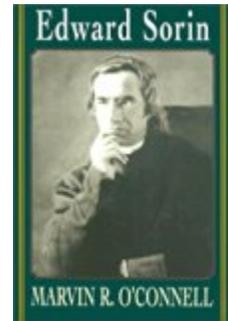


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Sorin of Holy Cross: A Religious Vocation in the Nineteenth Century

Sorin of Holy Cross: A Religious Vocation in the Nineteenth Century

Fr. Edward Sorin (1814-1893), Congregation Sainte Croix (C.S.C.), is best known as the founder of the University of Notre Dame, yet his life is also crucial to any history of Holy Cross in North America and in Europe, the origins of St. Mary's College for women, and the American Roman Catholic Church in the nineteenth century.

As a man and a priest, Sorin, marked by the Catholic revival of the nineteenth century, was an ultramontane ("other side of the mountain"), at one with those who supported the centralization of power in Rome and defended papal authority. Typical of the ultramontane were devotions of the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Heart, and the rosary. A relic maven (he sent them home by the trunkful) and indulgence collector, O'Connell credits Sorin with organizing the first pilgrimage to Rome from America (as O'Connell observes, a spirituality such as Sorin's is not to every "sophisticated" Catholic's taste, but suggests that taste in devotion and doctrine may be moving again toward Sorin's). In any event, Sorin's piety and faith went deep. His confidence in his own powers was founded on his conviction of the "righteousness of his goals" and the trust born of the belief that God and the Virgin (devotion to Mary was at the core of Sorin's faith) had placed him in America to "accomplish a great work" (p. 183).

Sorin's refusal to admit failure showed America's influence. He took to the entrepreneurial ethos with enthusiasm and embraced American practicality and its em-

phasis on the active life even before the "Americanist" bishops—Ireland, Keane, J.L. Spalding, et al.—came along near the end of the century. He became a citizen in 1850 and secured a post office for Notre Dame, becoming its postmaster in 1851. As head of Holy Cross at South Bend, he was businessman, salesman, land speculator, public relations flack, and fund raiser. In the latter role, for the building of Sacred Heart church in 1869, for \$50.00 (you could pay in installments) a donor received grace from daily Mass for fifty years, or if less than \$50.00, the benefits came pro rata. Sorin held "lavish dinner parties" (p. 669) on campus for the wealthy Studebakers and the Olivers of South Bend, and routinely sent cakes and liqueurs to these and other town worthies and the publishers of the two local daily newspapers. God helps those who help themselves and it was in that spirit that Sorin in early 1850 formed a company of seven, four of them brothers, to dig for gold in California. Part of the hundreds of the area who left for the gold fields in 1849 and 1850, the venture failed, but it illustrates Sorin's willingness to risk.

Sorin was no saint and O'Connell is no hagiographer. Sorin "was capable of duplicity and pettiness and even ruthlessness" (p. 183), a "careless and sometimes deceitful" (p. 177) keeper of accounts, and an authoritarian, even a "despot" (p. 400). The bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana was moved to write Sorin in 1881 that it was "hard to do business" with him and that more than one friend had turned against him "as being tricky, and in reality you give yourself the appearance" (p. 586). Sorin reached a low when, out of jealousy perhaps, he forced out the able

president of Notre Dame, Fr. William Corby, the hero-priest of Gettysburg. He vilified Corby as the “very personification of vanity,” one who “habitually consults only sycophants.” The word “projection” will occur to amateur psychiatrists. O’Connell observes that such behavior “was hardly worthy of [Sorin], though not entirely out of character for him” (p. 673). Yet for courage and determination Sorin “was hard to match.” The same Fr. Corby, at Sorin’s death, magnanimously, sincerely, and accurately called him “the great captain who led the army of Holy Cross to final triumph” (p. 718).

Much of the book is an account of the bitter controversies between Sorin and Fr. Basil Moreau, the founder of Holy Cross and his superior. O’Connell makes an effort to do justice to Moreau, but almost always comes down on the side of Sorin. One clear exception occurs in a footnote dealing with Sorin’s refusal to honor a debt of 15,000 francs owed to the order’s headquarters, Sainte Croix, in Le Mans, France. O’Connell states that “Moreau’s resentment” at Sorin’s conduct “was as understandable as Sorin’s conduct was reprehensible” (footnote 23, p. 548), but then comments that the money would not have made much difference as Sainte Croix was so heavily in debt. Sorin behaved toward Moreau in ways he would have never permitted in one of his subordinates: he threatened to quit a half-dozen times; once, in 1862, he asked to be released from his vows; he resisted an order to explain himself at headquarters in France; he refused to accept appointment in Bengal, India; he declined the bona fides of a visitor sent by Moreau; he claimed the right to separate from Sainte Croix. When Moreau traveled to South Bend in 1857 Sorin soured the occasion by insisting that a sum of money provided by Notre Dame du Lac to the motherhouse be repaid with interest, money that Moreau regarded as a gift.

