

EARLY 20TH CENTURY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: THE ROLE OF THE BROTHERS OF HOLY CROSS

PHILIP C. ARMSTRONG, C.S.C.

Brothers of Holy Cross, Notre Dame, IN

The Congregation of Holy Cross, the founding religious community behind the University of Notre Dame, had its origin in the ranks of diocesan clergy in France. This article chronicles the early history of the congregation, struggles between priests and its brothers, and its movement into the ministry of Catholic education.

BACKGROUND

The French Revolution bears an ironic responsibility for generating works of charity. To counteract the devastating social effects of that late 18th century uprising, numerous religious communities were founded in France, among them the Congregation of Holy Cross.

In 1820, conditions then permitting, the bishop of Le Mans and several diocesan priests prevailed upon Fr. Jacques François Dujarié, one of their number and a veteran of the difficult days of clerical persecution, to organize some laymen into a teaching force designed to assist in restoring Catholic elementary education to the scattered parishes of the diocese. For 15 years, Dujarié supervised the growth of this small band, known as the Brothers of St. Joseph, and managed, with the aid of one or two among their number and the collaboration of the LaSalle Christian Brothers and the Ploërmel Brothers, to provide them with some fundamental religious training as well as with the minimal academic background needed to begin their apostolic work.

Illness, however, forced Dujarié to hand over his fledgling group to someone else. Ready to assist was Fr. Basile-Antoine Moreau, also of Le Mans, who himself had organized a small number of diocesan priests to specialize in preaching missions and substituting where necessary throughout the diocese. Moreau's dream was to establish not only priests, but brothers and sisters as well, in one united family of apostolic religious. Dujarié's request was seen as a providential moment, and Moreau readily accepted responsibility for the brothers. Merging them officially in 1837 with the

priests, Moreau called the group the Association of Holy Cross. In 1857, when through *Propaganda Fide* papal approbation was granted to the community, the title became the Congregation of Holy Cross.

From 1835, Moreau enhanced the religious formation of the brothers and saw to their continuing effectiveness in small parish schools throughout the area. But Moreau's horizons spread far beyond the diocese of Le Mans in France. He had a zealous missionary spirit that prompted him almost immediately to send his best religious to respond to the cries of bishops in four needy areas of the world: Algeria, India, Canada, and the United States. In 1841, he sent a small contingent of six brothers and one priest to assist Bishop Céléstin de la Hailandière of Vincennes, Indiana, in establishing parochial schools and auxiliary services for the diocese.

PRESENCE IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Beginning that year and expanding its vision as well as its presence over the next 50 years, the small missionary group began apostolic ministry in the south-central area of Indiana, and then a year later in the northern part of the state at the present site of the University of Notre Dame near South Bend. During these 50 years, the brothers spread throughout the Midwestern part of the US and even ventured to the Eastern seaboard, taking on at various times and for various periods responsibility for some 76 elementary schools in 13 states. The need for Catholic elementary education was great in this pioneering era of U.S. development, and the Brothers of Holy Cross were able to respond by reason of their numbers, their sacrificial generosity, and their capability to recruit willing young men not only from among the French immigrant families they came to serve, but from among lads of Irish or German extraction as well.

Despite the significant and effective growth of the brothers' presence during the last half of the 1800s in elementary education, the turn of the century found them paradoxically closing or withdrawing from almost all of the 76 missions undertaken between 1841 and 1893.

