

# Chapter 1: Origins and Foundations

## *Our Spiritual Father in Christ*

“The last thing the Church needs is another community. We need about half the ones we already have.” This is not what you would expect to hear from a priest who became the spiritual father to two new communities in the Church. But this is exactly what Fr. Bob Bedard was confidently declaring in the mid-1970s. As Fr. Bob was so fond of saying, our God is truly ‘The Lord of Surprises’!

Ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Ottawa, Canada in 1955, Fr. Bob was soon assigned as a Religion and History teacher at St. Pius X Catholic High School. He was a popular teacher with a flair for making his subjects interesting and relevant. One of his passions was coaching basketball, which he did very successfully, leading his teams to numerous championships. But while his professional life was thriving, his spiritual life was weak. He readily admitted to being “ready to compromise any teaching or practice of the Church”<sup>1</sup> as yet another victim of the doctrinal confusion following the Second Vatican Council.

This all changed due to a profound spiritual awakening through the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’:

“So there I was in March of 1975 when God turned my life around. I have never been the same since. I hadn’t been praying. My theology had gone as far left as it could get. I didn’t know that God wanted to get active in and around me. But I honestly pursued the baptism with the Holy Spirit... I was in a state of repentance. Jesus was, I declared publicly, the Saviour and Lord of my life. I asked Him to give me the fullness of grace, to baptize me with the Holy Spirit. And I asked specifically for the gift of prayer.

Not only did I receive what I asked for, but a revolution took place in my mind. I can hardly credit it now, but my theology was purified completely, and quickly. I knew I believed exactly what the Church had believed and taught all these centuries. A 180° turn.”<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after this, Fr. Bob read *On Evangelization in the Modern World* by Pope Paul VI. It completely changed his ministry priorities. He saw with a new and brilliant clarity that the Church *exists* to evangelize. Recognizing the urgency and primacy of this call and the love God has for His people, he began to evangelize in the power of the Holy Spirit with great success. He soon became a genuine force of renewal in the Church as a leader in the charismatic renewal, a strong contributor to the growing Marian movement, and a much sought-after preacher and teacher.

## *The Parish Where It All Began*

In 1984, Fr. Bob was appointed pastor of St. Mary’s Parish in Ottawa to implement a vision for parish renewal. Fr. Bob describes the initial situation this way:

The congregation was now very small. My predecessor ... using a suitably Canadian image, put it this way: “You can stand at the front of the church at any of the weekend Masses, and throw a snowball down to the back without hitting anybody.”<sup>3</sup>

Having never been a Pastor before, Fr. Bob was completely at a loss as to how to begin. So he “persevered in prayer, seeking the Lord’s particular word for the parish.”<sup>4</sup> He felt the Lord answered him in the following way:

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Give God Permission*, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> *Give God Permission*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Companions of the Cross*, 24.

I don't want *you* to *do* anything, except the very obvious things that a pastor must do. I want to take over here myself. I don't want any of your programs or ideas. I have a plan of my own. But, what I want from you is your *permission*. I want you to give *me* permission to do what *I* want to do. And, not only that, I want you to tell the people that you are giving me this permission, and that I want their permission, too. If I get enough permissions, I'll move. When I do, you'll see it. You can then point it out, and get everybody to support it.<sup>5</sup>

Fr. Bob then preached passionately to his parishioners about the need to give God permission:

Let God be God. He's good at it. God is very good at being God. Let's let him do what He wants here. God has plans for our lives both as individuals and as a body. If we consult him, maybe he will tell us what they are. Are we satisfied with the condition of the Church, with the condition of this parish, with what's happened to our families, to the kids? Do we think God is satisfied? Do we think he has the power to turn it around? Are we willing to let him change the things that we ourselves cannot change? Then let's tell him so. God is fed up being a spectator in our lives. He wants to be a participant.<sup>6</sup>

He continued to preach these same basic themes for over a year. And he waited... and waited, as the Lord had instructed him to do. Gradually it began to dawn on him that the Lord was on the move! One sign was tears. Many people, especially men, began to weep in church. At first Fr. Bob thought, "Good heavens! Maybe they're crying because the homilies are so bad!"<sup>7</sup> But it was the Lord sovereignly touching people's hearts and bringing them into deeper conversion. The parish began to flourish and became a prominent center of renewal. A wide diversity of lay ministries and apostolates grew up to serve those who were being changed, healed, and converted. Throughout this whole process, Fr. Bob firmly believed the Lord was communicating an important lesson, not just for one parish, but for the whole Church.

