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Engaging Aging

Men with Hope to Bring: Holy Cross Brothers Adapt with Grace and Purpose

By Brother Philip R. Smith, CSC

Our vocation to be Brothers to others does not alter... and there is no more appropriate way to be brothers than to be one with and move among others to whom we are meant to be available..."

Brother William Geenen, CSC

Former provincial of Midwest Province of Holy Cross Brothers, 1994-2000

As a brother in the Congregation of Holy Cross, I have passed from an abundance of youthful exuberance onward to the ripeness of old age in but the blink of an eye. For nearly sixty years, I have attempted to live these years according to a congregational mandate: all Holy Cross priests and brothers are “men with hope to bring.” No matter if a member is twenty-five or ninety-five, Holy Cross men bring this hope to cities in this nation and across the world, to people who literally cry out for respite from the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that are too frequently thrust upon them through no fault of their own.

Young members of the congregation live the mission in a passionate physical and spiritual response. Elder religious also live the mission in a passionate response when given the opportunity to do so with graceful and grace-filled purpose. The Congregation of Holy Cross, priests and brothers, has consistently provided all its members with the challenge to “cross borders of every sort” as we continue to provide hope around the world.

Brother Philip Smith, CSC, Ed.D., has been a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross since 1964. For fifty years, he worked in many province high schools as a teacher of English and music as well as serving as President of Holy Trinity High School in Chicago, Illinois. Upon retirement from education in 2019, he was appointed archivist for the Midwest Province of Brothers, and is now the postulator for the Cause of Servant of God Brother Columba O’Neill, CSC.



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The Congregation of Holy Cross

In 1820, in France, Father Jacques Dujarié founded the Brothers of St. Joseph. Its early members were to provide care and education for children who were orphaned as a result of the French Revolution. Because of poor health and aging, Dujarié gave the care of these Brothers of St. Joseph to Blessed Father Basil Moreau in 1837. Moreau joined the brothers to six priests that he had been training to give missions in the Le Mans diocese. This merger took place in Sainte-Croix, France, and the group became known as the Congregation of Holy Cross.

By 1842, the Congregation was sending “missionaries” to North America, Africa and India. In North America, a priest, Father Edward Sorin, and seven brothers traveled to northern Indiana and founded the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. Over the next

Blessed Father Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, was beatified in 2007.



one hundred years, membership burgeoned into many thousands of priests and brothers who, initially, provided college, secondary and primary education throughout the

Congregation’s missions. Many of the brothers did not work in education, but provided ancillary services so that the schools operated efficiently. These brothers were the cooks, carpenters, farmers, firemen, and skilled laborers of every sort.

In 1945 a significant change happened in the Congregation of Holy Cross. The brothers of Holy Cross separated from the priests of Holy Cross on a provincial level but retained unity under a general administration. The brothers retained the Congregation’s high schools and one university, while the priests retained parishes and four universities. In the mid-1960s, the brothers opened many high schools across the United States; many were staffed by forty or more brothers. These were the days of seemingly unlimited personnel.

For the entire twentieth century the brothers taught in and administered excellent high schools across the country, but by the final quarter of the twentieth century it was evident that Catholic high schools were pricing themselves out of range for financially disadvantaged youth. Moreover, in city after city, public high schools could offer boundless academic programs and extra-curricular activities that Catholic schools could not. New expectations for salaries for lay teachers also accelerated the closing of many Catholic schools.

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In 2022, there are only two Holy Cross brothers serving as teachers in the Midwest Province high schools, and there are no longer any brothers who work in the schools' leadership. Now, the province actively supports the schools founded over the last 70 years through our sponsorship. One or two brothers serve as members on the governing boards, assisting our lay colleagues to assure that the charism of a Holy Cross education is tangible and promoted in instruction.

Holy Cross Village at Notre Dame: Visionary Transformation

Sadly, vocations to religious life began to dwindle by the early 1970s. The Midwest Province of brothers began to think of creative ways to continue to be "men with hope to bring," now with fewer members and fewer of these brothers staffing the schools. By the winter of 1995-96, the province was actively engaged in the visionary thinking of its new provincial, Brother William Geenen. He was well prepared to take up leadership, creatively addressing the rising issues of aging among the members.

In early 1973, Brother William was living in Florida. While on his way to a meeting, he met an elderly man who had lost his wife and was in poor health and lonely. This chance meeting provided Brother William with the seeds of an idea to develop drop-in centers as a response to the loneliness and isolation of aging adults. These centers came to be known as Senior Friendship Centers with the motto of "People Helping People."

