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Blessed James Desiré Laval, CSSp: Spirituality and Mission. A Message for Our Times

Bernard Hym C.S.Sp.

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Bernard Hym, C.S.Sp.

Bernard Hym, C.S.Sp. has since September 2017 been the vice-postulator for the canonization of the Blessed Laval. He began mission in Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, from where he arrived in Mauritius in September, 1988. Becoming director of the Laval Center in 1995 and responsible for the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Blessed, he came upon a dossier of testimonies to Laval, which launched him into research on the Blessed. In 2014, he published *Cœur à cœur avec le Père Laval à travers ses écrits* (ed. Diocèse de Port-Louis) on the life of Blessed Laval; two years later, he gathered the Laval letters in view of the process of canonization.

THE BLESSED JACQUES LAVAL: SPIRITUALITY AND MISSION. A MESSAGE FOR OUR TIMES

Learning to Answer God's Call Starts with the Family

Jacques Désiré Laval was born on September 18, 1803. His father was a rich peasant and mayor of the village. The father was not easy to get along with, while his wife was all tenderness and deep devotion. Welcoming vagabonds and helping the poor was part of the family custom. It was not rare to have ten vagabonds at the family table, and Jacques learned very young to serve them without judgment. His mother's piety and charity would influence Jacques Désiré's entire young life; undoubtedly his mother's death when he was only seven and a half years old left a beautiful legacy that he would faithfully uphold.

Since Jacques Désiré was in poor health as a child, his father encouraged him to study. He was sent to stay with his uncle, a priest who prepared young people to enter the minor seminary. He was not a bright student, but due to his devotion he was admitted to the minor seminary at Evreux. That was a failure, and he announced that he was going to quit his studies. Over summer vacation, his father made him do the heaviest and most difficult farm work: "If Latin breaks your head, I'm going to break your arms."¹ It was a hard lesson but it worked: Jacques went to study at College Stanislas in Paris, where he enjoyed learning. With his Baccalauréat diploma under his belt, it was assumed he would pursue preparation for the priesthood, but he chose to take another year of study in order to enter medical school. His uncle was a bit disappointed, but told him: "*We need holy priests, but a Christian doctor can do a lot of good.*"²

God Calls Sinners and Leads them on His Path

Returning to Normandy in 1830, he practiced as a doctor in Saint-André, then in Ivry-la-Bataille until 1835. His concern for the underprivileged was already apparent in his not requiring the poorest patients to pay for his visits. However, he also manifested a taste for parties and fine living and neglected Sunday mass. That only lasted a short time. Helped by his boarder and a local priest, he became a pillar of the church, to the point of conducting the "Month of Mary" in place of the village priest. Always generous to the poor, he continued his medical career and thought of getting

married and buying the house he was then renting. It was a fall from a horse, one that should have been fatal, that decided him to finally answer the Lord's call.

He was 32 years old when he entered the Saint-Sulpice Seminary in Paris. He wanted to become a Lazariste because of their mission to China. His spiritual director oriented him instead towards his diocese. He was ordained in December 1838 and his bishop entrusted him with the small dechristianized village of Pinterville. In the space of two years he worked wonders there. No need to look for him in the rectory; if you wanted to see him, it was in the church he would be found. There he would pray for hours, kneeling on the altar steps, then behind the altar.

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Some visiting seminarians spoke to him about plans for an order of priests devoted to taking care of slaves who would soon be liberated; he expressed interest, but said he would not force the Lord's hand. The sign from God that he was waiting for arrived one day in 1841. It happened through a call from the new Apostolic Vicar of Mauritius, Msgr. Collier. He needed a priest, and this potential congregation interested Fr. Laval because there the slaves were already liberated and no priest was tending to them. Fr. Libermann, who had not yet started the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, proposed to Fr. Laval that he follow Msgr. Collier. Without having done his novitiate and without really knowing the congregation that was sending him, he left on June 2, 1841 for Mauritius, where the slaves had been left to their fate.