### ***The Formation of the Community***

Around this time, Fr. Bob was meeting with a small group of seminarians and young men aspiring to the priesthood who gathered together for mutual spiritual support.

Fr. Bob explains, "As we were faithful to the weekly gatherings, as we prayed and listened to the Lord, as we responded to what we thought He might be saying to us by making commitments to Him and to one another, we believe He gently revealed to us the kind of body we were to be."<sup>8</sup> Over time there was a growing sense that God desired this group to endure beyond ordination and to minister together as priests.

The final realization of God's call came at a gathering of the brothers on the first Friday of May in 1985. One of the brothers announced, "I don't know what you're going to think about this, but I sensed in prayer that the Lord wants this body of brothers to live together." The rest of the brothers chimed in, "That's right on!" This word resonated in the hearts of the brothers who immediately recognized it as an authentic call from God. Fr. Bob then pointed out, "Do you guys understand the implications of this? We're talking about an identifiable community of priests in the Church. We're talking about a new community of priests! ... Who is supposed to go to the Bishop and explain it all to him? Who is supposed to go and say, 'Dear Bishop, there's a priest and four seminarians and we feel that God wants us to kind-of pull out of the general diocesan

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<sup>4</sup> *Companions of the Cross*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Companions of the Cross*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Condensed from *Companions of the Cross*, 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Companions of the Cross*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Reflections of a Veteran Priest*, p. 104.

structure and paddle down a river all by ourselves’?”<sup>9</sup> As the brothers smiled back at him, the answer was obvious.

Fr. Bob explains, “I eventually went to the Bishop, taking several deep breaths, praying like mad and getting everybody else to pray; and I explained the vision to him. He just sat there, looking across his desk at me, with a trace of a half-smile across his face. When I finished, he said, ‘There is no way I can refuse to support this. This is the work of God. So, I want to support it, and I will.’” The Bishop explained that 8 years earlier he had recognized the need for priests to support one other and had outlined a vision of priests living together in this manner. Fr. Bob later reflected, “The Lord already had a man in place who was ready to say ‘yes’ . . . I didn’t know that, but the Lord knew that.”<sup>10</sup> We continue to celebrate the first Friday in May each year as our Foundation Day.

### ***The Vision of the Community***

The Constitutions and Rules of the Companions of the Cross summarize the components of the vision that was received from the Lord:

The foundation of their ‘vision’ can be delineated as participation in the renewal of the Church through an effective evangelization founded on looking to the Cross—the power and wisdom of God. Concretely this entails: (1) trusting in the Lord and giving him permission to move as he pleases; seeking his wisdom, his ‘now’ word, and waiting upon it, with proper discernment, not making any major moves without it; (2) profound openness to the Holy Spirit, the power of God, and the various ministry gifts through which the Church is empowered; a strong conviction that God desires to touch and inflame the lives of all his people; (3) the renewal of the Church through the renewal of the person. Personal conversion, discipleship, empowerment, and ‘calling forth’ of individuals to ministry comprise the chief strategy for renewal. Social and institutional changes will flow more easily from a renewed people. Personal conversion is the necessary first step.

The components of this vision included: a fully Catholic spirituality imbued with an evangelical heart and Pentecostal fire; surrender to the Lordship of Jesus; adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit; evangelization; consecration to Jesus through Mary; fidelity to the Magisterium; simplicity of lifestyle; some form of community; concern for the poor; ministry and hospitality to priests and seminarians.

The founder’s project was, in response to God’s call and initiative, to establish a community of priests to address their human and spiritual needs, and especially to provide for mutual support, in a common life and ministry, and thus to fulfill the intentions as formulated above.<sup>11</sup>

Over time the vision was expressed more fully in vision statements, a positional statement, and ultimately in formal Constitutions. But the vision is the same. What we are called to say ‘yes’ to is the same now as it was in the beginning. As Fr. Bob said so emphatically:

“As we continue to grow, it is of vital importance that we hand on to those who come after us the original charism and that we do not move in directions the Lord has not intended. We have to know and understand the vision clearly and use it as a measuring stick in all that we do.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *History of the Companions of the Cross*, unpublished formation talk, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Constitutions and Rules of the Companions of the Cross*, Our Roots.

<sup>12</sup> *Reflections of a Veteran Priest*, p. 104.

