1978

Blessed Jacques Désiré Laval: Apostle of Mauritius

Michael O'Carroll CSSp

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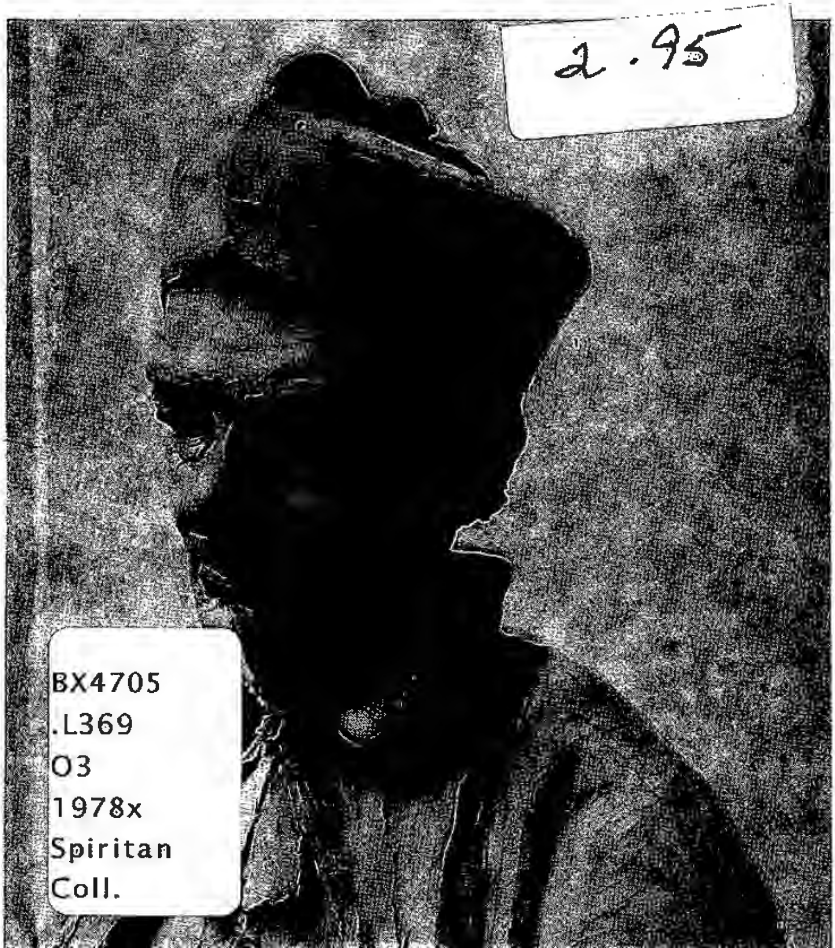
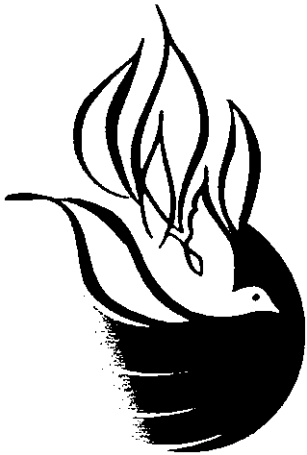
Apostle of Mauritius

by

Michael O'Carroll C.S.Sp.





Blessed
Jacques Désiré Laval C.S.Sp.

Holy Ghost Missionary
in Mauritius
1841-1864

DUBLIN

1978

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CHAPTER I

The making of a missionary

(i)

"I would not have left Pinterville for another parish; if I am going away, it is because God wants me to be a missionary. I shall offer for your intention the first Mass which I shall celebrate in the island of Mauritius . . . Now we shall not see each other again save in eternity; let those first into heaven pray for the others."

The speaker was a French country parish priest in the diocese of Evreux in Normandy, Jacques Désiré Laval; the date Sunday, the 19th February, 1841. He was in his thirty eighth year, a priest for little over two years. His decision to tear up his roots and cross the world to risk his life in an unknown country is not so rare in the history of the Church; other priests have left the security of European dioceses to work in missionary lands.

But the circumstances had something special about them and the outcome was to be singular. Fr. Laval was changing course for the second time in his life—he had been a doctor before becoming a priest—and he was the envoy of a religious body which would soon come into existence, but had not yet done so. He was a religious who had not done a novitiate, a missionary with no colleague to speak to him from experience; and he was travelling with a newly appointed bishop whose status was somewhat vague, even insecure.

But the divine spark was in him. In the next twenty-three years he met in exemplary fashion the principal challenge to the Catholic Church in his lifetime, the emancipation of the slaves, and he became, if in a geographically restricted area, one of those figures who leave on a whole people the stamp of their spiritual character. Like Patrick and Boniface he is a national hero. In terms of statistics his achievement was scarcely equalled anywhere in the first decades of the nineteenth century Catholic missionary revival.

By what steps had the future apostle of Mauritius come to the decision announced to his Norman village congregation in February 1841? It had been a zig-zag course. He came of farming stock. His father would have been a lawyer if his father, that is Jacques' grandfather, had not died young. He was obliged to return to the ancestral holding. A local notability, married to the daughter of a lawyer gentleman-farmer in the region, who was also a magistrate, Georges Delérablée, James Laval was mayor of Croth, a small village in the Eure valley: he held the office during the years of the Convention, the Directory, the Consulate, the Empire and the Restoration.

It was on 18th September, 1803, that his wife Suzanne gave birth to twin brothers, Jacques Désiré and Michel. They were baptised that day and Michel died before long. There were already two sisters in the family and a brother and sister would be born after Jacques. Not much is known of his early education which seems to have been sketchy. In later years he would speak of a certain shyness which he traced to a disturbed childhood. The principal shock was the death of the mother before Jacques was eight years of age.

The father was a martinet, harsh in manner. When Jacques who had been given some elements of education in a parochial school (conducted by his paternal uncle, the Dean of Tourville, Nicholas Laval), went on to the Junior Seminary of Evreux, he took a dislike to all schooling and wished to end it. The father's reply was caustic: "You say that Latin cracks your head; well, I'll soon crack your arms", an allusion to the farming work piled on the unwilling student. The parent had his way, but the venue was changed. This time Jacques went to the Collège Stanislas in Paris. It had been founded a short time before and already enjoyed the high reputation it would long hold.

There had been signs of a priestly vocation but, despite some hope held by the Collège Stanislas professors, their student's choice was medicine. An intriguing forecast made by a fortune-teller had no effect on the decision. When the young Laval had drawn three cards she set them out

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and spoke as follows: "My boy, you will go on a long journey; you will cross the seas; you will go faraway and never return." America was the nearest the youth's desire came to what would prove a singularly accurate prediction. Under the watchful eye of a Paris doctor Jacques meanwhile continued his medical studies and won his doctorate on 21st August, 1830 with a dissertation on Articular Rheumatism. In the following month he was already in practice in Saint-André, the principal town in his native district.

In the life of a man who would achieve fame as a friend of the poor and under-privileged, stories of an early interest in the poor may appear suspect. The evidence is adequate and the influence here may have been his mother, who was welcoming and generous to all who sought her help. As a medical student in Paris Jacques took time off to visit those living in a rundown quarter of the city. As a young doctor he was very available to the less well-off, sending no bills and occasionally easing the household budget by useful gifts.

Apart from that he was anything but a future saint. Handsome, well-dressed, with refined taste in furniture, he lived well, indulged his passion for horses and liked parties. His sisters were worried and one of them, Gertrude, decided to talk to him about the change they had noticed. His reply was surprising: "I am resisting God." He was attracted, at the time, by a young girl of eighteen years, Marguerite Buffet, but though he was seen dancing gaily with her, there is no satisfactory evidence as to his intentions; none on the effect which her engagement to another man had on him.

The young doctor's friendship for another young woman was used by a professional rival to embarrass him so much that he decided to leave Saint-André and move to another town, Ivry-la-Bataille. Here he secured a partnership with an older colleague, Dr. Postel, affectionately known as "Père Postel". The rival in Saint-André had been in collusion with the local pharmacist against Laval. When the plot failed with the arrival of another pharmacist, invited and financially covered by

Laval, the enemy turned to calumny. Laval's visits and a harmless gesture of affection in public to a former patient, who was also rich and beautiful, had fed the fires of calumny.

Postel was something of a freethinker. Association with him did nothing to help his junior partner rid himself of a religious burden. Once at Saint-André, Dr. Laval had tried to resolve this conflict; at the last moment he had lost his nerve. Within five or six months of his arrival in Ivry he had cut the knot clean. He went to confession, resumed religious practice fully and within a short time had set his face towards the way of heroic piety. Postel was dismayed and thought, as do the Postels of this world in such cases, that his young friend was going mad.

