

A REFLECTION ON BASIL MOREAU'S SENSE OF MISSION *by Joel Giallanza, CSC*

*We are committed by our vocation to extend the reign of Jesus Christ
in the hearts of all people. (1855 Exercises)*

In this brief sentence, Basil Moreau sums up the nature and content of our apostolic religious life in Holy Cross. By nature, it is a commitment, a vocation, a response to God's call. By content, it is a continuation of the mission of Jesus, planting the Word among all people, thereby working "to hasten along the kingdom." (*Constitutions, Brothers and Priests of Holy Cross, 2: 10*)

Already this sentence gives us a glimpse into Moreau's sense of mission: a commitment to continue the mission of Jesus, to extend the reign of God in the hearts of people. But this is only a glimpse. To reflect more fully on Moreau's sense of mission, I would like to focus on three areas:

1. The profile of Holy Cross: An insight into Moreau's sense of mission by looking at how he envisioned the congregation he founded. What did he hope it to be?
2. The driving force which provides dynamism and direction to the members of Holy Cross. What is the principal apostolic quality of Holy Cross religious?
3. The practical dimension of that profile and that driving force. How is that apostolic vision and that quality practiced?

PROFILE OF HOL Y CROSS

For Basil Moreau, the Family of Holy Cross was to be, above all, an apostolic religious community, within the church, in service to the people. Each of these three components warrants a brief comment.

- A. *apostolic religious community*: Holy Cross was founded in response to the needs of Moreau ' s time; from the beginning, the community was to be apostolic. Clearly and quickly his responsiveness to needs brought the members of Holy Cross beyond the boundaries of Le Mans, of France, of Europe. There were no aspects of our life which would remain untouched by our commitment to the mission, the apostolate. Even the constitutions would be reviewed and revised as necessary when the living and working situations of Holy Cross religious warranted such review and revision.

Soon after merging the Auxiliary Priests and the Brothers of St. Joseph, Moreau began speaking about introducing religious vows into Holy Cross. He saw the profession of vows, the religious life, at least in part, as a

means of stabilizing and organizing Holy Cross for the future effectiveness of its ministries. Moreau most certainly understood the sanctifying aspect of the vows and the other elements of religious life. Even the sanctification of the members was to be directed toward mission.

Community was a passion for Moreau. He believed the unity among us was a powerful apostolic force which could have a transforming effect upon the whole world. Even in Moreau's time, Holy Cross was to be inclusive, collaborative, multi-cultural, and international. Those same characteristics shape the priorities we hold for our presence and activity in ministry.

- B. *within the church:* For almost 20 years, Basil Moreau worked for papal approbation of the constitutions. Though we cannot pretend this had no political implications for him and for the congregation; it is important to note that even those implications were apostolic. Once Holy Cross could move easily beyond the boundaries of Le Mans, its apostolic effectiveness and prestige would only be enhanced. Nevertheless, it was important to Moreau that Holy Cross be a recognized part of the universal church, planted deeply within the church, moving ever with the spirit of the church in responding to the needs of the people.
- C. *in service to the people:* This is self-explanatory. Apostolic sensitivity and responsiveness were to remain focused on the needs of the people. As those needs changed, Holy Cross would need to change or become apostolically obsolete and thus ineffective. A significant means of fostering that sensitivity and responsiveness is respect for and integration into culture. Our service to the people is also a service with the people. Our presence and activity are influenced by and responsive to the richness and depth of the cultures in which we live and minister.

As we continue the mission of Jesus today, as we seek to change in response to the needs of the people, how do we assure that we remain an apostolic religious community within the church in service to and with the people? How do we assure that we continue to respond to present needs?

DRIVING FORCE OF HOL Y CROSS

The primary apostolic quality for Basil Moreau is zeal. Simply described, zeal is a hunger for mission, a passion to continue what Jesus of Nazareth began through his life, teaching, and example.

By zeal is understood that flame of burning desire which one feels to make God known, loved 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 gentleness because we have the tenderness of our Divine Model. (Christian Pedagogy, I:1, art 4- 1856)

By reading Moreau's comments on zeal we can formulate a more exact description of what he means by this apostolic virtue. Zeal is that power, that grace, through which the convictions of our hearts are translated into the actions of our hands and directed toward love of others.

- A. *convictions of our hearts:* Zeal begins in faith. Without faith, what can often be described as zeal is workaholicism. If any of the energies and efforts we expend in ministry are truly to be continuations of Jesus' mission, then the motivation for expending those energies and efforts must be rooted in the life and example of Jesus. Our love for the Lord and our faith in God's Word are why we continue the mission of Jesus in response to God's call.
- B. *translated into the actions of our hands:* Zeal, like the faith in which it is rooted, is work. Zeal takes energy and effort; never is it a theory or a feeling about what should be done. Zeal is in the doing; it is, essentially, incarnational.
- C. *directed toward love of others:* Zeal ends in love. Without love, what can often be described as zeal is humanitarianism. Zeal responds to the needs of others in generosity and love, it does not perpetuate areas of expertise merely for their own continuation. As needs change, we bear the responsibility to see that we are skilled and flexible to meet those needs. Love for the Lord and for others demands an ever-fresh pastoral competence and flexibility.

So, as we strive to be genuinely zealous apostles of the Lord Jesus, how do we assure that our efforts in the mission begin in faith, do the work that needs to be done, and end in love? How do we overcome any resistance within ourselves to acquiring new skills and competencies so our view of the mission and our involvement in it do not stagnate?

