

BASIL MOREAU: MAN OF GOD

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Basil Moreau, man of God. What is meant by the expression "person of God"? I mean those for whom *God* is real, those in whose life *God* is a real presence, those who live in the presence of God, enjoy the intimacy of *God* and convey by their lives that *God* is real for them. This admits of degrees. The individual most fully a person of God, then, will be the one for whom *God* is really present always and everywhere, at all times in everything, and for whom *God* is the meaning of life. A Christian person of *God* (for the Old Testament and religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition also speak of people of *God*) — a Christian person of *God* is someone for whom the *God* of Jesus and Jesus himself are real, really present and the meaning of life.

Since the Risen Lord and his Father are present to us only by faith, a Christian person of *God* will necessarily be a person of faith, and since it is impossible for the most important one in our lives to be present to us by faith and for us to be negligent, then the Christian person of *God* will also be a person of prayer.

First, a person of faith. Let us see more in detail just what this means. I noted a moment ago that *God* is present to us — becomes real for us by faith. Let me explain this a bit. God, of course, is real and really present even if we do not believe just as you may be present, even right next to me (let us say behind me), without my noticing you. You will be present for me only if I can see, hear, touch you since we are present to one another by our senses. *God* is present to us by our faith. Faith means seeing — recognizing — *God* as present where he is present, and, of course, he is present everywhere and in everything.

The New Testament uses the expression "to accept" as the equivalent of "to believe." For example in John 1: 12 we read that the Word made flesh gave *the power of becoming children of God* to all who accepted him, that is, to those who believed in his name. In other words, those who accepted Jesus as God's "Word," or self-communication, in human form, received this power. To accept him in this way — to "see" in Jesus God's Word made flesh — is to believe in him, and to accept or recognize, God as the Father — as Abba — is to believe in the God of Jesus. Jesus saw his Father present and at work in everything and always, and so really and fully to believe in the God of Jesus is to recognize the Father as present and at work in everything and always. Such faith transforms our life as Jesus himself points out. It is only when we are people of *little faith* that we are *anxious about ... what we are to eat or what we are to drink or what we are to wear*; the man or woman of faith is well aware that the *heavenly Father knows that we need all these things* (Matthew 6:25-34). It was because they had little faith, Jesus tells the disciples, that they feared the wind and the waves during the storm at sea (Matthew 8:23-26).

Next, a person of prayer. The person of faith will also be a person of prayer.

Anyone for whom God is always and everywhere present and at work and for whom God is the meaning of life cannot possibly neglect, not communicate with, not be in communion with God. Rather this individual will be someone who lives with God and also someone who, like Jesus, will keep *withdrawing to the wilderness to pray* (Luke 5: 16), even *spending the night in prayer* (Luke 6: 12).

Basil Moreau was a person of God. This means that he was a man of faith and a man of prayer. We must now see how our founder was both of these.

Was Father Moreau a man of faith? Did he regularly see God everywhere and in everything? To find an answer to this question, we turn to his writings and what was written or said about him by his contemporaries.

At the start of each new year the founder wrote a circular letter to the congregation and in it reflected on the events of the preceding twelve months. He described to the membership how Holy Cross had grown, its successes and what had been accomplished by particular works, houses and religious. He indicated also the difficulties Holy Cross had faced and failures or setbacks. For us the important thing is that he saw every one of these things in reference to God. Either each event was a blessing provided by God, or it was a failure on the part of Holy Cross to correspond with God's grace but, even then, having its place in God's providence. Each event was something for which to thank God or something about which to ask the question, "what does God want us to learn from this?" Surely one of the most impressive things about these letters is how he sees the crosses — even, or especially, extremely heavy ones — as divine blessings. In earlier circular letters he often asks whether particular crosses are not God's corrections or a way of calling the religious to greater fervor. But in 1865 when the future looked darkest shortly before he resigned as superior general, he could write:

