross continued to grow.

Basil Moreau was close to people; he came to know them and to care about them personally. Even over great distances, he did what he could to stay in touch. His conversation and teaching were marked by that same intimacy. His writing and preaching had a universal appeal. They were religiously reflective and meditative, but also instructive. Readers and listeners could translate his words into daily actions. His approach was pastoral, practical, and persuasive, based on faith and filled with the conviction that God's providential presence and activity are at work always, in every dimension of life. This keen sense of providence gave Father Moreau a profound capacity for hope that sustained him through difficult and painful times with his religious communities, church authorities, and civic officials. The motto he lived by and passed on to others sums up his perspective: "Hail cross, our only hope."

This conviction that the cross, in whatever form, can be a source of life and hope was an encouraging message for those who struggled and suffered in the political, economic, and religious turmoil of post-Revolutionary France. Even more, it held the promise of transformation and affirmed the goodness and potential of human nature; a promise and an affirmation not regularly heard in a society still influenced by the remnants of Jansenism. Basil Moreau was committed to "preparing the world for better times than ours," precisely because he believed better times were possible and would indeed come if people cooperated and collaborated in making the necessary efforts and sacrifices. That he inspired so many men and women to live the same commitment was good news during bleak times. It still is. Transformation is always possible; there is always cause for hope.

Today that transformation and hope are nurtured by the religious of Holy Cross and by those who minister with them in schools and universities where a quality education is provided. It is also present in parishes and other venues that offer an extensive range of pastoral services to those in need. This Holy Cross spirituality can be found in hospitals and clinics and in a variety of other ministries that respond to the pressing needs of society and the church. That response is evident through the presence and ministry of the family of Holy Cross in France, Italy, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Haiti, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Kenya, Uganda, Mali, Ghana, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. The women and men of Holy Cross reflect the richness and diversity of all these cultures.²

For Father Moreau, the spiritual life—indeed all of life—was meant to be "gravitation toward God," propelled by "a fervent and continuous desire" to be one with God. As that gravitational pull grows stronger, as the desire intensifies, transformation happens. This is good news, for any time, in any life situation. It is worthy of our confidence. Basil

Moreau's instruction is straightforward, "Be convinced that nothing should shake the confidence of those who have the Lord for their portion and support." This conviction is a choice that must be made.

Whatever similarities and differences there may be between the world that Basil Moreau confronted and the world in which we live, transformation is a challenge we must accept if we are serious about our relationship with God, and sincere in our efforts toward spiritual growth. Transformation will be shaped by our faith. It will shape our future as individuals and as a people. An even deeper challenge lies in our willingness to take up the transformation because we know we must, we are convinced it is possible, and we believe that God is with us always. The choice to transform life is ours.

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