PUTTING HOLY CROSS INTO PRACTICE

In our first papally approved constitutions, Moreau outlined the "ends" — or purpose — of Holy Cross.

The ends of the Congregation are as follows:

1. *The perfection of individuals by the practice of the evangelical counsels;*
2. *The sanctification of others by preaching the word of God, especially in the country and foreign missions;*
3. *The instruction and education of youth by means of schools where letters and sciences will be taught, and agricultural and technical schools; these latter are especially for poor and abandoned children. (1857 Constitutions, I)*

Even before that, in the *Rules* of 1847, we read:

The aim of the Congregation is to work, not only at one's own salvation, but also at the sanctification of others by ministering to them ... (1847 Rules, Part 2, Rule XI, 120)

In summarizing what Father Moreau says in this and related texts, we can say religious of Holy Cross are called to holiness to call others to holiness so our work is truly the Lord's own.

- A. *For mission, we are called to holiness:* For Basil Moreau, the place where mission begins is within the minister. Personal holiness is requisite for effective ministry. In fact, it is necessary for any ministry to be ministry; without a commitment to personal holiness what is called ministry becomes merely work. If we do not claim holiness to be a priority for our own lives, then it is unlikely that we can sustain any effective communication of the call to holiness to others. Calling others to tap the transforming grace which comes through a love-relationship with Jesus of Nazareth assumes we have tapped and continue to nurture that same grace.
- B. *Through mission, we call others to holiness.* As apostolic religious, our holiness must reach beyond us "if it is to be spared becoming a new pharisaism. Whatever our ministry, it must be a means for us to call others to holiness; even those ministries which address basic human needs are ways for us to improve the quality of life so others can hear and respond to God's Word in their lives. Wherever we go in Holy Cross, whatever we do, we bring with us the good news of Jesus of Nazareth, we extend to others the invitation to "be holy as God in heaven is holy." (Mt. 5:48)
- C. *In mission, our work is the Lord's own.* On more than one occasion, Moreau reminds us that "Holy Cross is God's work." Continuing the mission of Jesus, ultimately, is the work of grace. We participate in and cooperate with that grace, but the mission and work of Holy Cross is the Lord's own mission and work. That our work is the Lord's own is no justification for complacency, we always bear the responsibility to be and to remain competent in ministry.

As we work to practice what we preach, to live what we profess, how do we assure attentiveness to personal holiness so we can call others to holiness with integrity? How do we see and even experience our ministry as the Lord's own work?

GOD'S CHOICEST GRACE

Encounters with the cross are inseparable from the apostolic life. To continue the mission of Jesus is to trace the lines of Jesus' life and example upon our daily lives and experiences. Moreau understood that the cross is multi-faceted; he was insistent "these trials are the hallmark of the works of God" (CL26).

The cross is no theory, we experience it from without and from within. From without, the struggles, pain, hopelessness, injustices we encounter in ministry are touches of the cross in continuing the mission of Jesus. And that touch is particularly acute at those times we discover that we cannot do anything to address those realities. From within, the weakness and sinfulness and selfishness we encounter within ourselves are tastes of the cross we bear in continuing Jesus' mission.

Moreau says of the cross that "this is (God's) choicest grace, a grace reserved for the purification and strengthening of the saints ..." (CL28) For Moreau, the only response worthy of that grace is thanksgiving. Thus, he recommends that we "thank God for having initiated us into this secret of his providential action on those he loves because, as you well know, this is how his goodness deals with us." (*ibid.*)

We can be confident, the cross is the means to resurrection. Our own imperfections cannot be reasons for not preaching the gospel. Human weakness does not disqualify our involvement and effort in Jesus' mission. We must do what we have been called to do to the best of our ability, then trust that grace will make up whatever is lacking. There are no limits to the power of God's grace at work within us and through us.

CONCLUSION

The constitutions of the four congregations within the Family of Holy Cross articulate the current understanding of mission. That understanding has evolved within the history of the congregations given the diversity of contexts and cultures in which the men and women of Holy Cross live and minister. Nevertheless, mission has remained a principle element affecting and characterizing every dimension of religious life within Holy Cross. The following text is a composite statement drawn from the four constitutions and will serve as the conclusion to this reflection.

God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that we might have life and have it abundantly. In the fullness of time the Lord Jesus came among us anointed by the Spirit to inaugurate a kingdom of justice, love and peace.¹ Thus the Congregation sends us among God's people in our apostolic ministries of education, health care, social work, parish ministry, and community service. We insert ourselves into the social and cultural conditions of our times in whatever part of the world we find ourselves and in whatever we do to spread the good news.² Recognizing our own powerlessness and need for God's love we rely on the Spirit in opening ourselves to experience Christ's liberating salvation in and with the people we serve. Everything we are and do must communicate our commitment to his desire for the transformation of human hearts and human relationships. Our awareness of sin and its consequences in the world obliges us to examine our own lives to see to what depth we have assimilated the gospel message.³ All the members participate in the mission of the Congregation by the holiness of their life, by the authenticity of their witness, and by the quality of their service. They are especially careful to develop those dispositions and human qualities that render charity effective. The Congregation arouses in its members the courage for new and renewed beginnings in faith. It stimulates audacity in initiatives, constancy in commitment and humility in service.⁴

¹ Brothers and Priests of Holy Cross, *Constitutions* 9

² Marianites of Holy Cross, *Constitutions* 7

³ Sisters of the Holy Cross, *Constitutions* 3

⁴ Sisters of Holy Cross, *Constitutions* 40-41