For my own part, Reverend Father and dear Brothers, I am not the least surprised by all these trials. Thanks be to God, they have only increased my confidence in him who alone has founded and maintained this Congregation ... Bear in mind and do not forget ... that just as Divine Providence has willed its greatest works to begin in humility and abjection, it has also decreed that they should expand only at the price of difficulties and contradictions, trials, crosses, contempt, calumny, and detraction. [After illustrating this from the life of Jesus, he continues:] Rejoice, then, instead of being worried or discouraged, when you find temptation striking at the Congregation or at yourselves. [After citing the experience of several saints who faced humiliating temptations, he concludes:] Thus it follows that the many different trials to which we have been subjected are indubitable marks of the divine will in regard to our congregation, and of the presence of the Lord in our midst ... Be glad, then, Reverend Fathers and dear Brothers, that you have been found worthy to suffer in body and soul and to share in the tribulations, since

these trials are a sure guarantee of the divine will towards us and the work whose instruments we are. (CL 179)

Was this perception of God's presence and action in the events of his own life and in the Congregation's experience something Father Moreau had only when he reflected on them as he wrote his annual circular letter, or was it his habitual and spontaneous perception of events as they were happening? It was his habitual and spontaneous perception of whatever happened. We read again and again in his life how when events, sometimes unexpectedly, turn out well, he immediately thanks and praises God for what providence has arranged. So too, when events take a turn for the worse, he instinctively recognizes this as a cross offered him by God, perhaps because of his own sins or as a chance to share in the redemptive cross of Christ. His personal correspondence is full of such reactions, and anecdotes from his life provide repeated illustrations of this. I give only one example.

The foundation in Louisiana had suffered a long series of frightful setbacks: numerous religious and very many children for whom the brothers and sisters cared were struck down by epidemics of yellow fever and other diseases; they all lived in a poverty that bordered on destitution; they suffered from the delayed arrival, departure or death of successive superiors; and conflicts with Father Sorin in Indiana caused turmoil in the Louisiana community. The general council met to discuss whether the foundation should be suppressed. Each member spoke his opinion. At the end Father Moreau put his head in his hands for a few minutes and then said that since God had demanded so much from Holy Cross in the Louisiana foundation, this must be surely a sign that God planned great things for our future there; hence, he said, he thought we should stay. The council adopted his view and voted to stay.

Not only did our founder see the many events of his life and all of our history as so many individual acts of God's providence, but he saw them all as working together — or rather he saw God working in all of them to achieve his aims. Thus he could write in his presentation of the 1858 Rules:

If I could have foreseen the development of the Congregation of Holy Cross from the outset, I could then have regulated and coordinated everything in advance. If such were the case, however, the congregation would have been a merely human combination and not the work of Divine Providence. The fact is that it began and developed in a manner so mysterious that I can claim for myself neither credit for its foundation nor merit for its progress. Therein lies the indubitable proof that God alone is its author, since, according to St. Augustine, "when we cannot find the cause of a good work, we must recognize that the Lord is its beginning and author." In the light of this truth, I had to follow the designs of Providence by modifying our rules according as God's plan unfolded before our eyes ... (CL 94)

He wanted all the religious of Holy Cross to have this same sense of God as present and at work in everything and always. In his rules he wrote of faith:

The religious will try to have a faith which is so simple, solid, and lively that it will not only enlighten their minds but animate their thoughts, their affections, their words, and their actions...

To put this virtue into practice, they will walk in the presence of God and fear to offend him and to incur his judgments more than any evil on earth. They will adore him as the absolute master of all things; they will love him as a father; they will pray to him with respect, attention, fervor, and confidence; they will undertake all things out of obedience for his glory and the salvation of souls; they will have pure intentions, an ardent zeal, a burning charity.

There is no need to point out that this ideal, held up by the founder to his congregation, was his own. I trust that the texts I have cited show how close he came to realizing it. Must we not say that Basil Moreau was a man of faith who, as his Rule on Faith urges, *walked in the presence of God?*

A person of faith is a person of prayer. Was our founder a man of prayer? I think we can take it for granted that he did what he prescribed for all the religious, who, according to the constitutions he gave us, must *"never omit ... through their own fault the regular exercises of piety."* But he did not limit himself to the prescribed prayer. He wrote numerous hymns or poems, many for use by others but some extremely personal, a number of which express the desire to spend hours alone with God, a desire that surely was his and that he certainly satisfied when he found moments — or hours — of leisure time during his retreats, when traveling, and especially in his last years when he was no longer superior general.