REASONS FOR CHANGE

Three compelling reasons contributed to this turn of events. The first was that Catholic religious sisters were, in their numbers, becoming available for and engaging in primary education up to the eighth grade for such a meager stipend that men simply could not compete. Burns (1912) noted,

A number of the teaching brotherhoods that came to the country during the Immigration Period have grown and prospered; but they have not, generally speaking, kept pace with the growth of the communities of women which were

established here at the same time. Vocations to the religious life appear to be more plentiful among women than among men. (p. 104)

Burns (1912) added,

Brothers who teach in the parish schools generally receive from \$300 to \$400 per year. Notwithstanding this, the per capita saving in their schools is not much if any, above that in the schools of the Sisters. The living expenses of women are not so high as those of men. Nor do men understand as women do the art of economizing. (p. 282)

Burns (1912) also noted that “the salary most commonly received by Sisters engaged in parish-school work is \$20 per month, or \$200 per year” (p. 280). Weber (1961) stated:

The teaching Sisters replaced the Brothers because of the great savings involved. One estimate is that one Brother taught for one-half the cost of a male public school teacher and that a Sister taught for one-half the Brother’s salary. An increase in vocations to the Sisterhood, together with permission for the Sisters to teach boys up to the age of thirteen, also began the decline of the teaching Brothers’ power. (p. 157)

The second reason for the decline in the brothers’ presence in primary education was that the University of Notre Dame—from its founding in 1842 a principal focus of apostolic presence for both the priests and brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross and its motherhouse in the US—required both money and manpower to support its continuing growth and development. Much of the funding and many of the brothers formerly assigned to primary education elsewhere were husbanded by provincial superiors to contribute to the enhancement of the various programs at Notre Dame, including the primary, preparatory, and college levels. O’Dwyer (1937) notes, “Schools were given up for various reasons, not the least among them being the need for more Brothers in various capacities at the expanding University of Notre Dame” (p. 12). Burns (1912) also remarks:

Most of these parish schools were eventually relinquished. The chief cause of this was the scarcity of vocations to the teaching brotherhood, together with the remarkable growth of the College of Notre Dame, which necessitated an even greater concentration of the Community at home. (p. 104)

It must be borne in mind that though the University of Notre Dame has traditionally been associated with the priests of Holy Cross, the brothers, as

proper to the egalitarian nature of the congregation, have been an integral factor in its founding and staffing—especially during the first 100 of its 160-plus years—in campus roles ranging from professorships to prefecting and teaching on the primary and secondary levels, to clerical skills, and to the most common but necessary maintenance tasks. The brothers were in complete control of the “minims” (the primary school section) and the preparatory department of the university. It was at great sacrifice to the much needed independent development of the society of brothers in the congregation that so many of them were withdrawn from various apostolic commitments and returned to the stateside motherhouse to shore up its human resources and assure its fiscal well-being.

A third reason, one not expressed by either Burns (1912) or Weber (1961), contributed to the decline of the brothers in primary education, a reason that in hindsight was perhaps fortuitously beneficial. As the 20th century began, bishops were beginning with some urgency to seek male religious to conduct boys’ secondary school departments in their dioceses. This new and ready market for the brothers’ talents thus became a prime focus of apostolic activity. Unfortunately, few Holy Cross brothers had as yet been adequately prepared to engage in secondary school administration or teaching. Fr. John Zahm, provincial superior in 1905, wrote,

We have only to look around to see that, in every country, the Governments are tending to exact official grades of those destined for the mission of teaching. It is prudent to take immediate measures to that effect, so that we may be ready for any eventuality. Besides, if solid piety already possesses...an efficacy so deeply rooted that nothing can take its place, how much more would not the same piety effect, when armed with profound knowledge and requirements, slowly and perfectly acquired, and amply sufficient for all branches of learning, rather than those superficial attainments, vague and disconnected and hastily and incompletely stored in mind. (J. Zahm, Circular Letter, October 15, 1905)

This situation was also alluded to by O’Dwyer (1937) in his manuscript, “The First Hundred Years.”

The problem of vocation recruitment affected the brothers’ potential for an adequate response to the needs of the dioceses. Burns (1917) stated,

It remains that men teachers are, by common consent, preferable for boys of high-school age. We would have a larger number of Brothers’ high schools if we had more teaching Brothers. One of the greatest needs in Catholic education at the present time is an increase of vocations to the teaching brotherhoods. (p. 89)

These three reasons—the emergence of religious sisters, the recall of brothers to Notre Dame, and the urgent request for male religious as secondary school teachers—precipitated events in the first part of the 20th century that were destined to determine the apostolic directions of the brothers for the next half century and beyond.