It was conversion, in a minor key, but conversion none the less and for Laval there was to be no turning back. He could thank discreet, pious and devoted women friends in Ivry for the grace he had received; soon he was meeting them in the evening to recite the Rosary, or, early in the morning, in the church before Mass for the May devotions. He received Holy Communion every Sunday, which would be singular in those days, and was even seen in the choir stalls dressed in surplice.

(ii)

The young doctor's decision to take the next, more serious, step and advance to the priesthood was entirely personal. When his brother Auguste sought to reason with him, to point to the good he could do as a doctor his reply was: "True, I hesitated between the priesthood and medicine; I chose medicine and now I see that I was wrong. God is calling me. This is my vocation. As a priest I shall be able to do more good. I must follow the voice of God, so I have to ask you not to speak to me again about the matter." Local gossip was not satisfied with such an explanation: Had he not been disappointed in love? Did he not narrowly escape death when he fell with his horse? Had he not made a wrong diagnosis when he was called to examine a young woman, suffering

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abdominal pain, member of the domestic staff in a local château—he had ordered her to hospital, but a midwife had that night in the château delivered her of a baby? Was his professional pride stung? Was he fleeing from the embarrassment? The prosaic fact is that his decision had been taken before this incident occurred and he wished that baby to be born in hospital; he had always tended to avoid obstetric work; he wished to do so more than ever when he was about to enter a seminary.

We hear of no voices predicting failure in the new career; nor did any but his spiritual counsellor know that the thought of the Missions was already in his mind. He was directed towards the Paris seminary which at the time had two departments, for Philosophy at Issy, and, for Theology, the famous house of St. Sulpice. After some months at Issy Laval entered St. Sulpice on 10th October, 1834. He deliberately chose a quiet unobtrusive line of conduct; he seemed obsessed by the need to atone for his past: "As far as possible I chose silence and oblivion, striving to heal the deep wounds sin had caused in my soul".

In this characteristically modest remark he unconsciously reveals what was guessed by his fellow seminarists, whom he did edify. He had begun the practice of mortification which will be a permanent feature of his life. He was the seminarist appointed to attend to the poor who came regularly begging at the seminary; he was to gather what was left over in the dining-room and distribute it to them; he did this with eagerness and satisfaction.

Ordained priest on 22nd December, 1838, Fr. Laval was appointed to a rural parish, Pinterville in the Eure Valley, and he took up duty on 21st January, 1839. For the moment all thought of the Missions appeared impracticable and the young priest accepted the advice he had been given by his spiritual director in St. Sulpice, Fr. Galais. The situation in Pinterville would exemplify the thesis insinuated in a famous book of the present century, *France Pagan?* (*France, pays de mission?*). The parish contained 483 souls, half of them agricultural workers, the other half employed in factories in the nearby town,

Louviers. About twelve came to Mass on Sunday, less were seen in the church at other ceremonies. The priest was there to officiate at baptisms, marriages and funerals.

In face of such indifference the newly appointed parish priest took up two proved weapons: prayer and penance. This aspect of his life will certainly stir comment as he becomes better known to the faithful of our time, for many have relegated prayer and penance to a marginal place in the Christian life. Nor was it any self-centred pursuit of perfection with consequent neglect of apostolic duty. The essential motivation was apostolic; this was a man dedicated through and through to the ministry of souls. If he spent long hours in the church, cut food, sleep, clothing, house furnishings to the bare minimum it was to give his priestly power direct access to souls.

The spiritual programme was personally designed and its author maintained it broadly throughout his life. He made little alteration in it when he became a member of a missionary society which did not include such elements of self-inflicted mortification in its rule or way of life. The name of his contemporary, an older man who died just five years before him, the Curé of Ars, occurs spontaneously. The image we have in one case and the other is emaciated, yet strangely vital, glowing with light. It is like those Byzantine ikons in which the flesh is subdued to almost stark linear patterns, from which spiritual beauty shines mysteriously.

Some particulars of this arduous, unrelenting campaign: Fr. Laval rose, winter and summer, at 4 o'clock in the morning, tidied his room and went to the church for prayer. He prayed before the high altar, or later concealed behind it, at times stretched on the ground and he remained in prayer until 8 o'clock when he said Mass. Thanksgiving and the Little Hours of the Breviary occupied his time until about 10 o'clock when he returned to the presbytery. Breakfast was a little dry bread. Study or visits to the sick followed. Around midday he partook of a little soup and some cold potatoes. In the afternoon he said Vespers at 2 o'clock after which he recited the Rosary: Matins and Lauds at 4 o'clock; another pitiful

collation at 7 and then evening prayer and a long visit to the Blessed Sacrament. If he did not have catechetical instruction in the presbytery he remained in the Church until 10 or 11 o'clock.

So much was the parish priest's life lived inside the church building that it was here his parishioners would seek him. His clothes were shabby and patched. At first he had a primitive mattress stuffed with hay to lie upon, but he gave this to a poor man and thereafter made his bed on a sheep skin stretched on the floor of a small annexe to the kitchen. To complete the picture there was a hair shirt, one of the few articles of clothing highly priced in the unfading catalogues of heaven.

Fr. Laval's pastoral ministry in Pinterville was not merely a dress rehearsal for his later apostolate in Mauritius. His principal task was instruction in the catechism, his most promising subjects were the children, his power came from the force of example and a persuasive gentleness. Though he was doubtful of the progress being made by his first catechism class the children were ready for First Communion on 17th November, 1839: a group of 21, an unprecedented number in the village. Three couples living together outside the sacrament of marriage consented to have their unions regularised by the new parish priest.

When the village school-teacher left without being replaced it was the parish priest who undertook elementary instruction every afternoon in the presbytery. When, in the month of January, 1841, some twenty victims of flooding from the river Eure had to leave their homes, it was in the presbytery that they found not only shelter but food and even clothing. Those held back from this refuge by the rising waters were sought out by Fr. Laval, who reached them on horseback.

Daily visits to the sick in the parish were a regular part of his ministry. The compliment was returned. As his reputation for generosity to the poor spread beyond the parish a steady stream of visitors made their way to the presbytery door. On Sundays some of them would be guests at the midday meal; two were always there, a blind

woman and a man so handicapped that his own parents found him repulsive. The professionals of the begging class preyed on a man so easy to exploit. "But father, can you not see that you are being fooled? This fellow is coming back the third time" the sacristan once exclaimed. "It's not me he's fooling; it's himself" was the reply.

Such a priest was a problem for his housekeeper. She would have liked to provide attentively for his needs. It was impossible. True, he insisted that she should buy for herself what she needed. But here again there was a drawback: he might easily go to the larder and take what she had bought, if there was nothing else to give some mendicant caller. Yet her abiding sentiment was one of profound admiration. Admiration is not easily withheld from those totally disinterested.

(iii)

Before long Fr. Laval's disinterested spirit would have more ample scope than that provided by his village parish. In the year 1840 he heard for the first time some details of an ambitious missionary plan conceived and furthered by some of the seminarists in St. Sulpice. Religious founders like saints often do not fully look the part until they are dead. Those here in question were not exceptions. One was a créole from the island of Bourbon, now known as La Réunion, Frederick Le Vavasseur, generous, idealistic, volatile to the point of explosion; another was a Parisian, born of a Haitian mother, Eugene Tisserant, and there was a brilliant, wealthy, circumspect young man, indecisive and ultimately undecided. The cohesive, staying power in the foolhardy enterprise came from a still more unexpected source: a convert Jew, striving to steer a straight course after several false starts, rising from a career broken by epilepsy with no support save that of indomitable faith and courage.

That support would suffice through all the shocks and ordeals ahead. In the perspective of time the giants stand

clear as the drifting mass about them subsides. Libermann, the Jew and Laval, the doctor turned priest, were the giants of this first venture into the vast heathen world of their time. When Laval first heard missionary news of his future superior, whom he had known in Paris, Libermann was on his way to Rome to seek official approval for the "Work in favour of the Blacks" (*L'Oeuvre des Noirs*): a fool's errand if ever there was one. There were strident voices to tell him so, with a dash of mockery thrown in. What did he take himself for, a religious founder? He was a penniless clerical reject. The fact was painfully evident in Rome when he could find no better lodging than a garret, nothing more effective to do than pen his reflections on the Gospel of St. John; he sometimes begged his meals at convent doors.

He did not panic. In the miserable attic he composed a draft rule—Règle provisoire—for the future missionary society of the Holy Heart of Mary, a document which will repay analysis in the light of Vatican II and its aftermath. A pilgrimage to Loreto removed one huge obstacle, the dispiriting inhibition of epilepsy: it would not bar the priestly ordination of Libermann or compromise his work. Suddenly many things favourable to his plans happened together. There entered the flow of events a personality who may not have thus far received due recognition in the story of these important beginnings.