### ***Naming of the Community after the Triumph of the Cross***

In preparation for the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross in 1986, Fr. Bob preached an impassioned homily at St. Mary's parish, challenging his parishioners to follow Jesus as Lord: Jesus is looking for "those that will follow Him no matter what it costs, even if it will cost them their whole lives. He's talking about *radical* discipleship. Jesus is saying, 'Everybody and everything has got to take second place to Me. If you're going to follow Me, it's going to cost you everything.'" <sup>13</sup>

Fr. Bob offered his parishioners the opportunity to make a public commitment to Jesus and to receive a small wooden cross to symbolize this commitment on the following Sunday, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Parishioners who chose to do so would promise to testify to their relationship with Jesus and what that means in their lives when anybody would ask, as expressed in the following prayer they would say: <sup>14</sup>

"Jesus, I consecrate myself to You, body, mind and soul, and I wish to make you Saviour, Lord and King of my life in all things. I thank You for the opportunity to wear this cross as a symbol of my dedication to You and promise to witness to Your presence in my life whenever You may open the door. Please help me to be faithful to this pledge. Amen."

Fr. Bob concluded his homily in this way:

Now who knows what the Lord will do through you. Who knows? People change when they turn things over to the Lord. They want to do things for Him... That's what God does. He touches and He turns things around. He gives us new priorities. He makes His priorities ours, His burden, in other words, ours. "Come to me," Jesus said, "with your burdens and lay them before Me. I will refresh you and I will give you *my* burden, which is touching every single human being that ever lived in this world." So, think it over, pray about it, and maybe next Sunday, or at subsequent times, some of us will become companions of the Cross. <sup>15</sup>

Several members of the community were struck by these words and with excitement told Fr. Bob, "That's it! That's our name." On the following Friday, the brothers discussed the homily and how it reflected their calling. After taking the matter to prayer, it became clear that God had indeed given the community its name: *Companions of the Cross*.

We believe that this name was chosen for us by God because it perfectly encapsulates our identity and calling – to extend the Triumph of the Cross of Christ through our lives and ministry. It is truly our deepest desire that all people come to share in the victory that Jesus won for us on the Cross.

### ***The First Lay Associates***

Almost from the beginning, a large number of lay people desired to associate themselves more fully with the priests and seminarians of the community. They too, felt the call to embrace the spirituality and mission that the Lord had given to Fr. Bob and the brothers.

In 1988 many of these lay people began praying with *Companions* priests and seminarians in the hall of St. Mary's church. This weekly prayer meeting included enthusiastic and joyful worship, teachings, testimonies, and small share groups. It was characterized by a contagious fervour and

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<sup>13</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Homily in Preparation for the Triumph of the Cross*, September 7, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Homily in Preparation for the Triumph of the Cross*, September 7, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Fr. Bob Bedard, *Homily in Preparation for the Triumph of the Cross*, September 7, 1986.

quickly swelled to over one hundred committed people. The Lay Associates movement was born.

Soon after, the priests and seminarians recognized the need to meet on their own in order to focus on internal community development. At this time the annual 'Lay Associates Retreat' began.

Some of the lay associates were ordained as deacons, and some priests desired to become associated with the community, sharing in the community's spirituality and mission, while remaining diocesan priests. To accommodate this, the community soon created the categories of deacon associates and priest associates alongside the lay associates.

Since that time the Lay Associates has gone through many different stages of experimentation and development. It now exists as an integral way of living the Gospel, a way of Catholic discipleship, which shares in the mission and spirituality of the Companions of the Cross.

### ***Growth and Development of the Community***

On the memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes, February 11, 1988, Fr. Bob and Fr. Rick Jaworski, who was a seminarian at the time, had recently drafted the community's first official statutes. After having reviewed these proposed statutes, Archbishop Plourde granted the Companions of the Cross recognition as a Public Association of the Faithful. This was the first canonical step in the development of the community.

In June of 1994, Archbishop Marcel Gervais (the successor of Archbishop Plourde) and a group of diocesan officials met with Fr. Bob and some of the brothers to discuss and discern the future of the community. 'There being sufficient evidence of a distinct charism, of continued growth and overall stability', Archbishop Gervais agreed to have the Companions of the Cross pursue canonical status as a Society of Apostolic Life, becoming independent from the Archdiocese.

Now that the direction of the community was settled, the brothers began discerning and drafting official Constitutions. After seven General Assemblies these new Constitutions and Rules were ratified by Archbishop Gervais in September of 1997.

### ***A Difficult Transition***

In 1990 Fr. Bob had stepped back as Pastor of St. Mary's to devote himself full-time to leadership in the community. Over the next decade, the growing community consisted mostly of seminarians in formation, with most of the priests appointed to parish ministry. This left the leadership and internal administration of the community almost entirely on Fr. Bob's shoulders. He was also still in great demand as a preacher and speaker and he tried to accept as many of these invitations as he could. In the midst of this ever increasing workload, the personal demands on Fr. Bob became overwhelming. He began experiencing a series of serious medical conditions including severe insomnia. Despite this, Fr. Bob continued to serve the Lord and the community with great dedication. It was a labour of love, but it was taking a significant toll.