What started as an idea developed into a network of centers that stretched across several counties in Florida. Armed in the beginning with little more than a desire to improve the lives of elders, Brother William drew inspiration from the earlier example of Canadian Holy Cross Brother

Right, Brother William Geenen, CSC, served as provincial of the Midwest Province of Brothers of Holy Cross and was instrumental in creating a multi-generational living community that would ultimately become Holy Cross Village at Notre Dame.



St. André Bessette. Often up against insurmountable odds, St. André was sustained by a strong devotion to St. Joseph that underpinned his outreach to the poor and the sick in the early years of the twentieth century.

In 1994, as Brother William began his term as provincial, his creativity and organizational skills expanded the vision of the Midwest Province of Brothers of Holy Cross to include new opportunities for witness and ministry. Plans to meet the needs of the brothers, he suggested, could also include meeting the needs of the laypeople. Brother William was a perfect fit to administer a province of two hundred aging brothers engaged in various apostolates.

He and his council immediately began designing the plan to build a neighborhood for laypeople and brothers as a multi-generational community with medical care and retirement opportunities. The facility housing both brothers and laity would become Holy Cross Village at Notre Dame.

In 1998, Brother William wrote to the brothers who were moving into the new Village. His words that follow seem prophetic in light of the changing developments that continue in the

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care of aging religious. Brother William wrote: “At this time [you are] facing major change. More than picking up and moving lodgings, it is preparing for closer association with others, laity, religious, clergy, who will eventually comprise the residents of The Holy Cross Village. At a life stage when pulling back and savoring privacy seem natural and welcome, many of us will be asked to reverse that process and open ourselves even further to the presence of others, strangers in our lives, a presence that will definitely affect our daily routine and comfort. Yet when we consider who we are - Brothers - and not just what we do or have done professionally, we face the honest acknowledgement that this adaptation is precisely what we ought to be involved in. Our vocation to be Brothers to others does not alter, whatever might influence our apostolic profession, and there is no more appropriate way to be brothers than to be one with and move among others to whom we are meant to be available as their brothers, and to do among them those services that they would want their brothers to do for them. We take on the task of being neighbors as well, both by contiguity and intent, just as all residents of The Village will do by agreement as members.”

Because the mission statement of Holy Cross Village emphasizes the phrase “interdependent community,” the Village is not simply an aggregate of people living on the same property or in the same building. The members are, instead, to feel a sense of neighborhood, of people helping people, that they may have never felt before.

Brother William wanted the Holy Cross brothers living among the Villagers to nourish the residents with a sense of outreach as they witnessed brotherhood at work. It was a means of encouragement to continue and enhance talents for helping others. The mission statement



Above, Brother Tom Rock, CSC, *left*, helps a resident of Holy Cross Village.

recognizes that “brotherhood and neighborhood” may not be entirely new experiences for Village residents, but the statement does expect that they will bring their own sense of community and community building to new levels of fruition. New residents are expected to continue whatever outreach ministries they had been enjoying over the years and to explore new ways of expressing their charity in ministries they may never have considered before.

Holy Cross Spirituality: Praying from the Heart

Something that is new to most residents who move into the Village is Holy Cross spirituality. Some may have experienced this spirituality as students or staff in high schools or universities where the brothers worked. Living among the brothers, however, provides first-hand experience of their Holy Cross hospitality and belief that embracing the Cross is the only hope of resurrection. As Brother Joel Giallanza notes in his book, *Praying from the Heart: Holy Cross Spirituality*, the founder of Holy Cross, Blessed Moreau, left a heritage, a “challenging call to transformation: it is a challenge to be lived so

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that the message and mission of Jesus can continue. It is incarnational.” Many of the brothers living in the Village over the last twenty years have been retired educators who informed minds and formed hearts. Hopefully, these efforts transformed their students into thoughtful Christians who would reach out to their needy brothers and sisters.

One of the members of the early planning committee for the design of the village said, “When we were doing our master plan, we agreed that we wanted a place where brothers and lay people could associate in a neighborly fashion with people who have similar interests and values. It’s not just a housing development. It’s an opportunity for people to live a closer life with those who are members of Holy Cross. The concept does a lot to expand our ministry to other people.”

Dignity and Respect

All of the work in the Village is brought to a focus in an environment of both dignity and re-

spect. From the moment that members move into the Village, whether it be for independent living, assisted living, or skilled nursing care, members will sense that their new home is different in a very good sense. Pervasive throughout the Village is a thoughtful, caring, and nurturing atmosphere which the brothers insist remains a resilient part of Village life.