INTERNAL COMPLICATIONS

However clear as these portents seemed, the change was not achieved without difficulty, at times verging on catastrophe. Internal tensions concerning equality between the priests and brothers of Holy Cross had by the turn of the century provoked a critical juncture in their relationships. Some brothers, with what they felt to be adequate reason, incited enough rancor among their number to cause dissension and even prompt a formal request to Rome that the brothers and the priests be separated juridically on all levels of government to permit them freely to seek their own independent ministries. This request was denied, but the Vatican insisted that the clearly valid complaints of both brothers and priests must be effectively addressed at once. Provincial superiors saw the resolution to tensions to be found in the equal but independent development of the brothers' capacities to receive higher education and independently to conduct their own institutions. Many of the priests were supportive of the brothers' attempts at seeking redress, but they also realized that the apostolic development of the priests' society was in some sense restrained by the needs and concerns of the brothers. So the priests too yearned for some degree of autonomy.

General chapters in the early years of the 20th century, therefore, mandated the establishment of programs to assure the higher education of the brothers and to permit them to be as independent as possible in the operation of the few secondary schools at which they ministered. The latter, however, were diocesan schools, in which bishops habitually placed "business superintendents" from among their priests, although the principal was a brother. At times, the superintending was more akin to governing, and the brother administrator felt he had little or no authority in his own school.

Several brothers influential in implementing the goals of these decisions toward greater independence in apostolic ministry became highly regarded educators and administrators over the years. Among them—and there were many—were Brothers Justin Dwyer, Aidan O'Reilly, Agatho Heiser, Engleburt Lisse, and Ephrem O'Dwyer. It is to the latter figure that we are most indebted by reason of his role in promoting the identity, image, and independence of the brothers in the apostolate.

BROTHER EPHREM O'DWYER

Br. Ephrem (Dennis) O'Dwyer was an immigrant, recruited for the community in Ireland by two native Irish Holy Cross religious. He responded positively and accompanied them to Notre Dame in 1907 at the age of 19 and at the height of the crucial period of intracongregational tension. His intelligence and shrewdness, along with a bold and energetic aggressiveness, set him apart early as a capable teacher, administrator, and defender of the rights of the brothers. He joined almost at once after his perpetual profession of vows in seeking a resolution to the problems the brothers were encountering. Assigned in the years after his novitiate to work in the few secondary schools among the brothers' apostolates, he gained experience in both the classroom and office. In 1923, he was given time to complete his undergraduate work at Notre Dame and earn a Master's degree in education, as part of the effort by the community to foster professionalism among the brothers.

It was during this sabbatical that O'Dwyer, responding to the state of Indiana's recent emphasis on accreditation of teachers, and recognizing the still inadequate organization of the brothers' talents toward certification, engaged in a study of the heretofore relatively neglected educational records of the brothers at Notre Dame and prepared a roster of men and their status. The result was the immediate accreditation of some brothers and the establishing of concrete educational goals for others toward secondary classroom and administrative licensing.

O'Dwyer (1937) described this period:

The General Chapter of 1906 formulated plans for a revival of teacher-training, and the Very Rev. Gilbert Français, Superior General, whole-heartedly supported the movement. Improvement began under the provincialship of Fr. Andrew Morrissey. Dujarié Hall was built as a new House of Studies and opened on August 15, 1907. Fort Wayne grade school became a standard high school in 1909 and the next year Holy Trinity in Chicago assumed high school status. The [General] Chapter of 1912 promulgated further decrees for the welfare of the Brothers and the advancement of their educational aspirations. Sacred Heart Preparatory College, Watertown, Wisconsin, was converted into a Juniorate for postulants to the Brotherhood. The provision for high school work at Watertown removed the postulants from Dujarié Hall, making the building a residence for college students only. The Brothers were given direction of Holy Cross College, New Orleans, a preparatory boarding and day school.