In 1996 these demands finally caught up with Fr. Bob: in his own words he "hit the wall". He began to experience extreme fatigue and depression and was forced to take medical leave. He was eventually hospitalized in a condition serious enough to warrant several sessions of electro-shock therapy. It was a difficult moment for the community. For the first time we had to move ahead without the man who had been our leader and inspiration.

In order to fulfill all of Fr. Bob's previous responsibilities, the community elected a new Moderator, hired a secretary, appointed a Director of Admissions, *and* hired an accountant. It became very clear how fully Fr. Bob had poured his life into the community. Thankfully, Fr. Bob made a significant recovery and in time was able to assume the portfolio he most cherished: Director of Admissions. But it was clear that the ordeal had taken a great deal out of him. Even at this stage there were early signs of the dementia that would increasingly afflict Fr. Bob in his later years.

### ***Coming of Age***

In 1999, the community expanded outside of Ottawa for the first time, establishing foundations in Toronto, Ontario and Houston, Texas. In 2000, Archbishop Gervais appointed an Episcopal Vicar to oversee our transition to an independent community. Having received the Holy See's approval, Archbishop Gervais issued the decree establishing the Companions of the Cross as a Society of Apostolic Life on the first Friday of May 2003, our Foundation Day. The Companions of the Cross had finally come of age.

This recognition was significant for several reasons. First and foremost, it was official confirmation by the Church of our unique charism and mission. Second, it confirmed our belief that Fr. Bob's vision for our community came from the Lord and ultimately belongs to him. Third, it confirmed that we are called to accomplish a particular mission that began in the Lord's own heart. Our community *exists* to answer this call from the Lord.

### ***The Associated Sisterhood***

From the beginning there was a fond hope and conviction that a community of consecrated sisters would grow up around our community, sharing in our spirituality and mission. In June of 2003, after a significant period of discernment and with the blessing of Fr. Bob, Sr. Anna Chan answered a call to found a community of women associated with the Companions of the Cross. The Servants of Cross describe their mission and objective in the following way:

We are a community of consecrated women called to spread the message of the Gospel through a dynamic evangelization. Akin in spirituality to the Companions of the Cross, we live this message in our everyday life as Fr. Bob Bedard, our Spiritual Father envisions. We stand on four pillars: being

faithful to the Eucharist, being open to the Holy Spirit, being devoted to Our Lady, and being loyal to the Church's Magisterium.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Fr. Bob's Final Years***

In January of 2009, Fr. Bob was taken to the hospital with stroke-like symptoms, but was ultimately diagnosed with a neurological disease called Miller Fisher syndrome. We never suspected that he would not return home again.

While residing in the hospital for treatment Fr. Bob fell, suffering a critical head injury. Emergency surgery was performed, but it seemed very unlikely that he would survive. The painful decision was made to remove Fr. Bob from the ventilator. Reluctantly, funeral preparations were begun. On the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes several of the brothers prayed with Fr. Bob, surrendering him to the Lord. After praying the rosary, they sprinkled him with water from the miraculous spring in Lourdes. Within 20 minutes, to the amazement of everyone present, Fr. Bob awoke! It seemed clear that the Lord still had a mission for Fr. Bob.

Fr. Bob recovered from this injury but continued to require continuous medical assistance. After six months in the hospital he was moved to a long term care facility. Though his dementia was steadily advancing, it was clearly a joy for him to receive a steady flow of visitors. Community priests, seminarians, and sisters visited him on a daily basis to share friendly conversation, read to him, pray the rosary, celebrate Mass, and even to watch the latest game of Fr. Bob's favourite hockey team – the Ottawa Senators! A team consisting of several parishioners and close friends was set up to ensure he received the best possible care.

