

Marianites: Women Searching for the Love of God

The Marianite sisters were established in Le Mans, France by a French priest, Basil Anthony Moreau. Fr. Moreau had a deep desire to serve God and the People of God. He had a vision of bringing together, a family. A family of Priests, Brothers and Sisters. His vision became a reality. Fr. Moreau founded the Congregation of Holy Cross. Fr. Moreau dedicated the priests to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Brothers to St. Joseph and the Sisters to Mary, the mother of God under the special patronage of Our Lady of Sorrows. His model for family was the Holy Family. Fr. Moreau's deepest desire was that the priests, brothers and sisters would go together, wherever there were needs to be served. This all took place in Le Mans, France in the mid- 1800's.

Rome did not approve of the priests, brothers and sisters functioning under one constitution. The constitution for the priests and brothers was accepted and later after, several years, the constitutions for the sisters was finally accepted by Rome.

Fr. Moreau was a man of deep **FAITH** and committed to the **SERVICE** of God's people. He instilled that deep commitment to **FAITH and SERVICE** in the hearts of the earliest members of this new congregation of Holy Cross. Fr. Moreau gave the sisters the name, Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, identifying the sisters as 'little Marys at the foot of the Cross'. The first service given to those first Marianites was that of 'being domestic servants of the priests and brothers.' Yes, Fr. Moreau sent the early members out – the Priests, the brothers were engaged in ministry and the sisters were charged with caring for these men, their Holy Cross Family.

The **LOVE** of God was the motivation for Fr. Moreau's **FAITH** and his dedication to **SERVICE**. Fr. Moreau's love of God was nurtured and developed in him through his family life. His mother and father were religious people who instilled these values within the hearts and minds of their children.

The first Superior of the Marianites was a young woman named Leocadie Gascoin. Leocadie was born in 1818. At the young age of 9 years, Leocadie's mother died and she (Leocadie) assumed the task of mother to her siblings. Even with this major challenge she began her own education and went on to boarding school. At the age of nineteen Leocadie returned from boarding school and took over her Father's household. She was a very devout and fervent girl, attending daily Mass. She began feeling drawn and called to more. After a Lenten mission in her church parish, Leocadie told her parish priest of her desire to give her life to God. Her father received this news with much hesitation. Leocadie met Fr. Moreau when he served as Superior at Good Shepherd convent.

Leocadie's faith was strong, and she persisted in her desire to give her life to God. Leocadie was sent to the Convent of the Good Shepherd to make a retreat. Her choice would be to either stay with the Good Shepherd Sisters or to become a Sister of Holy Cross. Fr. Moreau told Leocadie. **"You are for Holy Cross...you will go to Holy Cross."** And she did, go to Holy Cross. Leocadie, on the day on which she received the habit of the Marianites, was given the religious name, Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors!

The Congregation of Holy Cross – priests, brothers and sisters were established as an "Apostolic Congregations". Commitment (to the mission and ministry) was essential. Community life was important so as to 'energize' the members in their response to service in founding and responding to ministry.

**** (Mission statement of Marianites—United with Mary, standing at the foot of the Cross, we Marianites of Holy Cross are apostolic religious, women of prayer and compassion. Our mission, energized by our life in community, is to incarnate the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. Called to be a prophetic presence in an everchanging world, we resolutely stand with those who are excluded.)**

The new and young family of Holy Cross was sent far and wide in the late 1840's and continues through the present time to go where there is a need. Within the USA, Marianites and Holy Cross priests and brothers were first sent to Notre Dame, Indiana (1842). The congregation of Holy Cross came to New Orleans by way of Notre Dame, Kentucky and finally Louisiana. The first ministry served by Holy Cross in New Orleans was at St. Mary's Orphanage for Boys. The orphanage was located on the east bank of the Mississippi (almost directly across from this very sight). The brothers and one priest were sent to teach and care for the needs of orphaned boys. The sisters (4) were the 'housekeepers at the orphanage. They cooked, did laundry, cleaned house for the boys and the men.

At this time a group of wealthy women went to the bishop and asked that he assist them in getting some education and training for their daughters. The bishop went to the Marianites. The sisters contacted their superior in France and obtained the permission to begin a school for the daughters of these women. The school was the Immaculate Conception Industrial school. The sisters had to fund all their needs based on the articles which the students crafted and sold. Eventually, the Immaculate Conception Industrial School grew and during the Civil War the Marianites found themselves 'building a new school building.' The new school was dedicated to the Holy Guardian Angels and in the midst of the Civil War, the Marianite Sisters opened the Academy of Holy Angels.

The sisters had FAITH! The sisters in considering any new ministry or place of mission responded as Women of Faith. FEAR and never a "Fear of Failure" ever kept the Sisters from moving to something new. Even today, Faith keeps the

Marianites resolute in showing a willingness to be open to that which is new or different.

To take on a new ministry – Immaculate Conception Industrial school, and to venture into opening the Academy took **FAITH** and a deep commitment to be of **SERVICE** and respond to the needs of God's people. This was the beginning of the Marianite sisters engagement in the **MINISTRY** of **EDUCATION**. The Marianites in Louisiana grew in numbers through their accepting young women to join them in this ministry. In Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi grew to be nearly 400 committed primarily to the work in education in elementary and secondary schools. It was in 1916 that the Marianites established an educational program to 'train' the sisters to be teachers. The Marianites established Holy Angels Normal School which was to eventually become the Our Lady of Holy Cross College in which we gather this day.