The Mission is not Theory, but Living at the Rhythm of the People

Arriving in Port-Louis on September 14, 1841, Fr. Laval had to confront two forms of opposition. First, the English Governor hoped to transform the francophile and thus resolutely Catholic Mauricians into faithful subjects of His Majesty; thus, he favored Protestantism. Second, the former masters saw Fr. Laval as a priest not to their liking, because he wanted to care only for the Blacks. In addition, as his evangelizing caused the Blacks to discover their dignity, he deprived some former masters of their mistresses and others of profits from selling alcohol. Heckling in the church, blows and even death threats – nothing could deter Fr. Laval from his mission.

The Mission is Everyone's Business

While he remained alone during five years of service to former slaves, the secret of his success was based on six main elements. He had not planned them out but they were impressed upon his pastor's heart before the immensity of the task.

First, in the image of Christ, he viewed each person without judgment. He loved these people as they were, even if he did not approve of sin. Second, on his own taking care of the 70,000 liberated slaves, he was not going to waste his time traveling the island; he remained available by staying in the capital. His first encounters were with the employees of the parish house; they brought others, telling them simply, "there is a priest

here for us.” Third, because he was alone, and knowing it might be for a long time, Fr. Laval surrounded himself with couples that he trained in order to form catechists and community leaders. These “Lay Auxiliaries,” as Fr. Joseph Michael called them, would also bring their former masters back to church. Fourth, after not managing to learn a word of English in three and half months of travel, Fr. Laval succeeded in learning enough Creole in six months to become chaplain of the prison.³ Morning and evening, he prayed with the men, then with the women. He had no chapel, but he said Sunday Mass for them. Over the course of 15 years, he devoted close to 4,000 hours to them. He emptied the prisons of Creoles, for on their release from prison they were welcomed by his Lay Auxiliaries who helped them find work. Also, by formalizing their marriages, he helped them become responsible persons. Fifth, a tireless catechist, Fr. Laval also spent 15 hours a week in the confessional, from where he steered emerging communities, encouraging the most dynamic of them to construct their own chapels. He also received in the confessional catechumens who, in non-sacramental encounters, he was able to prepare for a true conversion of life. Sixth, and finally, almost all the Blacks were dying without the sacraments of the church. They had been so unwelcome at church or the parish house that they no longer dared even put in an appearance there. A group of women called the “*counselors*” would go visit the sick after working all day. People summoned them and they would prepare the sick person to receive the priest. One of them, “*Ma Celeste*,”⁴ often led the missionary to the homes of three, sometimes six sick people. Despite her own frail health and exhausting work as a laundress, Ma Celeste opened the way to heaven for thousands of dying people.

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Joseph Michael highlighted Fr. Laval’s originality in surrounding himself with responsible lay persons: it would be another twenty years before Africa would have any catechists and most of those would be men. Among the “Lay Auxiliaries of Fr. Laval” and counting only those known with certainty, 30 of the 70 were women. An Irish priest, Fr. O’Dwyer, who had benefited from the services of Fr. Lambert and “the good Saint-Louis” wrote a report to the Propagation of the Faith regarding the importance of the auxiliaries:

the catechists exercise a salutary watch on the neighborhood and never fail to warn the priest or missionary of budding scandals or dangers to which faith or virtue might be exposed. They act openly as part of their duty and the people don’t view this surveillance as spying. In this way the priest knows everything that is happening in his parish and can even prevent many troubles that he would only have learned of too late without the catechist’s intervention. The catechists render an immense service . . . I am convinced that one priest assisted by a group of catechists would do more good than two priests with no catechists.”

The Mission is First and Foremost the Work of God

He extended himself so much that a missionary passing through on his way to Bourbon, Fr. Marcellin Colin C.S.Sp.,⁵ wrote to Fr. Libermann that Fr. Laval was an

excellent missionary, but that he complained of not having enough time to pray and suffered because of it. What Fr. Collin did not know, since he rose at 8 a.m., was that Fr. Laval had already been in church since 4:30 a.m. With breviary, prayer, mass and thanksgiving, he was giving himself the spiritual means for a full day of being available for others.