The State of Indiana does not claim jurisdiction over private schools; but, when requested, it recognizes and "commissions" private schools which meet the standard of public schools as regards teachers and equipment. Because of college entrance, this recognition is rated as desirable, and has been so considered since the plan first originated in 1913. It has meant much to the Brothers

of Holy Cross, for it has provided a sufficient reason for the thorough training of teachers. (p. 13)

NEW DIRECTIONS

Fr. Gilbert Français, Superior General, wrote in a letter circulated to the congregation in 1912 that a new future was open to the brothers. Although they had lost the parochial schools, Catholic high schools had grown and become more indispensable. "From this time forward," he proclaimed, "the High School is the outstanding vocation of our Brothers!" (as cited in Weber, 1961, p. 165). He felt that instead of being buried in the general works of the congregation, a new field with ample scope for personal initiative and opportunity was opening to the brothers. "In a word, the High School furnishes an element of durable and holy peace between the two branches of our society. Both will hereafter march unitedly forward like two distinct forces that make but one, and that aid each other mutually" (p. 165). Français was overjoyed that in finding a resolution to the issue of apostolic thrust for the brothers, internal congregational tensions could, he hoped, simultaneously be laid to rest.

In 1945, the general chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross took the momentous step of declaring the societies of priests and brothers autonomous and homogeneous on the provincial level, though united still in their constitutions and in a common governmental council on the general level. This move paved the way for virtually independent development in both societies.

Responding to critical post-war needs, O'Dwyer, elected to serve as the first provincial of the autonomous province of brothers, had in mind a concrete plan of expansion and entrenchment for the brothers as initiators and operators of quality institutions of secondary education throughout the United States. In 10 years as provincial, he not only solidified the brothers' presence in the diocesan owned high schools, but he also opened 15 new institutions, most of them province owned, and managed the subdivision of the one United States brothers' province into three separate governmental units headquartered in different areas of the country.

The impetus of expansion continued beyond O'Dwyer's term of office, and, according to statistics available in Holy Cross community directories and the Catholic Directory, by 1967 there were 32 secondary schools in the US staffed by the brothers, who numbered over 550 directly involved in those institutions, about 5% of the over 12,000 brothers of all congregations in the US at that time. By contrast, in the early 1990s, some 50 years after the serious effort began to broaden their presence in secondary education, and some 25 years after the peak of their influential presence, the Brothers

of Holy Cross had remaining only 19 of their secondary schools, and their numbers in them were decreased to fewer than 200, an even smaller percentage of the equally decimated total number of some 6,000 brothers in the US.

Forced by circumstances out of primary education as the new century dawned, affected by intracongregational tensions and difficulties as efforts were made on all levels to enable the brothers to merge into the secondary educational level of the early 20th century, and impacted by the requests of bishops and pastors attempting to meet the needs of their people in education, the Congregation of Holy Cross, led by its general and provincial superiors and by such notable individuals in that field as Fr. James Burns, Br. Ephrem O'Dwyer, and Fr. William Cunningham, facilitated the transition of the brothers from largely rural or small town Catholic primary educational ministry to that of urban secondary schools.

TODAY AND INTO THE FUTURE

The presence of the brothers in education remains visible and tangible, but decreasingly so. To offset this phenomenon, the spirit of their educational ministry is being absorbed and perpetuated by those whom the brothers have educated and who have responded to the needs of today by collaboratively assuming the burden of assuring Catholic education for their own children and grandchildren. Thanks to the determination and generous adaptability of the pioneering men of Holy Cross, the congregation has played a significant and effective role in the fostering of Christian education in the United States, a role that continues, if not as noticeably in its physical presence, at least in its perduringly enviable spirit.

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Philip C. Armstrong, C.S.C., is a staff assistant in the Province Administration/Development Office for the Midwest Province of the Brothers of Holy Cross. Correspondence should be sent to Brother Philip C. Armstrong, C.S.C., Brothers of Holy Cross, P.O. Box 460, Notre Dame, IN 46556-0460.