Dom William Collier, O.S.B., was a Yorkshireman whose studies had been completed in the English college of Douai. He was named president of this important scolastic centre. The English Benedictines chose him as their delegate to a General Chapter of the Benedictines in Rome and later as their representative to the Holy See. In 1840 Collier at the age of thirty-eight was chosen as Vicar Apostolic of Port-Louis, capital of Mauritius, the third to bear the title, as he was the third Benedictine. Though Mauritius was at this time an English possession Collier knew that the religious traditions were French and he determined to look for French priests. The decision brought him to Paris and St. Sulpice. Le Vavasseur was still in the seminary and after consultation with the professors sympathetic to the

" Work in favour of the Blacks " he informed the bishop of this project. Collier at once offered to give the society his episcopal protection; Mauritius would be its warrant before church authorities. He would also assume responsibility, of the kind required by church law, for the ordination of Francis Libermann. If Le Vavasseur were freed of his commitment to Bourbon, the sister island of Mauritius would open its doors wide to receive him.

The ardent Le Vavasseur had still some time to wait for ordination but the other founder, Tisserant, was to receive the sacrament shortly. He volunteered for Collier's vicariate apostolic and was strongly advised to bring a companion. Who would he be? One of the two seminarists who had visited Pinterville remembered Laval's great interest in the new enterprise. Fr. Galais knew of the latent missionary vocation. Now, he thought, was the moment to stir it to life. He wrote to his disciple asking him how he felt on the subject. Laval saw the message as a sign from God and came post-haste to Paris where he was fully briefed. His resolve was immediate. All that remained were formalities to secure his transfer from his Norman diocese to Bishop Collier's vicariate apostolic.

As yet Fr. Galais and his colleague in St. Sulpice, Fr. Pinault, did not think of Libermann as superior of a new society; they saw him more in the office of Novice Master. But they seem to have realised that he had an indispensable role and they knew that Roman sanction would be withheld until he was a priest. Thanks to Bishop Collier this would now be possible and thanks to the same man a field of action was ready for the first missionary of the new society. To him and to the island of Mauritius the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, the instrument to further the " Work in favour of the Blacks ", owes a continuing debt, for he helped to bring it from dream to reality.

Fr. Laval did not set sail as quickly as he would have wished. His own bishop first demurred at the request to release him from the diocese of Evreux, but was won over by Bishop Collier. After he had left his parish of Pinterville he was delayed for a while in Paris and then obliged

to return for some months to his uncle in Tourville. When the call of duty did come, it was borne from Paris by Le Vavasseur. He came like a thief in the night to awaken Laval and give him a rendezvous in London whence he would embark with the bishop and three other priests for Mauritius. Informed at 4 o'clock in the morning the eager missionary left at once for Evreux and Paris and, in constant haste, took the coach for Boulogne sur Mer, where he caught the night boat for London. Through no fault of the bishop's delays still occurred. But on 4th June, 1841, the Tanjora, en route for Bombay via Mauritius, took to the high seas and was on its way. As we shall see, a delay of some more days would have meant that the passengers would not have included Jacques Désiré Laval.

CHAPTER II

The Making of a Saint

(i)

An Englishman, Fr. Giles, a Frenchman, Fr. Rovery and an Irishman, Fr. Larkin, were, with the bishop, Laval's companions on the voyage to Mauritius. He nearly died on board ship, for a dose of sea-sickness worsened into a more serious illness. As the ship neared the equator he began to recover and as they passed the Cape of Good Hope a stray thought from the past may have helped to speed his convalescence; he remembered the old fortune-teller who spoke of a journey across the sea.

He would remain a long time. But first he had to get a secure foothold. He was and would continue to be at the mercy of the civil authorities on the island; so to a less extent was the bishop himself. Church State relations in the remote English dependency explain this curious fact.

In the centuries when distant lands became the possession of whatever European power could seize and control them, Mauritius had been first annexed to Portugal and

baptised the Island of the Swan. The Portuguese did not stay very long and the Dutch were the next European adventurers to move in. They called the island Mauritius after their Stadtholder, Maurice of Nassau. Competition was increasingly keen for faraway prizes but the Dutch held off the French and English and for a while were determined to establish the structure of a colonial settlement. They imported deer and sugar cane from Java.

Colonial fatigue set in, the Dutch departed, and the way was open for a newcomer. In 1715, the French East India Company, one of the multi-nationals of the time, took over Mauritius. The name was changed, with a flourish of national modesty, to "Isle de France". The island in due course was the arena for a great colonial entrepreneur Mahé de Labourdonnais, of the breed of Rhodes, Lugard or Lyautey. His drive and ability created the political entity which would endure. His company, however, enfeebled by wars lost its managerial capacity and, in 1767, ceded its rights, such as they were, to the French crown. Royal administration exploited fully the advantage of a naval station at a meeting point of the great maritime routes. Pirates and privateers did not automatically strike the name off their ready reckoners.

Especially French culture with its religious core and with the French language as its medium took deep root in Mauritius. It survived the revolutionary storms in France and the last colonial change. For in 1810 the English displaced the French as rulers of the island and the Treaty of Paris ratified the armed intrusion. Henceforth, until the attainment of independence in the post-colonial era, Mauritius would be governed from London; but the legal status of the Catholic Church was to continue exactly as it had been before the surrender. It would enjoy the privileges and restrictions of the Napoleonic Concordat, as this had been extended to the French colonies.

The governor of the island in the year when Bishop Collier was appointed had little inhibition in exercising such powers as the Concordat gave him. Only the slowness of postal links over such a vast distance cheated him of one objective. He tried to have Bishop Collier retained in

England and his appointment to Port Louis cancelled. He had sent a message to this effect to the Secretary of State: his grounds of objection were the French education and sympathies of the newly consecrated prelate.

In the same message the governor asked that French priests be barred from the island: this would strike at Fr. Laval. But no prohibition of the departure of either bishop or priest was enforced. They had left London in the Tanjora, were already out at sea when the despatch from the governor in Mauritius reached England. A case to classify with the "Ifs" of history.

The governor, Sir Lionel Smith, had been only a year in office and was in poor health. The kingpin of administration was George Dick, chief secretary; he handled religious affairs. It was not so much Church State relations as one body enmeshed with the other. The immediate effect of this tangle was that the number of parishes could not be increased without the governor's permission; nor could the priests who arrived carry on their ministry if he forbade them to do so, to stay on the island.

The bishop was unaware of the governor's prior moves against him. When the little potentate refused to see him, he may have suspected antipathy. He had evidence of further opposition when Dick informed him officially that the number of priests exercising the ministry could not be increased, and that the governor would prefer to have priests who were British subjects. This put Laval's stay on the island in jeopardy.

Collier met the challenge like a man. He wrote to the governor as follows: "True, Fr. Laval is of French origin but he is entirely disinterested in regard to France. I wish your Excellency to know that, as I know him, his character and his conduct would honour any priest in any country. I intend to assign him to the ministry of prisoners, emancipated blacks, the poorest and lowest section of the community. I have tried in vain in England to find a Catholic priest willing to devote himself exclusively to the poor and to prisoners. For this special and important task I have no hope of finding anyone else in whom I could have the confidence that I have in this gentleman . . . A

large section of the Catholic population will be deprived of instruction if I am not allowed to give this work to Fr. Laval. Having regard to this situation I hope very much that your Excellency will allow his name to appear on the list of the colonial clergy."

The reply came from Dick. The governor was embarrassed by the arrival of Giles, Larkin and Laval. He would, however, accept their services but only on two conditions: one, that the Secretary of State in London did not disapprove, and, two, that the bishop would guarantee the departure of the priests should this be requested by the civil power. Dick noted that the two British subjects could assert their rights against the second condition. Laval alone remained wholly vulnerable.

(ii)

The threat to the French missionary was momentarily halted. It would eventually vanish before his singular achievement. Without delay he set to work. Mauritius, over 500 miles east of Madagascar, was a melting pot into which many races had been poured, European, African, Indian, Chinese, Malaysian. It was at this moment in full crisis for the hatches had recently been lifted from the submerged mass: the decree abolishing slavery from the 1st February, 1835 gave freedom to 76,774 men, women and children. The capital city was at the mercy of roving bands of incendiarists; fear was widespread, as disorders were reported from every side.