As for the routine events of everyday life, in his activities, in difficult moments as in his joys, he spontaneously turned to the God whom he saw always at work in all that was taking place. In his most difficult moments, like Jesus in his agony in the garden, he *prayed all the more earnestly* (Luke 22:44). He explained how, in his great trial of 1855,

... when the community had retired, I remained in the chapel for long hours. What did I do there? I went from station to station, searching for light, for an inspiration, and I found nothing, absolutely nothing. I came back to the sanctuary, went up to the altar, and knocked on the door of the tabernacle. I waited and received no answer, not the least encouragement. At that moment I understood something of our Lord's abandonment in his agony as he went from his Father to his disciples without finding any consolation ... I would have yielded to the temptation (to flee) had I not kept my eyes fixed on the crucifix. I kept looking at it

for days ... Finally, convinced more than ever that everything was crumbling around me ... I saw myself mocked and stoned, and I said, "My God, I consent, provided that the congregation be saved and that you be glorified."

This God for whom and with whom Basil Moreau lived -- was he also habitually on our founder's lips? Did others find God in and through his life?

They certainly found God through his preaching. From his earliest years as a priest, Father Moreau was a popular preacher, much in demand. One of the brothers said of him: *There was energy and fire in his preaching, and he never did so well as when he was called on to preach unexpectedly and without preparation.* People remembered sentiments he aroused or certain details of his sermons decades later. The parish missions he preached were usually marked by numerous and lasting conversions.

As for whether people found God in the way our founder behaved and in the way he lived, we have an interesting text from 1846, when Father Moreau was 47 years old and had been superior of Holy Cross for more than a decade. After having had supper with our founder, the French writer Louis Veuillot wrote of him:

He has ... the manner of one of those peasant priests from whom you do not really expect very much, and this impression is hardly offset by his Le Mans accent, in which he makes statements of the greatest simplicity ... After you have spoken with him for a little, you see that he has eyes full of delicacy, a mind which is simple, solid and fertile, a heart eaten up by love. He is a man of noble character and a saint. God has supported him wonderfully.

In 1868 even Bishop Fillion of Le Mans, who had taken sides with Father Moreau's opponents and persecutors, had to admit that there might some day *be question of canonizing Father Moreau, as his friends seem to think there will be.* Among the witnesses for his cause in the 1940's were two ladies in their 80's who remembered having seen Father Moreau when they were children. They recalled how many people were then calling him a saint. One of these ladies said that he was *like a grandfather* to the little ones, that the children *would run after him and kneel down to get his blessing*, and that while his body was exposed before burial, people touched their rosaries or other religious articles to his remains. The other remarked that, when she met him, she *was struck by his appearance, which betrayed intense interior life, a profound humility and a limitless condescendence and charity for his neighbor.*

Basil Moreau, a man for whom God was real, really present and at work in the whole of his life, a God with whom and for whom he lived, a God others found through him. We naturally expect the reality of God to have a profound effect on

such a man's behavior. Already several of the texts I have cited illustrate this. I add only two more to show how profoundly his faith penetrated and transformed his attitudes and outlook.

In his later years as superior general and even more after his resignation, he underwent a veritable persecution — a trial more terrible, especially in its great length, than his great trial of 1855. It is amazing to find him saying repeatedly in his correspondence of this period that, despite the storms that raged around him, he found his heart at peace. Three years before his death he wrote to the sisters in New Orleans:

You are kind enough to write to me your condolences for the trials of the year which has just ended. I thank you with all my heart, and I bless the hand which has struck me. It is a great honor which our Lord grants me, and also a true source of happiness, to drink his chalice. Thus, thanks to the prayers offered for me, I have not been troubled or discouraged ... With all my heart I pardon those who have persecuted me, and I wish them well.

Six months before his death he wrote to a sister in France:

Do not feel sorry for me because of the trials (the good God) has sent me. They are a grace for which I bless him, and my mind is no more troubled by them than my heart is saddened.

A man of faith, a man of prayer, a man whom others saw as one close to God, a man who spoke enthusiastically and persuasively of God and through whose words and life others found God — is this enough to characterize someone as a person of God? If so, Basil Moreau was surely a man of God.