An unexpected treasure, believed to have been lost forever, was found: the draft of Fr. Laval's evening lectures on the austere catechism of the Council of Trent. This "Great Catechism," alas incomplete, teaches of course that hell must be avoided, that hell that the church brandishes on practically every page. But speaking as a father to his children, Fr. Laval shows them above all that holiness is also made for them, that Christ saved them, too. He knows just how to reach them. For many of them, work is synonymous with slavery. He shows them that Jesus did penance for thirty years by laboring in Joseph's workshop.⁶

Fr. Laval, an "Incendiary Saint" as Fr. Libermann Wished

Fr. Laval, being modest, felt he was not doing enough. He dreamed of going to the island of Madagascar which was closed to missionaries. It was his superior, Fr. Levasseur, visiting from the Isle of Bourbon, who expressed his astonishment to Fr. Libermann:

Anything I could tell you about Fr. Laval's mission would be a gross understatement. Oh! My dear Father, how powerful is a holy priest completely surrendered to Our Lord! What great things he does! Nowhere have I seen grace poured forth more abundantly as on the children of Fr. Laval in this country. Here we see realized all those descriptions found in the Annals of the Propagation, which are often only half true; here we rediscover the early church, what spirit of penance! What spirit of faith and prayer, what courage in these Christians of Fr. Laval's.⁷

Fr. Levasseur also had the opportunity to visit some of Fr. Laval's catechists; there, too, he could not praise him enough: "Recently Fr. Laval introduced me to a poor Malagasy woman who holds a proper catechism in her home every day for 70 to 80 Blacks. And she makes saints of all those she instructs."⁸

Fr. Laval's best catechist, Emilien Pierre, was shaped by Fr. Laval's example; he in turn had the charism to choose and train other catechists, which extended the work of the too few missionaries: "Humble apostle of charity . . . instrument of the mercies of Mary granted to the poorest and most abandoned souls . . . Poor child of the Virgin, spurned by all except those who share his humble condition . . . Humble catechist who so many times helped us in our apostolique ministry." The occasion of this praise was the story of an initiative by Emilien that gives a measure of his zeal. In 1856, in the Mozambique Canal, a British ship had boarded another ship engaged in the slave trade. They found and seized 200 Africans, between the ages of 18 and 30, destined

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for plantations in America and took them ashore in Port-Louis. Two years later, many of them were living in the capital where they were forced into long and arduous work. They languished in huts that were nothing more than sordid bunkhouses. Emilien was moved by their poverty and by the ignorance and neglect in which they lived as all but slaves. Helped by Fr. Laval's advice, he went door-to-door speaking of God to these Africans with such conviction that they expressed desire to be prepared for baptism. Forty of them were chosen to receive baptism. That meant eighty godmothers and godfathers had to be found. As was Fr. Laval's custom, only the most steadfast were chosen to take charge of the catechumens, ideally couples or at least friends. Several meetings helped the godmothers and godfathers become aware of the seriousness of the commitment they would be making before God and the church. The baptism ceremony was held in Sainte Croix on July 10, 1859. No newspaper reported it, but the godmothers and godfathers cherished their godchildren.” Emilien Pierre died two years after Fr. Laval. The Bishop, Msgr. Haninson, celebrated Emilien Pierre's funeral mass himself, and in an extraordinary act, two priests accompanied the casket to the cemetery . . . but it's not known which one. “*Happy are the poor in spirit.*” The same is true of all the others: the location of only three of their tombs is known.