Since many of the emancipated slaves were baptised Catholics, the victims of their unruly, criminal ways clutched at religion as a remedy. The missionaries who arrived with Bishop Collier were seen therefore primarily as reinforcement to the cause of law and order. Sudden cries of hope arose from those who saw priests as vigilantes, religion as social therapy, medicine for a sick society. The local press was the mouthpiece of this optimism: "The news (of the arrival of the missionaries) will be greeted with enthusiasm by those who believe as we do that

religion has an important role to play in the new organisation of society."

Thus one paper. Another put the point more forcibly: "By increasing the inadequate numbers of the clergy, the wish of the enlightened section of our community has been fulfilled, a fulfilment awaited with some impatience not so much on their own behalf as on behalf of the other section of the population which follows its coarsest instincts, which has acquired the vices and none of the virtues of civilisation. We can look to the future with hope, thanks to the arrival of these new ministers of religion."

The writer told the priests what they should do: "What wider field could be opened before ambitions which have only heaven as their objective, than to awaken religious sentiments in the hearts of those degraded by the vices of slavery and the excesses of freedom, to attack their crude superstitions, to give them a consciousness of their duties, to inspire in them love of work, to make of them men and Christians? The moral reform of those given freedom may be advanced or held back: that depends in large part on the work and teaching of the clergy." Religion not so much as the opium of the people, rather as the bulwark of the establishment.

Fr. Laval would not understand things that way, even if the hoped-for results would be immeasurably surpassed by his achievement. Part of this achievement would be a changed outlook in the "enlightened section of the community".

(iii)

The Vincentian Fathers had been the first European missionaries in Mauritius. The excellent work they had done had suffered, during the Anglo-French wars following the French Revolution, from the impossibility of personnel replacement. The year the Revolution broke out there were on the island 13 priests for 45,000 inhabitants; in 1793 there were but 8 and in 1809, with the population

swollen to 73,000 the number had fallen to 3; eleven years later the population stood at 100,000 and there were 5 priests all French, though now the island was under British rule.

The religious status of the island was raised in that year, 1820, by the appointment of the first Vicar Apostolic, that is a bishop whose territory was not recognised in church law as a diocese. He was an English Benedictine, the first of a long line from this order. Neither he nor his immediate successor could accomplish the religious renewal which was every day more painfully needed. It was in the episcopal reign of Bishop Collier that recovery began.

But from what depths! There is a letter in the Archives of Downside Abbey from the bishop in which he describes the incredible religious situation he met: unimaginable moral degradation, total ignorance of religion, priests few in number, some of them deplorably lax. For a population of 140,000 he found 8 priests, three of whom he had to dismiss at once while three others whom he would have sent with them were imposed upon him. He was hopeful, none the less, and his spiritual discernment told him that the very presence of Laval on the island was a good omen: "I continue" he wrote to Fr. Galais of St. Sulpice on 19th February, 1842. "to take advantage of the ardent zeal of my dear Fr. Laval, whom I consider the greatest treasure of my Vicariate Apostolic; he is truly an apostle and I cannot but believe that if heaven did not have graces in store for this poor colony, it would not have granted me this admirable ecclesiastic".

Mauritius did not have at the time any religious community, any Catholic association, any Catholic primary or secondary school. People worked on Sunday as on weekdays; fifty or sixty Catholics came to Mass in Port Louis on Sunday; a few hundred made their Easter duty in the whole island.

The evils were almost concentrated in the sector to which Fr. Laval was assigned, where from the outset he had set all his desires and hopes. When after some months on the island he learned that his religious society was

established and that Francis Libermann was the Superior he wrote to him a letter describing the difficulties, telling what he was trying to do and expressing filial sentiments:

" The whites are the big obstacle to the conversion of our black brothers. To form an opinion of that and of all the annoyance they are causing us and our poor children, so as to turn them from the right path on which we are trying to lead them, you would have to be on the spot. Mauritius is a very wretched country in a pitiable state; lamentably there are not half a dozen white homes with even a little religion. Things are much better in Bourbon, where there is a good nucleus. Nevertheless, Fr. Superior, I am at work from nine in the morning to ten at night, teaching the catechism to these poor abandoned folk and hearing their confessions. I have already baptised about sixty, blessed the marriages of a large number and given First Communion to about forty—these are fairly good, which is a consolation: I have to do everything myself; no one is willing to give a helping hand, quite the contrary.

The corruption and riotous immorality are unbelievable; the demon of impurity is causing appalling havoc among these poor abandoned folk, the whites being the cause of it all: it's frightful. Thus far the priests have had nothing to do with the poor abandoned people, almost as if they were animals and, yet, great good could be done among them. If the priests had done for the blacks what they had done for the whites, they would have had better results for their work, but it is not souls that they seek here; it's money and things still worse.

Priests have given unimaginable scandal here, and at the present time four are suspended without mentioning others who exercise the ministry in spite of the bishop. That, Fr. Superior, is the wound, the deep wound, in this poor and unfortunate island of Mauritius. When I shall have the happiness of seeing our beloved brother Fr. Le Vavasseur, we shall give you a more detailed account.

Pray in the novitiate in La Neuville for one of your poor brothers, pray also for these poor dear blacks, who, if they are black, are good at heart; with instruction they can be made good, strong Christians. I renew into your hands the promise of obedience and poverty made by the poor priests of the Holy Heart of Mary. Let us follow the divine Master and his most holy Mother"

Why, Fr. Laval asks in another letter, was everyone, white and black, against him at the outset? "Because" he answers, "of the scandals of every kind given by the priests who had been here before us; what scandal a bad priest gives, my dear brother, what time it takes to have his scandals and misconduct forgotten; there have been so many bad priests in poor Mauritius that the wonder is that a shred of faith still remains."

Bishop Collier would struggle unremittingly to rid the island of undesirable priests and to recruit a better, more reliable type to replace them. In the penury of the early years he called on Fr. Laval for duties beyond his essential assignment which was to the blacks: as prison chaplain, to give religious instruction to boys and girls in boarding schools, for ordinary ministry as parish curate.

These tasks did not bring him into any close association with the clergy of the island. He was a solitary, shunned somewhat by all save those who absorbed him entirely. He identified with them. For living accommodation he had a wooden hut on a patch of ground adjoining the presbytery; it was in two sections, a small bedroom with a coffin-shaped bed, which had been hammered together by the carpenter from Fr. Laval's trunk, on which he placed a grass mat, and another room, which he called his catechism room, which some called a chapel. The furniture in this one was benches and the walls were adorned with holy images.

This humble residence became a magnet for the poor blacks. The constant visits meant an incessant movement through the presbytery yard. To avoid this and spare inconvenience to the priests Fr. Laval had an opening made in the wall next to the street. Persons and ideas then moved freely.

For the first time in the history of the island the blacks had a European who had time for them. They came and talked to him about their worries but he talked to them about God. Gradually his words began to have their effect. The religious awakening among the blacks did not occur at once and there were many difficulties ahead. But Fr. Laval worked hard and he had found the right method. He studied the idiom of his people; he had set out to acquire their language from his first days among them; he would also master the subtleties through which their ideas were expressed. For their instruction he then composed a catechism, a text on which he spent much time and care.

Though the shades of meaning are missed in translation some examples of question and answer will interest the reader:

Must all bishops, priests, Christians obey the Pope? Yes, he is their leader.

The Pope, bishops, priests, all Christians then form one great troop on earth? Yes (for troop he used the word *bande* which had a special meaning for the blacks: the connotation was unity of work).

Is the whole troop of Christians called the Church on earth? No, part of this troop is in heaven, part of it in purgatory and part of it on earth.

My child, you have often seen a priest say Mass, is that not so? Yes, father.

Then you have seen the priest eating and drinking something at the end of Mass? Yes, father.

Well now, what does the priest drink and eat at the end of Mass? The priest drinks and eats our Lord Jesus Christ.

How is it that what the priest eats and drinks at the end of Mass is Jesus Christ? Doesn't it resemble bread and wine? It resembles bread and wine, but it is no longer bread and wine, it is our Lord Jesus Christ.

What was it before Mass? It was a little bread and a little wine.

But how could a little bread and a little wine become our Lord Jesus Christ? By the will and infinite might of God.

In whose hands does God make bread and wine become our Lord Jesus Christ? In the priest's hands.

How is that? In the middle of the Mass the priest takes a little piece of white bread in his fingers and says over this bread a word which our Lord Jesus Christ gave; as he says that word God makes the bread which he holds in his fingers become our Lord Jesus Christ; at once after the bread has become our Lord Jesus Christ, he goes on his knees, adores Jesus Christ and raises him into the air; the bell is rung and all lower their heads to adore our Lord Jesus Christ. Afterwards the priest takes the chalice, in which he has put a little wine, in his hands and he says over the wine a word which our Lord Jesus Christ gave; as he says that word, God makes the wine in the chalice become Jesus Christ; at once the priest goes on his knees to adore Jesus Christ, he raises the chalice in the air, the bell is rung and all lower their heads to adore Jesus Christ too.