It was through this special ministry that I met the Sisters. When I started kindergarten, I was enrolled at Holy Name of Mary which is just a few miles away from us here on the West Bank of the Mississippi. From my earliest days in kindergarten and throughout elementary and high school, I knew that I wanted to be a Sister. I wanted this, because I saw, I observed, I experienced something special in the sisters who taught me, the sisters who lived at our convent on the school yard. I could not name 'what was so special,' however, I experienced this special gift when I was in the presence of the Sisters. I loved being around the sisters and took every opportunity to help them, before, during, after school and on Saturdays (when necessary).

I will share just a bit of 'my own call to the Marianites. My story is not very much unlike the story of many of my Marianite Sisters. The vast majority of us are from 'blue collar' families. **We are ordinary women who said YES to an extraordinary call from GOD!**

I was one of 7 in my family. I'm third in order, and am the oldest daughter. My father was a taxi-driver and a longshoreman (worked on the River) and my mother stayed at home until her 7th child was 3 years old. Finances required that 'our mom go to work – a cashier in a grocery store. I liked school and was engaged in 'every club/organization' offered in our school. I went to a co-ed school and enjoyed every school dance, ball game, and whatever activity was being sponsored. I had a strong faith in and devotion to God. School was fun for us and I spent a lot of time engaged in school activities and helping out at the Convent. We had a lot of social opportunities and I really enjoyed all my friends/ girls and guys. And yes, there were some special guys.

I knew that I wanted to be a teacher and I wanted to be a Sister, "just like all those wonderful women who taught me" I spent a lot of time around the Convent and being around the sisters as much as I was, I saw that the sisters were not 'perfect'. They were so very human, some I liked a lot better than others. And,

early on, I knew the ones who were my ‘ideals’—these were the women who inspired me, challenged me, and encouraged me. These women were loving, kind, were enthusiastic and energizing in their being with us—as teachers, coaches, club moderators. They were deeply spiritual and taught us to pray (as well as ‘say’ prayers); they were strong disciplinarians, excellent masterful teachers. As I said, they taught us to pray, and to believe and depend upon the power of prayer. These were women who, in living out their commitment to God, offered us a model of Faith in Action. These women, my teachers, motivated me (and all of my school mates) to be of **service** to and for others. We had some of the strongest Service Organizations in our city. The love of God radiated from these Marianites—that’s what I saw and that’s what I wanted. **Ordinary women who did extra-ordinary things!**

So I entered the Marianites Of Holy Cross Congregation, September 7, 1960. I came right here to the front doors of this building. One year later I received the habit. On that night, I had difficulty trying to sleep, I was tormented with the fear “what IF I don’t make it! I cried myself to sleep that night, fearing the worse—All that I wanted was to be a Marianite! And, now 49 years later, I can say, so far, I have made it, I’m still here. And every day I pray, Lord, give me the grace of perseverance.

Marianites—women searching for the Love of GOD! Women who are apostolic religious, living in community. Yes, we do search and seek to know the love, the will of God for us! DAILY, in our communities we seek to recognize and respond to God’s love as manifested in the day to day challenges and struggles of life. We seek the love of God in the faces and hearts of the people we serve and within and among the people with whom we work and minister. The challenge of recognizing and responding to the love of God is as limited as my own ability to recognize the Creator, Redeemer and Spirit of God in each of the faces and persons of the people I encounter as I go about my daily activities.

The Marianites —are women who have searched and found God’s love. That love is ever before us—it is ours to reach out, and to take hold.

Have you ever been in search of ‘something’—a lost important paper, a special receipt, a misplaced /lost credit card? You find yourself, looking, searching, everywhere, turning over every possibility. You reach the point—it’s no use, I give up only to find that ‘it was in the easiest of places—right in front of you! So it is, I think, finding the love of God. I have to see that the face of person before me is the ‘face of one who is made in the image and likeness of God. The very same God, who created me---created you!

Why is it so difficult for me to ‘not be able to not be judgmental of that face before me?

Why is so difficult for me ‘ not treat that person ‘ the very way in which I wanted to be treated by All people!.

How is it that I often fail to live more fully the education/commitment of my /our call to be totally in God’s service?

How has the reality that each person is beloved by God changed the way I think and respond to others?

What can I do to appreciate others today/each day instead of judging others?

The answers to these questions are truly simple! The answer is LOVE of God—Loving God; loving neighbor as myself!

We have what we need, especially, we who are members of this esteemed organization. Our motto, FAITH AND SERVICE, prompts us to deepen our awareness and acceptance of God’s love!

When I reminisce about my days in elementary and high school, the faces of those Marianites, my teachers come to mind. They still inspire me, I still seek to be like them. **These were ‘very ordinary women’ who did extraordinary works—all in response to their Love of God, their Faith in God, their service to God’s people.** In 2010, I will celebrate 50 years of my living the life of a Marianite Sisters. When I celebrate this jubilee I will be celebrating with several of my Marianite Sisters. We will have one sister celebrating 25 years, 3 of us – 50 years; 4 others –75 years; 1 sister 80 years; and another sister celebrating 80 years. As I anticipate this 50th anniversary, I give thanks to God, ‘who has done marvels for me’. I know that I have been abundantly blessed. And, yes, I know that the journey continues-- the search continues. The journey and the search will only end, **when I / when we** stand before the throne of God and pray... O LORD, I Give Thanks to YOU, Your love is everlasting!

Written and Presented by:
Sr. Marjorie Hebert, MSC
Associate to the President
Our Lady of Holy Cross College
(mhebert@olhcc.edu)

KAPPA GAMMA PI
National Convention
Our Lady of Holy Cross College
New Orleans, LA
June 25-28, 2009