Mission is a Community Project

The first missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary began trickling in starting in 1846. Fr. Laval was named superior of the Mauritius community, then provincial superior of the Indian Ocean from the end of 1852 to 1859. His confreres were awed by Fr. Laval's evangelization methods and adopted them, spreading good to all four corners of Mauritius, as well as the outer island of Rodrigues. Consequently, Fr. Thiersé had only one church for the entire south of island. In order to live in community as their superior in Paris wished, he would only go there eight days a month. He was preceded by Emilien Pierre, who chose a good family in each of five villages who would provide a room for the evening. Three families would join them to hear the priest; the following month they had to meet outside because the group had grown so large. Soon, they themselves erected makeshift chapels that had to be rebuilt after every cyclone, before constructing more solid structures - some even built from stone. In 23 years of Fr. Laval's presence on Mauritius, Msgr. Nagapen¹⁰ counted no fewer than 50 chapels. Many no longer exist, but a number of them became the forerunners of our parish churches.

In 1850 Fr. Laval became the first priest to stay on Rodrigues for six months. It was another six years before Fr. Francis came for six months in turn. He found such well-structured communities formed around their catechist that he brought the Bishop back with him the following year to celebrate a confirmation. The Bishop promised he would try to send them priests to stay on Rodrigues—but when?

When an outbreak of deadly epidemics spread throughout the island, Fr. Laval, his missionaries, and lay auxiliaries were there. People were dying by the thousands. Fr. Laval ensured that his missionaries could respond to calls without succumbing to illness themselves; he improved their nutrition and made them drink wine at every meal as a preventive measure. He prohibited them from going out at night so as not to exhaust

themselves, and he prevented them from responding chaotically to every call; an auxiliary grouped the requests by neighborhood and Fr. Laval would assign each one his tasks for the day. Fr. Laval himself went to the hospital which was packed with the dying; he did not give sacraments to all the sick, but as a former doctor, was able to sense who would die during the night and ministered to them. In the evening, he would go pray for those who had been buried in mass graves without sacraments.

During Fr. Laval's beatification process, he was faulted for not having acted in his capacity as a doctor. It should be noted that to do so would have been grounds to expel him for illegal practice of medicine. Also, while writing the book on Fr. Laval's letters, I was happy to receive an excerpt of a book which had appeared shortly before on the great doctor, Brown-Séguard. The author claimed that the two people who rose to the occasion in those dramatic times were Fr. Laval on the spiritual plane and Dr. Brown-Séguard on the medical.¹¹

Fr. Laval Feels Useless As “An Unarmed Soldier”

Fr. Laval spent 23 years in Mauritius, but he remained a true Norman in the practical sense. Fr. Schwindenhammer was aware of his reputation for holiness and wanted a photo to put next to the one of Fr. Libermann. Before obeying, Fr. Laval raised many objections dictated by his modesty: *“I'm not a good looking enough fellow to have my portrait taken.”* Finally, he turned to Fr. Thévaux, the local superior and one of his first companions. Fr. Thévaux encouraged him to let himself be photographed and to distribute his portrait *“to finish construction of the Sainte-Croix church”*; thus, his heartfelt cry: *“For Sainte-Croix, do whatever you want with Fr. Laval, living or dead.”*

Another torment from Fr. Schwindenhammer: he ordered Fr. Laval to write his own biography. With typical Norman obedience, *“Maybe yes, maybe no,”* he wrote a letter that was a work fit for an anthology. He managed to obey without saying anything particularly significant.

“1. My life before entering Saint-Sulpice Seminary was so filled with sin that my director, Father Galais of blessed memory, never wanted me to revisit those wretched years, so much did the memories fill my spirit with turmoil and my heart with despondency and sadness.

Here is what this wise and holy director counseled: ‘My friend,’ he told me several times, ‘before you entered the Seminary you made a general confession of these unfortunate disorders; do not dwell on them, do not stir up that old dungheap, it will only upset and discourage you.’ I followed that advice to this day and found it very rewarding. And I must tell you in confidence that the great cross of my old age is these returns to all those disorders that the demon attempts to paint in my imagination and which I have great difficulty ridding myself of . . . consider whether it would be prudent to stir up this rotten old dungheap.