In the end Sorin’s victory over Moreau was complete. In his frequent trips to Europe (some sixty ocean crossings), Sorin ingratiated himself to Rome. Named provincial of North America by Propaganda de Fide in 1864, four years later Sorin was elected superior general replacing Moreau. With Holy Cross in Europe declining every year, by 1880 two-thirds of Holy Cross was in the New World. In 1870 Sorin uncharitably used his victory over Moreau to interpret the latter’s living outside the community (in a small house shared with his aged sisters) as a request for a dispensation from all connections and all duties with the order. Sorin soon had opportunity to rub the wound again by offering Moreau a refuge at Notre Dame during the Franco-Prussian War amid heavy fighting at Le Mans in January, 1871, twice asking

Moreau to “pardon and forget the past.” O’Connell admits only to Sorin’s postscript—“Is it not marvelous that Providence has prepared in America a refuge for the Congregation?”—as being “a little self-serving,” and credits Sorin with a “handsome gesture” (p. 578) and sincerity. Readers may not agree and few will blame Moreau for not replying to the offer. Sorin was far from being the only one who sinned against charity; when it comes to malice, the clergy need no lessons from the laity.

The story of the University of Notre Dame begins with Sorin at age twenty-seven, ignorant of English, arriving in Vincennes, Indiana in 1841 with six brothers of the order. After an unhappy year in proximity to Bishop Celestin Hailandiere (for whom, apparently, no one has ever had a good word), each saw the benefits of putting distance between them. Sorin and four companions arrived in the South Bend area in November, 1842, to take up land that the bishop had offered.

>From the time of his arrival in America, Sorin saw the establishment of a “college” (in his mind something on the order of a French high school) as the way to financial and religious success. Only through the revenues that such a foundation would bring would the infant order of the Congregation of Holy Cross (Congregation Sainte Croix, or C.S.C.) succeed in America. Beyond tuition fees, a residential college would mean vocations and alumni, as well as influence with the parents. Neither an intellectual nor a scholar, as a pragmatist Sorin preferred the “appearance” of scholarship over the reality if it might increase enrollment or attract funds.

Notre Dame began in 1843 as a “random collection of modest brick structures and log shacks, attended by no more than a half-dozen students, and staffed by a faculty only a few of whom spoke English with any facility” (p. 141). That there were few books in English did not matter much either as few of the faculty could read them. Nonetheless, in January, 1844, the Indiana state legislature granted articles of incorporation as a university to Notre Dame du Lac with all the rights of “all the great colleges” (p. 141). Even Sorin admitted that the title was not justified, but in time “it cannot fail to have the most profound results for the good” (p. 141). Besides the college’s students, Notre Dame would number seminary students, a Manual Labor School for orphan boys aged twelve and over educated separately in trades and crafts until age twenty-one, and the “minims,” boys as young as five or six from good families taught their letters and numbers who might go on to attend the “university.”

Growth was slow (twenty-five students in 1844; forty

in 1848), and Notre Dame's existence remained precarious until 1851 when the railroad reached South Bend. Now it could attract students from the whole Midwest. In 1857 one hundred and forty students matriculated, belonging, as Sorin observed, "to a higher and more comfortable class" (p. 380) than the local farmboys who had been the rule. Catholic and non-Catholic attended Mass twice a week, Catholics made confessions once a month; no visits to private rooms, silence except during recreation, no tobacco, liquor absolutely forbidden (Sorin drank wine but sparingly), no leaving the grounds without permission. Feet were to be washed in winter on Saturday, in summer the students bathed twice a week in the lake. Sorin routinely censored all mail and when one was given permission to leave on a trip, the luggage was always examined. Such harsh discipline led to two student riots in 1859. Sorin blamed bad food, overzealous discipline, and "particular friendships," code for homosexuality.