As much as Fr. Bob was loved and cared for, it was still a time of suffering and trial. One of his principal care-givers makes this evident:

The following is but a glimpse of the ailments Fr. Bob was inflicted with in the 33 months before he died: Miller Fisher Syndrome, subdural haematoma, traumatic brain injury, dementia, sleep apnea, heart arrhythmia, multiple and various life-threatening infections including endocarditis (two separate bouts), pneumonia and sepsis, urinary tract infections, minor stroke, scabies, painful bedsores, immobility and crippling arthritis in his left hand and leg. His dementia and brain injury challenged his mental capacities, at times leaving him confused and agitated and causing him to occasionally behave out of character which would have been an embarrassment for him. He patiently endured and bore all of the indignities that hospitalization imposes - the complete lack of personal privacy, disruptive roommates, continual poking and prodding by medical staff, medical tests and treatments, bland and unpalatable food, seemingly endless moves from room to room and inadequate (or no) air conditioning in sweltering heat - just to name a few. For the last 18 months of his life, he was tube fed as he had lost the ability to safely swallow solid food and liquids. He did not even have the basic pleasure of food and drink. He had to endure multiple medications and their side effects and inevitable boredom as he could not move, read or even turn on his television by himself. Over time, he lost the ability to stand, walk, move, use his hands and even speak clearly. He had control over nothing. Yet, not once did he complain about any of it.<sup>17</sup>

Before his fall in the hospital, Fr. Bob had shared with one of our priests that he was offering all his suffering for the community and our mission of evangelization. Yet again he had given the Lord permission to do with him as he desired. Few doubted that Fr. Bob was enduring

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<sup>16</sup> Servants of the Cross, *Mission and Objective*.

<sup>17</sup> Colleen MacFarlane, "The Patient Priest," *Companions of the Cross Newsletter*, Memorial edition, Spring 2012.

redemptive suffering for the sake of his spiritual family. All could see that he suffered it heroically.

### ***The Death of Fr. Bob***

On September 25, 2011 Fr. Bob's situation began to worsen. Reluctantly, we had to accept what his deteriorating symptoms announced: Fr. Bob was dying. Fr. Scott McCaig, our Moderator at that time, recounts the final hours of Fr. Bob's life:

On the evening of October 6, I celebrated the 'Mass for the Dying' in his room. Fr. Bob received the Sacrament of the Sick, Viaticum in the form of a drop of the Precious Blood, and the Apostolic Pardon. (...) By this time Fr. Bob's breathing had become little more than shallow gasps. We gathered around him, said the prayers for the dying, and sang *Ave Maria* and *Come into My Heart* as he passed from us to the Lord at 10:17pm. When we were sure that Fr. Bob was gone, we broke into his favourite song: *Press On* (also known as 'The Victory')... One would think that on such an occasion the mood would be sombre, but in truth a joyful current ran through all the prayer and discussion. It really did feel like a victory.

### ***The Witness and Patrimony of Fr. Bob***

Almost everyone who knew Fr. Bob felt grateful and privileged to have been part of his life. Those whom he ministered to were always better because of it. His quiet authority, laid back manner, gentleness, and remarkable capacity for love and understanding left its mark on untold numbers of people. As stated in the homily for Fr. Bob's funeral, held in a full Notre Dame Cathedral Basilica on October 12, 2011:

He was a driving force of renewal, a leader of the Marian movement, a much sought after speaker and teacher especially in matters pertaining to Church renewal and the renewal of the priesthood, and a pioneer both of the New Pentecost in our time and of the New Evangelization. He yearned wholeheartedly to see the Catholic Church, the Church he loved with every fibre of his being, come fully alive to Jesus, living and vibrant. And he extended himself completely, even at the price of his own health, to see it realized.

To the Companions of the Cross and the Servants of the Cross and to our many Lay Associates, he was and remains our spiritual father in Christ, the one who handed on to us the vision and the mission of renewal that God has planted in his heart: a vision for renewal empowered by a meaningful common life and spirituality. He was and remains for us a deeply cherished brother and friend.

And to countless others, he was a gifted teacher, pastor, coach, a fiery preacher who set hearts on fire for the Lord, a gentle (one could even say tender) fatherly presence, who was always available, it seemed, with a listening ear and a compassionate heart, someone who always remembered your name and what mattered to you, who made you feel special, who had an uncanny way of speaking affirmation and healing into hearts, someone who taught us how to take God very seriously but not to take ourselves too seriously. His proper full name of course was Reverend Robert Joseph Bedard. But to us, to all of us, he was "Father Bob". And somehow that just seems to say it all.<sup>18</sup>

Fr. Bob is laid to rest in a simple mausoleum in the Companions of the Cross community plot at Hope Cemetery in Ottawa. His life is a humble and enduring witness to God's redeeming love revealed in Christ Crucified, the power and wisdom of God. As his spiritual family, the Companions of the Cross, Sisters, and Associates strive to carry on the mission that God first planted in his heart.

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<sup>18</sup> Fr. Scott McCaig, CC, "Funeral Homily," *Companions of the Cross Newsletter*, Memorial edition, Spring 2012.