But who showed priests how to do that? Our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

How was that? On the eve of his death, on Holy Thursday evening our Lord Jesus Christ being at supper with his Apostles, when supper was ending took in his hands a piece of bread and then spoke a word over that bread; as soon as he had said this word this bread which he held in his hands became himself: his body, his blood, his soul and his divinity, himself entirely; it resembled bread still, but it was no longer bread, it was Jesus Christ himself. Then he gave Communion to his Apostles. Next he took a glass in which there was some wine; he spoke a word over that wine; as soon as he had said this word, the wine which was in the glass became his blood, his body, himself entirely as the bread. Wine was still seen, but it was no longer wine, it was our Lord Jesus Christ. Then he said: "Drink all of you." When they had finished drinking he said to them: "you will do what you have seen me do until the end of the world." Since then, priests do at Mass what Jesus Christ showed them.

What are the bread and wine which have become

Jesus Christ called? They are called the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Thus the Sacrament of the Eucharist is Our Lord Jesus Christ resembling bread and wine? Yes.

When a priest has made a piece of bread become Jesus Christ does it always remain our Lord Jesus Christ? Yes.

What is a piece of bread which has become Jesus Christ called? A consecrated host, the Sacred Host.

When the consecrated host is broken in two is Jesus Christ broken? No.

But when it is broken in ten, a hundred pieces, which piece is Jesus Christ? Each piece is Jesus Christ.

Where are consecrated hosts put? In the ciborium.

Where is the ciborium put? In the tabernacle.

Where is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ now? It is in heaven and in all the tabernacles where it has been put.

Why does Jesus Christ remain in the tabernacle like a little bread? Because he loves us, because he wishes to be the food of our souls and to remain always with us.

Should we come often to the church to pray to him and adore him? Yes, as many times as we can."

(iv)

It may be thought that Fr. Laval was catechising children, since we associate the catechism with childhood. On the contrary, his first disciples were all adults. They were emancipated slaves living, for the most part, in concubinage; some were caught in a fatal cycle of drunkenness and debauchery, others in subservience to the sexual whim of a white settler. Baptism and marriage were the Sacraments which Fr. Laval offered to these socially depressed citizens of Mauritius. He watched carefully the progress they made in the practice of Christian virtue before admitting them to Holy Communion. : "I baptise and marry them" he wrote "at the same time, and, afterwards, if I see that they persevere for some time, I have

them make their First Communion . . . . I have baptised about sixty of these poor people; some go forward fairly well; others misled by bad advice left us after having learned the truth. I have had the happiness of having about forty of them for First Communion." With time he became stricter in regard to First Communion. "It seems to me that we have to use every means possible to ensure perseverance and that it is better to have three or four hundred good Christians than to give First Communion far and wide and to see deserters." With the highest ideals the good priest found himself immersed in a situation where canonical irregularity in marriage was the normal practice. He sought his way out with all the wisdom and all the love at his command.

It was love that, time and again, proved the solution. Fr. Laval had a way with him. He could be exacting in his demands but for persons he had a tenderness, a delicacy, a respect which could not but win those who had never known such things.

Love with its endless capacity for adaptation, its own modes of discernment. Fr. Laval, at the baptism of young children, would meet for the first time the god-parents, who might be themselves parents, but unmarried. He would talk to them kindly, affectionately. As a result the god-mother would often bring her own child for baptism and god-father and god-mother would come to sit on the benches in the priest's office to receive instruction.

The converts did not realise that behind the affection lavished on them, by which they were won, was the life of priestly prayer. Laval was still the contemplative in action which he had been in Pinterville. A letter to Libermann in 1844 gives us insight into the apostolic labours of the man and the life of asceticism which inspired and sustained it:

> "Here, Fr. Superior, is the fruit of three years, two hundred and fifty people instructed and baptised, Malgaches and Mozambicans; some 350 marriages, créoles as well as Malgaches and Mozambicans; about 320 First Communions; few of them young, mostly old people; all have persevered save some young girls and

young men who had to be turned away from the Sacraments, about 18 or 20. I am very exacting for Baptism and marriage, and especially for First Communion, not for instruction so much as for conduct . . . . I don't know if my way of acting is right; these good people have great confidence in their poor father; they do nothing, either in temporal or in spiritual matters without consultation and are very docile in following what they have been told. Besides, minds are turning back very much to religion even among the whites; perhaps Mary will have pity on us.

Here, Father Superior, is my little daily regulation: rising at 5 o'clock in the morning, visit to the jail for morning prayer with men and women prisoners; at a quarter to six I go to the church for a half hour meditation followed by half an hour preparation for Holy Mass, which is at seven o'clock followed by half an hour thanksgiving. In the confessional until between half nine and ten; at half ten recital of Little Hours, a little Scripture reading; a quarter of an hour for lunch and then the remainder of the day is taken up with hearing confessions, marrying, baptising, visiting the sick; at four o'clock in the confessional, at five visit to the jail for evening prayer with men and women; in the confessional from half past five o'clock until seven; at seven the Rosary and instruction begin; at eight the main prayer followed by some hymns. Some people who do not know their prayers or their mysteries of religion or Sacraments remain and instruction continues until nine in the evening; at the stroke of nine I shut the church door: then a little prayer, a little supper, to bed and on to five next morning, to begin the same round.

On Sunday here is what I do: at seven in the morning I go to the jails to have prayer with the women and the men and give a few words of instruction; I return at half eight, say my Office, then after High Mass I begin hearing the confessions of blacks, at midday Holy Mass attended by five or six hundred blacks; instruction for one hour, sometimes three quarters of an hour; when Mass is over some decades

of the Rosary and a little instruction, which ends about three o'clock. I go to take a little food, visit the jails for evening prayers. Vespers are over at five; in the confessional until seven; recital of the Rosary and evening prayer for the blacks who could not come to Vespers. That, Fr. Superior, is my way of life for the last three years; sometimes a little tired but hobbling along none the less.

I hope that Mary will have pity on her poor missionary and that soon she will send him one or two colleagues. If we had three missionaries in Mauritius we could do some good; with only one it is too tiring and exhausting; I do not know Fr. Superior if you will approve my way of life.

I say this to you as my kind father. It is Mary my good Mother who supports me, who consoles me, in all my troubles, my discouragements, at times my anxieties and my moments of disgust. Pray, dear brother, that I may not dishonour the title of missionary of the holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary. Rather death a thousand times. The bishop must have acquainted you with the state of Mauritius; I see only two places where we could open missions, that is Port-Louis and Pamplemousses; only there could missionaries do some good."

The next year Laval again wrote to his superior regretting that he had no collaborators;

" My very dear Father, the work of God and of the most holy Virgin is still going slowly in the poor country of Mauritius, and that for want of workers to work the land; nevertheless we make some gains from day to day. At the present time in the whole country of Mauritius, where there were not twenty blacks who practised our holy religion, there are about 3,000 practising. Of these 3,000, 900 have been married in the church, are living well together; there are 800 who for the great feasts of the year come to Holy Communion; the remainder are not yet sufficiently instructed. That is the result of four years, very little; none the less this little nucleus has caused a great fermentation of the whole mass and a

truly great movement towards religion; every day I am approached by some good blacks, some créoles asking for instruction so as to be married in the Church and then come to the Sacraments, some Malgaches or Mozambicans seeking to know the prayers and mysteries of our holy religion so as to receive Baptism and Marriage and to have the happiness of receiving the good Lord and saving their poor souls; but what can one do all alone, all alone, to sustain this good movement.

In the midst of all that, my very dear father, there is much misery, many weeds; oh! from afar how fine the holy missionary state appears, but on the spot one meets much harm, many troubles, many repugnances, many anxieties; but thanks to the infinite mercy of Our Lord no discouragement so far, tired enough, exhausted in the evening, but next morning one sings with good Father Blampin, 'Let us go forward with a good heart and with courage, Here below we must work and suffer, but in heaven there will be rest and happiness,' or something like that."

Fr. Laval spoke of the annoyance he had to endure in the course of his ministry. The most active cause of this annoyance was the section of the white population who, through the success of the priest's ministry among the blacks, were deprived of a whole way of life. This way of life included mistresses at will for the young whites and, for those married, a supply of concubines. The practice was established and had gone unchallenged hitherto. Fr. Laval's converts refused to comply. Thereon storms of rage and resentment broke out. " The whites detest him " wrote an eye-witness " he is the big black beast; he speaks the hardest truths to them; he has taken the negresses from them; they complain that there are no more women to be found ".