2. My life at Saint-Sulpice Seminary was truly poor and miserable. I stayed as much as possible in a state of silence and forgetting, working to heal the deep

wounds that sin had left on my soul. Those four years offer nothing edifying or interesting.

3. After the Seminary I was placed in a tiny parish in the diocese of Evreux. I served there for two years. Having very little ministry work to do I spent my time in prayer, study of the Bible and theological study, having had a limited education. I led the life of a genuine monk, and I find the memory of those two years very consoling.

4. In 1840, Fr. Blanpin and another student from Saint-Sulpice came to find me in my solitude and spoke to me of the Very Reverend Fr. Libermann's project to form a congregation of priests for the colonies and of the ease of establishing God's reign among the Blacks. I was not doing much in my poor little parish and yet I desired to convert some souls to make amends for those souls I had lost. I felt impelled to join this congregation, especially since it did not require great talent to do good among these poor people. That was when I left for the mission in Mauritius.

I remained alone there five years, then Fr. Lambert arrived, and two years later Fr. Thévaux. Frs. Lambert and Thévaux are better writers than I and can relate what they saw; my only task would then be to try to remember the first five years of the mission, which will be very difficult for me given my weakened memory and my great inability to write and develop my thoughts.

Thus you will see, my Very dear and Reverend Father, that there was neither stubbornness nor disobedience in my delay.

I have the honor to be my Very Reverend Father, of your paternity, your very devoted son,

Laval, miss. S. Esp. S.C. M."

Fr. Laval suffered a first stroke in the confessional, a second while in the pulpit. During the night of September 8, 1864 he had a more severe stroke, followed by a hemiplegia. He had been a doctor so knew it was the end, but he readied himself for death with confidence: "*I am happy to have always worked for the poor.*" He closed his eyes on September 9, 1864. He was 61 years old. The priest who had been so poorly received was accompanied by a third of the population the three kilometers from the cathedral to Sainte-Croix, his chosen burial site. All cultures and all religions were united by the one who was rightly called "*The Apostle of Unity.*"

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In the testimonies of healing we can see that the first miracle granted through his intercession took place before his casket was even closed: it involved Caroline Prosper, the daughter of one of his most faithful friends. She was near death and Fr. Laval invited her in a dream to have herself carried near to his body to be cured. The doctor refused to risk it, but at her insistence, the family took the risk. She arrived more dead than alive, but the

moment Fr. Laval's hand touched her eye and her hand, she was cured of her infirmity, though one leg remained rigid for some time before also finally being cured.

Father Laval Continues to Watch Over Mauritius

Before his death he made a commitment: "*Those who come to pray at my grave, I will carry their prayer to the Lord.*" Beginning the year after he died, more than 4,000 people come to Sainte-Croix on the anniversary of his death. This number has continued to grow, and increasingly the pilgrims come every day of the year. Today, every week from 8,000 to 14,000 come from Mauritius, as well as the Island of Reunion to visit his grave, and in the month of September more than 200,000 visit. Mauritians scattered throughout the world also gather in September.

The many letters of thanks arriving from Mauritius and the Mauritian Diaspora, as well as from those who have heard them tell of Fr. Laval, prove that Fr. Laval kept his word, even if the church has accepted only one miracle for his beatification. On April 29, 1979 Fr. Laval was one of the first two Servants of God to be beatified by the holy Pope John Paul II. Ten years later, on October 15, 1989, the holy Pope visited Fr. Laval's grave and put his pontificate under his protection.

Missionaries Today, In the Manner of Father Laval

Today, to be a missionary in the manner of Fr. Laval means, for lay people, to take their Baptism seriously: to commit as a couple in order to mutually support each other in service and bear witness to the power of the sacrament of marriage they have received. In a world which has lost its social, moral, and religious bearings, it is important to hear the Pope's call to go towards the margins of the church, to be able to have the same view as Jesus who does not judge, but who puts people back on their feet in hope. The poor and the sick are the face of the suffering Christ, but we must also be for them the signs of Christ compassionate and merciful.