Brother William’s master plan for the Village had called for a total number of 400 residential units, including single villas, duplexes, quadplexes, and apartment buildings. Together the units would house hundreds of residents. He also envisioned future buildings, including a Commons with postal services and “branches of institutions or businesses associated with the general notion of the Village and its neighbors.” Brother William wrote, “Only the limits of the imagination of the residents will restrict the variety and number of ways they may reach out to one another to help make their lives happier and more productive.”

Mass is celebrated daily at Our Lady of Holy Cross Chapel in the Village of Holy Cross. It is located between Schubert Villa that offers assisted living services, and Dujarie House, a care center that provides skilled nursing and memory care services as part of the Village’s continuum of care.



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Educating Hearts and Minds

At a time when many religious communities were losing their way, Brother William Geenen saw a new apostolate opening for members of his own community, and he had the presence of mind to propose geriatric ministry as a suitable and noble substitute for the high school work the brothers had excelled in for a hundred years.

As teachers, the brothers embraced Blessed Moreau's understanding of education. In Holy Cross schools, brothers and their lay associates "inform minds and form hearts." If taken seriously, the hoped-for result is that the graduates would be transformed into persons who think seriously about the welfare of their neighbors before making decisions that will affect them. This educational tradition of heart formation among the brothers would become the same wellspring from which they would provide the nourishment for their Village neighbors.

Expanded Services

A new addition to the Village staff came in 2007, when Brother Lewis Brazil was appointed Director of Social Services. Once a music teacher in Midwest Holy Cross schools, he is now a licensed clinical social worker and the Director of Health Care and Aging for the Midwest Province. His ministry to elders began in Ohio, and with a master's degree in social work from Case Western Reserve University, he moved in 2001 to Phoenix where he ministered until called to work at the Village. As a music teacher, Brother Lew directed jazz bands, and within the first months of his new ministry to Village seniors, he realized that many played instruments. Over the years, the Holy Cross Village Jazz Band has grown in prominence and reputation throughout northern Indiana for its professional music making.

The Village expanded its services once again with the blessing of the Philip L. Quinn Memory Center. The unit was made possible through a gift honoring Quinn, a former philosophy professor and chair at the University of Notre Dame, and a Village resident. This concluded the major building projects at the Village. It was a marvelous decade for the brothers of the Midwest, the entire congregation and for the growing roster of Villagers. Senior citizens, lay and religious, could now live with and care for each other in a new community of Christian friendship.

As Holy Cross Village remains confident of its mission, members have come to appreciate how they invigorate and validate each other. As new residents arrive, lay and religious, they ask how they can get involved in Village activities. These new people soon learn that no pressure is used

Brother Lewis Brazil, CSC, (left) combined social work and a background in music as he ministered at Holy Cross Village. He now serves as Director of Health Care and Aging for the Midwest Province of Brothers of Holy Cross.



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André Place is part of the continuum of care at Holy Cross Village and offers independent living apartments for residents. (All photographs are used with permission of Holy Cross Brothers, Midwest Province.)

to get Villagers to be involved. They are encouraged to gravitate naturally to those activities they find best suited to their talents and needs for giving as well as receiving.

In 2022, although many of the original lay and religious residents have passed away, there are still several of that first group of brothers living in the Village. These men continue to live among their neighbors, “providing services they would want their brothers to do for them.” There are brothers who drive their neighbors to doctor appointments or for shopping excursions. Another brother assists some of his neighbors with their finances and their annual income tax preparation. Other brothers organize outings to restaurants, the theater or local concerts.

Above all else, there are always brothers to pray with their neighbors at daily Mass or at prayer groups and discussions of Scripture. The constant remains the availability of the brothers to their neighbors. What began as a vision by Holy Cross Brother William Geenen continues as a dream both fulfilled and yet evolving by the valued members of the entire Village community.

No Empty Promise

As the number of Holy Cross brothers shrinks in America, they are completely alert to God’s provident care: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Most of the remaining brothers came to Holy Cross in the late 1950s and early 1960s when there were over a thousand Holy Cross brothers in the United States. Today, there are 63 brothers in the Midwest Province.

As the ideals we embrace have evolved, we do not obsess with death, but rather look to new life and new numbers for Holy Cross brothers in Africa and Asia and, once again, in the United States. If we grow tired of the good fight, we remember Jesus’s words to us in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.” This is not an empty promise.

Please join the staff of the National Religious Retirement Office as we continue to give thanks this Christmas for the generosity of our many friends and benefactors. We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life and to our world throughout the coming year.

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