The dispossessed did not give up without a struggle. Young people forced their way into the church, trying to disturb the ceremonies. Laval faced them with a withering attack; " Get out impurity " he shouted from the pulpit " I do not go looking for your women at the shows, at the theatre . . . leave me alone in my own house. The coal-

heaver is master in his hut; will the priest not be so in the house of God?"

Things worsened so much that in January 1842 the disturbance was reported in the press and Bishop Collier had to call in the police. Two officers were assigned to protect Fr. Laval, to hold themselves ready to take action should the evening service be interrupted. There followed a short respite. Then things became still worse. Intimidation was followed by violence. Maddened, aggressive young men came to the church shouting that they would have an end of the big black beast. He stood firm. Had he shown any weakness, it has been said by a competent judge, he would not only have lost the day, but been forced to leave Mauritius. On one occasion he faced a rich landowner who was moving past row after row of the women in the church obviously looking for someone he knew. The priest took him by the arm and marched him to the door with the words; "The one you are looking for is not here." He did not flinch.

Character is destiny and courage is creative. Not all the whites were pleasure-seekers. Decent folk among them recognised the immense good accomplished by the missionary to the blacks. Voices were raised in his defence. He stirred admiration and with the passage of time a deeper response, veneration turning minds to God.

Fr. Laval's influence reached the whites in an unexpected way. The domestic staff in their homes were blacks who came to his catechism lessons. They reported what they had heard and their improved behaviour spoke still more clearly of the good effect the priest's teaching had on them. Years later a nun gave a characteristic example of this direct, gentle apostolate: "The pious exhortations and advice of Fr. Laval were brought back to my family by a servant who used to attend his catechetical instruction. It was thus that religion and piety, little by little, found their way into the heart of the family and that we were definitely converted."

The black servants formerly sang bawdy songs as they rocked the babies to sleep; to amuse the children they would tell them tales of witches. Now it was hymns they sang

and as the children slept they said the Rosary which Fr. Laval had taught them. If their masters or mistresses fell ill and were in danger of death, they would look for the opportunity to introduce a priest to the home. They did, on occasion, intervene more directly, asking their employers why they did not go to Mass; at times this prompted reflection and a change of conduct.

There were more drastic conversions. A case was narrated at the canonical inquiry into Fr. Laval's life with a view to his Beatification which showed a high degree of courage. A half-caste Mauritian girl who was a white man's concubine came to him one day to tell him Fr. Laval had forbidden her to continue this relationship; they were devoted to each other which made the decision a hard one. They decided to part and kept their resolve.

Much as Fr. Laval might have wished to evangelise the whites directly, his choice had been made in favour of the blacks and in their service his whole life was spent. Providence saw to the apostolate of the whites. In 1845 a Belgian priest, Fr. Masuy arrived in Mauritius to undertake this work. Indirectly Fr. Laval had prepared the way for him and he rejoiced at the spiritual success which crowned the labours of his brother priest. They were close friends. We shall meet Masuy at Laval's death-bed.

CHAPTER III

Structures

(i)

Jacques Désiré Laval loved the poor, the destitute, the underprivileged. They are found everywhere but in his time as to-day they were especially numerous in what we call the Third World countries. He had an automatic means of winning their sympathy as he was a doctor. We have seen the success of medical missionaries in our time, the spectacular individuals like Albert Schweitzer, whole religious societies bearing the name.

This approach Jacques Laval never used. It became known that he had practised medicine but the only reference we find to the fact is in the malicious rumour spread about him by his enemies, the whites deprived suddenly by his ministry of sexual plunder. "This onetime doctor was married but he killed his wife by poisoning her; it was to expiate his crime that he became a priest and lives such a mortified life." Every man of singular worth and creative power has had such things to endure. The human condition at its worst is boringly repetitive.

It was not Jacques Laval who drew attention to his medical qualification. In the light of contemporary insistence on the missionary as an agent of social betterment, of a certain modern extravagance in regard to welfare, development and public health policies as essential to the missionary programme, this silence is significant.

It is significant too and may be instructive in an age when church structures are so often questioned that this man free to choose a solitary existence craved the support which structures would provide. From the outset Fr. Laval had the trust and support of his bishop whose behaviour towards him did not change. Dr. Collier had told Libermann that if he were not a bishop he would enter the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. His intentions about its full existence as a community in his diocese appeared to those in charge ambiguous in the early years. But when the moment was right he did the right thing by them.

The Society itself survived a series of shocks. Libermann had been ordained priest on 18th September, 1841, four days after Laval had set foot on the soil of Mauritius. Even at that moment the convert Jew was not free of the cloud of suspicion. That very day the ordaining bishop, Dr. Mioland of Amiens, was assured by clerical visitors that the man he had priested was ambitious, fickle, without ability: a bad risk who had deceived him. Luckily a former spiritual director of Libermann's arrived on the scene. To the bishop's doleful remarks his reply was emphatic: "My Lord, this is the finest act in your whole life."

Soon after, Libermann opened his first house, the novitiate, at La Neuville near Amiens, in a small boarding school given him by the bishop. In the following year Le Vavasseur left La Neuville for his native Bourbon (now La Réunion as we have seen) and, a year later, the first group were ready for the African mainland. One of those chance encounters which in retrospect appear predestined opened the way. In December 1842 Libermann went to a shrine which had a special importance in his private life and in that of his institute, Our Lady of Victories in Paris, to seek the solution to a pressing problem: he had missionaries but nowhere to send them. Next day the famous Curé of Our Lady of Victories, Abbé Desgenettes, had another visitor: a bishop appointed to a vast African territory with no one to accompany him, the Irish-American Dr. Barron. The two men were brought together and, after the necessary discussions and other preliminaries, all was ready for the first missionary expedition to west Africa in modern times. It took place on 13th September, 1843. It quickly turned into a holocaust. Within a short time Libermann learned that six of the seven priests he had sent with Bishop Barron were dead and the seventh missing.

The founder kept his nerve. On one side he was besieged by ardent young men who volunteered to replace those lost; on the other he would know that his wisdom and judgment would be called in question. He did not waver: "I am profoundly convinced that I acted according to the will of God, that I should have failed his will essentially had I not accepted this mission."

(ii)

Did Libermann find the reports from Mauritius a counterweight to the tragic happenings on the African west coast? "Be patient" he wrote to Laval in 1845 "and pray that the divine goodness will send workers into your little corner of the vineyard. In the meantime submit yourself to the divine will. I think that my previous letter will have

informed you of the evils which have befallen us in Guinea. Pray for our dear brothers who have there sacrificed their lives for the glory of God. Five at least are dead through the sickness of this terribly unhealthy country and I have reason to believe the same about the sixth That is enough to discourage poor folk such as we are; but the divine goodness sustains us. We cannot resign ourselves to abandon upwards of fifteen million unfortunate souls. None of those in the novitiate was discouraged. On the contrary all of them asked to go to Guinea. I had to forbid any talk of it because this was interfering with appointments I had to make. It was a consolation for me in the intense sorrow which overwhelmed me. We are now going to undertake the mission to Guinea following another plan as you can see in the copy of the letter I am sending you. Pray that God may bless us in this great enterprise. I shall ask you to offer for our dead brothers the Masses prescribed by our rules . . . As we cannot send fathers to you and see that you are all alone, we have great compassion for you."

La Vavasseur in Bourbon was regional superior for the area which included Madagascar and Mauritius. He took a rigid line in judging Laval's isolation. He proposed to invite the Mauritian missionary to Bourbon on health grounds and thought that he should remain: "From what you yourself say about Bishop Collier" he wrote to Libermann "and from a letter his Vicar General has written me, it seems clear that we shall never be able to establish a community in Mauritius. Either then Fr. Laval must come back here or he must cease to be a missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary. Now he hopes that you will not abandon him in this way. They cannot be dissatisfied in Rome. Fr. Laval has begun the mission to the blacks in Mauritius; anyone at all zealous can maintain it at the point to which it has now been brought; he is exhausted with fatigue . . . It is absolutely necessary that we get him to come here at present or we shall be sinning, consenting to let the poor priest end by killing himself. When he shall have passed five or six months here we shall see."

Bishop Collier had been out of the country when this letter was written from Bourbon to La Neuville. When he

returned Fr. Laval told him explicitly: "I cannot remain alone; it is forbidden by my Rules and the work is too tiring." Collier then faced a dilemma. Either he must lose Laval or risk government displeasure. At the moment of crisis the Government was represented by a bigot, who planned to spread Protestantism through the black population by means of Methodist schools. Sir W. Gomm stiffened his hostility when Bishop Collier stated publicly that he was no mere government servant but a bishop directly subject to the Holy See: in proof of which he appointed to a preaching post a former missionary to Pondichery, Abbé Dumas.