For O'Connell, Sorin's "finest hour" (p. 342) may have come in the summer of 1854. A half-dozen unrelated deaths through accidents and illnesses were shortly followed by typhus and other diseases. Eighteen died—sisters, brothers, and priests, one fifth of Holy Cross mission in South Bend—and most of the rest, including the faculty, were grievously ill. Sorin understood "intuitively" (p. 342) the need to keep the public, especially the seventy boarding students (who somehow largely escaped, only one having died), in ignorance of the blight. In circumstances "almost surreal" (p. 343), Sorin insisted that normal routines be maintained and the dead be buried secretly at night!

Most readers will judge Sorin's behavior after the great fire of April, 1879, as his finest hour. The six story Main—classrooms, dormitories, library, refectories, professors' rooms, and offices—was utterly destroyed and four buildings nearby were also consumed. (Fortunately, untouched was the present church built in 1875.) Sorin, who had left for the East to go abroad, was sent for and brought back. Having seen the "destruction of his life work," Sorin spoke to the community in the chapel in what one witness described "as the most sublime words he had ever listened to. There was absolute faith, confidence, resolution in his very look and pose. 'If it were ALL gone, I should not give up' were his words in closing. The effect was electric....A sad company had gone into the church that day. They were all simple Christian heroes as they came out" (p. 652). Before and after photos attest to the completeness of the destruction and its replacement by a new Main, far "grander" (p. 655),

and ready in time for the fall term. A truly magnificent accomplishment. By the 1880s between three hundred and four hundred students were in residence, and in 1886, forty-four years after arriving at South Bend, some 1100 persons lived at Notre Dame. It "survived because Edward Sorin—domineering, charming, supple, courageous, sometimes duplicitous and always devoted to God's cause as he saw it—refused to fail" (p. 400).

The third leg of the Holy Cross mission in America would be the religious sisters, the Marianites. From their arrival in 1844 the sisters had done the cooking, cleaning, and laundry at Notre Dame and tended the cows and poultry. Increasingly, nuns turned to teaching as Sorin had intended from the start, but he was ever loath to do without their domestic services.

In 1853 Eliza Maria Gillespie followed her brother into Holy Cross. As Sr. Angela, her good judgment and able advice made her indispensable to Sorin. A cousin was the statesman James Gillespie Blaine. The Gillespies were also related to the Ewings, their neighbors in Ohio, one of whom married the Civil War general William T. Sherman. The Gillespies brought status, connections, and their mother, Mary Phelan, funding to Notre Dame, as well as considerable talent. For example, the real editor of the successful *Ave Maria* magazine, founded in 1865, was Sr. Angela.

There was no difficulty in attracting young women to the order and the Marianites were more successful and more numerous than the Salvatorists (priests) and the Josephites (brothers) combined. They made a name for themselves as nurses in the Civil War and by 1888 ran nineteen academies, twenty-eight parochial schools, five hospitals, three orphanages—in all, fifty-five foundations spread throughout the nation. To the last Sorin wanted the sisters under Holy Cross with himself continuing as their head, but in 1889, his great ally Sr. Angela dead, the Sisters of the Holy Cross ratified their severance from the priests and brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross.

O'Connell, author of several books on Catholic history, benefitted from three rich archival holdings: Notre Dame's university archives, the order's Indiana Province archives, and most particularly the order's Rome archives that contains the Sorin collection. The latter includes Sorin's own chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac, covering the years 1841-1866 and 1880. (O'Connell judiciously warns that Sorin's chronicles were composed after the fact and thus require clarification and sometimes correction from contemporary documents.) O'Connell also cites the rich scholarship on Notre Dame and Holy Cross.

Of special note as a source is the two volume biography of the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Basil Anthony Mary Moreau, by Etienne and Tony Catta. Originally published in French in 1950-1953, O'Connell used the more than 2,100 pages of the English version but scrupulously often cites the French and then his translation so that readers can judge his success in capturing nuances. The Cattas' work's value for O'Connell is the great detail of the narrative and the quotation of large numbers of fugitive documents. However, it "is marred by its deeply apologetic and hagiographical tone, by its undisguised hostility toward Sorin," and its unusable index (p. 19).

The book is handsome, with but few typographical and factual errors. This work will surely stand as Sorin's definitive biography. Quarrels with its interpretation of the Sorin-Moreau relationship may arise, but if O'Connell is too forgiving of Sorin he has provided all the ammunition against him that anyone needs. At more than 700 pages, however, the book will have fewer readers than it deserves. It has the defects of its virtues: length and rich detail. It would be a service if O'Connell and the University of Notre Dame Press produced a shorter book for the reader who, while vitally interested in the topic, does not require such detail.

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