Lay Persons, Cooperators in the Mission in the Name of Their Baptism

Priests and missionaries, we too readily consider lay people as "fill-ins" who offset our small and aging number. We must see them as people who are also called by our Lord in the name of their Baptism to a mission, different from ours but complementary. Some will take their place in the liturgy, but many others will find their place as witnesses of the Gospel, according to their charism, to drug addicts, alcoholics, people getting out of prison who are in danger of seeing only those who trapped them in their former negative life reach out to them.

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Prayer, Nourishment of the Mission

There is not only one way to pray, but in order to live a commitment in the name of the Gospel, it must be sustained by the presence of the Lord in our life and our tasks. Charismatics and rosary groups, couple and family spirituality groups, leaders of

neighborhood groups, each in its way keeps the flame of faith burning. Everywhere in Mauritius and surely in many places, lay people are nourished by Ignatian, Franciscan and Carmelite spirituality. We have been surprised to see how much Libermannian spirituality fulfills a need among people who commit themselves. However, are we Spiritans available to promote it? Ten years ago, the Spiritans of Mauritius introduced training in Libermannian spirituality for committed lay persons at the request of secular priests who regretted being offered only Ignatian spirituality. We have a treasure to share, let's not keep it "under a bushel."

*Bernard Hym, C.S.Sp.
Port-Louis, Mauritius
Vice-Postulator for the Cause of the Canonization of Fr. Laval*

Endnotes

¹ Michel, Joseph, *Le Père Jacques Laval: le saint de l'Île Maurice: 1803-1864*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1970, 14.

² Ibid, 16.

³ In 1855, before the combined Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Agriculture and in the presence of the Governors of Mauritius and Reunion, Sir Cécilcourt Antelme, who as a young lawyer had been the voice of white pessimism concerning the religious future of the former apprentices, acknowledged that since Fr. Laval began his apostolate, "the number of criminally accused among the emancipated classes had been in continual decline . . . and today everyone, even lawyers, are surprised when they see a former slave in the prison dock." Excerpt from *La Commercial Gazette*, June 6, 1855.

⁴ Madam Celeste.

⁵ *Notes et Documents*, VI, 540.

⁶ Question: *Is it therefore Jesus Christ, Son of God, second person of the Trinity become man like us, who earned forgiveness for our sins?*

Answer: *Yes.*

Q: *But what did He do to earn our grace, to earn forgiveness for our sins from God?*

A: *(He did penance all his life) and then He died on the cross.*

Q: *What penance did Our Lord Jesus Christ do up to the age of 30?*

A: *He did penance by working.*

Q: *Work, therefore, is a good penance to offer to God for forgiveness of our sins?*

A: *Yes.*

⁷ See Hym, Bernard, *Coeur à coeur avec le Père Laval à travers ses écrits*, Ed. Diocèse de Port-Louis, 91 [*Heart to Heart with Fr. Laval through his Writings*]

⁸ Michel, Joseph, *Les Auxiliaires du Bienheureux Jacques Laval, Apôtre de l'Île Maurice*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1988, 128. [*The Auxiliaries of the Blessed Jacques Laval, Apostle of Mauritius*].

⁹ Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁰ Historian of the diocese, deceased and not replaced.

¹¹ In 2016 on the publication of the book by Emmanuel Richon, *Charles-Edouard Brown-Séquard, le Mauricien le plus célèbre*, [Charles-Edward Brown-Séquard, The Most Famous Mauritian], it was emphasized that at the time of the cholera epidemic, “only two people were mentioned both by Mayor Gabriel Fropier and the population itself for having taken every risk in order to save large numbers of the sick: Fr. Laval and Charles-Edouard Brown-Séquard, who did not for one second waiver in their vocation.