A dramatic episode would soon give the bishop his opportunity to save Laval for his diocese. But first we should hear Le Vavasseur on Laval as he saw him at work.

The Mauritian missionary had spent, with the Governor's permission, a month in Bourbon, a month devoted to prayer and reflection. He persuaded Le Vavasseur to return the visit, now that the bishop was determined to bring in French priests; his religious superior could discuss the possibility of a community on the island. To this visit we owe important testimony on the early missionary success of Laval: "All that I could say to you about Fr. Laval's mission would be still beneath the reality . . . I intended to spend only a month but as Lent came I determined to stay to comfort him during the work of Lent. I could not without cruelty or inhumanity leave him alone during Lent; he would have died . . . It is absolutely impossible for me to leave him much longer on his own in Mauritius. I found his health considerably weakened; it is still clear that God sustains him in a supernatural way. But should we count on that to abandon him? I do not believe it. As soon as I get back to Bourbon I shall send Fr. Collin to Mauritius."

(iii)

While Collin was in the island the strange event occurred which enabled Bishop Collier to set up a community of missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary. A recently arrived

Belgian priest, Fr. Eggermont, had been called to a dying black woman, a former slave; he gave her the last rites of the Church. When, some hours later, she died he was called back and asked to bless her body. She was pregnant. With her husband's consent and the help of some friends of the dead woman the priest performed a Caesarean operation, delivered her of a live baby whom he baptised.

Gomm seized on the incident as highly reprehensible and, so he alleged, shocking to many in the colony. He asked the bishop to expel the missionary and, when Collier refused to do so, had it done by the police. Public controversy then erupted and the Catholics took advantage of it to stigmatise government discrimination against them. An article in the *Cernéen*, a Mauritian newspaper, stated among other things: " Meanwhile the zeal of the Catholic clergy has displeased the government; the gradual moral improvement of the lower classes of our island which impresses everyone, so far from satisfying, does but irritate them, because it is not due to the preaching of their ministers . . ."

The Irish and English priests in Mauritius met and signed a declaration as follows: " We bear witness to the exemplary character of the few foreign priests serving on this mission and to the happy effects which result from the peaceful accomplishment of their duties as Christian ministers, particularly in improving the social and moral condition of the humblest classes."

The campaign took on large dimensions. Bishop Collier sent a memorandum to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and he urged English Catholic papers to publish the correspondence which had passed between himself and the Governor. Press cuttings from the Mauritian papers *Mauricien* and *Cernéen* were sent by militant Catholics to French Catholic papers and to those in India. The title " Alien " was being used as " one of proscription just because a nasty political decision had been taken to get rid of an individual."

For a while all this activity yielded little result. Gomm's policy to eliminate all priests who were not in some way British subjects was apparently being favoured by the

accidents of life. In 1846, the year of the crisis, there were but four foreign priests on the island: Laval, Masuy, Dumas and Collin. Dumas contracted fever and died; Masuy, the Belgian, apostle of the whites, a talented preacher, was overwhelmed by melancholy after the deportation of his fellow-countryman and friend, Eggermont and, in his depressed condition, could not face the demands of the priestly ministry. Collin fell ill and withdrew to Bourbon.

Laval was isolated. As a letter written in the following year reveals, he did not just then trust the bishop's nerve: "Bishop Collier is still too fearful before the government for they are putting spokes in the wheels as much as they can to impede the sacred ministry; at times this good bishop is fully resolute, but a minute later he changes completely, is timid to the point of excess, anxious about the least difficulties: a holy bishop but too timid, too fearful."

Gomm then must have thought that things were going better than he could have wished. The coping stone on his policy of discrimination and bigotry was to be an official order from London. It was expected from W. E. Gladstone, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who had been informed by the governor that Bishop Collier intended to bring to the colony priests who would be independent of the government. It was urgent to forbid access to Mauritius to these people, troublemakers hostile to England.

Gladstone was not to make the decision for the government, in which he served, fell that year. Lord Grey was Secretary of State for the Colonies in Lord Russell's Liberal government which then took office. He studied Bishop Collier's memorandum on the Eggermont affair; he consulted experts in Catholic ethics and church law. He dealt a resounding rebuff thereon to her Majesty's representative in Mauritius. Fr. Eggermont, he found, had acted in full conformity with the principles of Roman Catholic church law. "Fr. Eggermont" he decreed "must be reinstated in his office as Parish Priest of Moka. The

costs of his journey home and back must be covered by the governor."

Collier acted at once. He asked Le Vavasseur to send two priests to work with Fr. Laval. Le Vavasseur could not conjure them out of thin air. He sent Fr. Lambert from Bourbon in December of that year. Two others were soon made available by a missionary expedition to Australia which had collapsed. Libermann had, in 1845, undertaken a mission to this area in reply to a request from Bishop Brady of Perth, who had been named Administrator of Southern Australia. His missionaries, after a four month journey by sea and a 250 mile trek on foot to the territory assigned to them, reached a desert. After misunderstandings the two surviving French priests left Australia—the third had died on landing. Father Thévaux reached Mauritius in October 1847 and Fr. Thiersé followed him in September of the following year. For each Mauritius was a happy ending to an ordeal of bare survival.

Gomm did not desist from his anti-French policy. It all appears strange to us, but the island was an important strategic point on the map of the seven seas. The seizure by the British was a recent painful memory for the French population and, with Anglo-French rivalry still active, everyone French was suspect. So the governor sent dispatches warning the authorities in London of wicked schemes afoot among the French on the island: the ultimate purpose of these missionaries was to turn the native population against the English crown.

Grey was true to his liberal principles. Missionaries, he instructed Gomm, were not to be expelled from a Catholic country because they were foreigners; hostility to the British government must be proved; as long as their conduct was irreproachable and they obeyed police regulations they must be allowed to remain in Mauritius.

(iv)

The missionaries did not know that they had a protector in Liberal high places. Thinking that at any time their residence permits might be withdrawn Fr. Laval cast

around for some assurance that his work would continue. We find him writing to Libermann in 1847: "We must have English subjects as missionaries. Bishop Collier has often spoken to me of the following project: several Irish subjects could be brought from Fr. Hand's house in Ireland; they could be trained in our rules, made associates of the Congregation and then sent to Mauritius. Then the government could say nothing; these people would do whatever they wished in the country. But while we remain French and foreigners of any kind we shall be constantly worried and never free. If then, Fr. Superior, you could have some Irishmen from Fr. Hand's house, you would guarantee the mission to Mauritius—one of the finest under the sun, for the good to be done here is great and it is easy; have pity on my poor Mauritian children who pray much for you; one day you will find a large number of them in heaven and it is there they will thank you throughout eternity."

The letter was written on 18th October, 1847. Fr. Laval did not know that Fr. Hand had died on 20th May the previous year at the age of thirty-eight. He had completed the foundation of All Hallows College, a seminary to train priests for the Irish diaspora. Nor did Laval know that Fr. Hand and Libermann had known each other. When the Irishman was studying in Europe different models of the kind of seminary he would found, he visited Paris, where he saw the seminaries of the French Foreign Missionary Society and of the Holy Ghost Congregation. He then went on to Rome and on the return journey through France went to see Libermann at La Neuville. That was in January, 1842. The two founders liked each other, for six months later Libermann wrote to Hand a letter which reveals personal sentiments and conveyed a practical proposal: "I am very glad to have an opportunity of strengthening the union which Our Lord seems to wish to establish between us. We have just had news from Mauritius . . . As things are uncertain, I would like to have one or two English or Irish priests who are willing to be associated with our little society for the negroes. I would keep them here for long enough to form them in the

spirit of our work and I would send them to join the one already in the island who is a saint (you possibly know him, Fr. Laval) . . . If you reflect on things you will see that the work of the poor blacks is of the greatest importance for your colonies . . . If you have a society of priests devoted to the blacks, serving as helpers alongside the parish clergy in the colonies they will be of real service to these priests, keeping them fervent and courageous, especially by using certain means to achieve this end. I can let you know another time the means we shall try to use to this end. Experience will improve them and with God's help there will be a double gain to these destitute countries: by our working effectively for the salvation of souls who otherwise would certainly be lost and supporting the clergy by keeping them faithful to their duties."

Fr. Laval did not know in 1847 that he had in many ways achieved the programme outlined by Libermann to Fr. Hand five years previously. With Fr. Hand's death the project of cooperation between All Hallows and the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary lapsed; nothing came either of Libermann's approach to Wiseman, archbishop of Westminster, with a view to overcoming the obstacle of French nationality. The suggestion this time was that Wiseman should try to use his good offices with the government to obtain British nationalisation of French missionaries working in Mauritius: they would become British citizens by deed poll. The government rejected Wiseman's request.

(v)

In the atmosphere of insecurity the new society took root in the island. Community life, an essential element in Libermann's missionary rule, was made possible. Fr. Le Vavasseur, as regional superior appointed Fr. Laval superior in Mauritius; he could scarcely have done otherwise.

The apostle of Mauritius never conformed to the pattern of the religious life admired in his time. We find Libermann, who, as we have seen, thought him a saint,

writing to him that the Mauritius community was the one which gave them in France, that is Libermann himself principally, the greatest satisfaction—with one reservation: they lacked regularity. Some of the letters written by Laval's associates in the missionary work complain of the unsatisfactory state of affairs: Fr. Thévaux thought that they had "none of the advantages of community life." Fr. Thiersé saw things more lucidly: "As for the regulation, it is not possible to observe it here, things being as they are; we have nothing in common save meals, particular examination of conscience and evening prayer. The remainder of the regulation is made up of the confessional, visits to the sick, catechism lessons, marriages and Baptisms. From four in the morning until ten at night there is not a moment's rest . . . Everything suffers here, the rule and everything, but, on the other hand, the good that is being done is immense."

These were instant spontaneous reactions of men formed to a set of rules drawn up in Europe, remote from the contact with life which would have prompted some flexibility. It has been judged that if all the prescribed common exercises were accomplished they would take up five hours each day, apart from meals. The Congregation was feeling its way and experience would dictate the necessary adjustments.

This would be so while Libermann lived, for he could combine suppleness in decision making with lofty idealism. He and Laval were one in the basic intuition which gave meaning to their whole lifework: the apostolic life in its plenary sense had primacy over all else; it was the goal, the religious life was a means. But Libermann would be gravely misunderstood were his concept of the apostolate taken as "good works". For him it was "the life of love and holiness which the Son of God led on earth, through which he sacrificed himself continually to the glory of his Father for the salvation of the world." We shall meet the subject again.

To this life of identification with the redeeming Christ Laval had come and to this he sought to lead his fellow missionaries. They became so involved in the very

apostolate of which he was the driving force that they too became apostles in the manner of Christ. Le Vavasseur, their provincial superior, came on an official visit to them and was realist enough to accept the facts. He admitted in a letter to Libermann that he was terrified by the work load they were carrying. They were forced by their missionary work to live a life almost " continually irregular "; yet he could not in conscience interfere with an apostolate so " prodigiously blessed ".

Such things must be remembered when Fr. Laval's he describes his activity as superior:

letters to Libermann are read, those in particular wherein

" As for Fr. Laval " he writes " he has served his time, he should be retired, he is flying on one wing only, he is almost finished, can only spoil God's work; so he unloads things on his two brother missionaries as much as possible so that the account he will have to give will not be too heavy.

Otherwise, Fr. Superior, we live here in peace and in perfect union in the sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, we love one another as children of Jesus and Mary; the only thing needed is a superior. Fr. Le Vavasseur appointed me but the choice was not a good one for these reasons: first, because I have not been trained in community life; second, because I do not know the rule; third, because I am not a faithful and exact observer of the rule, not having practised it in the novitiate; fourth, because I do not feel that I have sufficient strength of character, I would prefer a thousand times to obey than to command; fifth, because I find this office very dangerous in case the number of missionaries happens to increase; it seems to me that another would be far better in my place; may the most holy will of God be done.

Fr. Thévaux has undertaken to give you some details about the mission and the good there is to be done; conditions are very good and good missionaries would do a great deal of good . . .

I shall not speak to you of my poor soul, which is very tired and cowardly, scarcely thinks of the dear Lord,

scarcely loves our Lord Jesus, is not tender and loving towards his very kind Mother. Oh where are those delightful times when one's heart beat constantly for God, when one lived only for Jesus and Mary; occasionally, Fr. Superior, I long for those times when first we ate fresh white bread, whereas now all we get is rough whole-meal bread; it's annoyance, it's infidelity to grace which has led us to such a state, it's very hard, but may the most holy will of God be done; if only we don't fall into hell, all we ask is the lowest place in Purgatory, and we'll be happy. To sacrifice one's self-interest for God is nothing, but one's interior life! There is the most painful sacrifice.

Fr. Superior, you who are at the source, Oh ask just a little for your poor child, that he may remain a faithful missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary, that he may die in the holy love of Jesus and Mary, that he may not be separated forever from his dear brethren.".

(vii)

Here is expressed the dilemma of the contemplative immersed in apostolic activity. There is for us a language problem, for ordinary words and phrases cannot convey the intimate subtleties of grace. The letter went to a man whose intuition would discern the message, a man who lived a like reality. He and Laval met on the level of experience. Libermann had an authentic mystical gift; he was by natural bent a contemplative. The active life exhausted him and went constantly against the grain. "There is not a fibre in my body" he once wrote, "not a movement of my soul which does not impel me to solitude."

When Laval, in his turn, speaks of his impoverished spirit, in a moment when he was consumed in fruitful activity for souls, he is really trying to depict the ultimate act of generosity, the final point in self-surrender. He has parted with his programme for personal holiness so that he may be totally at the service of souls. As God's elect enter more profoundly into the divine mystery the paradoxes

deepen. This very thirst for souls is in itself deeply sanctifying. Here the priest achieves identity with Christ; Christ truly lives in him, works his own essential work, the salvation of souls.

Laval was a Christlike respecter of persons. Such an attitude influenced his conduct as a religious superior. Therein Le Vavasseur, who did not have a similar outlook, misjudged him. "He does not control things sufficiently, does not command sufficiently and leaves each one to his own will . . . As I said to the brethren, it's for them to have enough virtue and love of God themselves to oblige Fr. Laval to be a superior."

One of those under his authority was more discerning: "I am always satisfied to work under Fr. Laval's guidance. He is really a kind father, entirely attentive, full of charity and goodwill to the missionaries who are lucky to work under his authority. He is full of indulgence for my defects and misery and leads me with quite fatherly tenderness. . . . He is truly a kind father to his missionaries as he is to the countless children whom he has brought forth, whom he brings forth daily to Jesus Christ." Another judgment on him was: "He has the gift of getting you where he wants you through suggestion and sweetness." "He could not," said Fr. Masuy, "use the imperative mood." Rules and regulations for their own sake did not fit his direct, practical thinking; a certain magnanimity led him to speak of "fiddle-faddles."

Fr. Laval shrank from interference, above all dictation, for he seems always to have considered himself a convert, one rescued by God's grace from religious apathy and indifference.

Essentially a man who radiated peace he was anything but a kill-joy. His brethren recalled especially his happy laughter on amusing occasions. Thus in his last years he used to request a special performance from one of the cathedral curates who excelled in mimicking the cock-crow, and he laughed like a child.

Pleasant repartee also was not beyond him. With those whom he wished to lead to higher things he had a delicate touch. A friend of his, an old soldier, non-practising, loved

pictures, painted a little and took a pride in restoring damaged or faded paintings. So occupied on pictures for the church of St. Croix he was watched by Fr. Laval, who confided in him: "Like you I am a lover of pictures and something of an artist; and I am going to clean an old picture to prove it to you." Surprised, the old soldier replied: "Oh, how curious I should be to see your work." Same days later he came back to the subject: "Well, then, show me your picture." "Wait," was the reply, "I am not as hurried as you; I need a little time." After many such questions the priest confessed: "My friend, the picture I want to clean is yourself, your soul. I must do some brushwork on it, and at once if you wish."

The fabric on which the missionary worked day by day was God's grace in souls, to which the free response of the individual was required. His mode of cooperation in the divine work of renewal was all gentleness, delicacy, respect, patience. He could be firm when the soul was already under the influence of grace and when Christian duty clearly marked the way. Then, too, he joined encouragement with firmness.

Laval's attitude to his subjects within the religious community of which he was superior was of a piece with his apostolic outlook. If, in their youthful self-confidence they misunderstood him, the loss was theirs. He thought too highly of them, respected them too much to intrude on a domain that was not his; the action of God's spirit within them. If he sinned here by self-effacement, there were far too many in his time and afterwards who failed otherwise, confusing the exercise of Christian authority with self-assertiveness, with mastery of others.

CHAPTER IV

Missionary Expansion

(i)

It would be easy to gather testimonies on Fr. Laval's success as a missionary from his own brethren, collaborators

and visitors. There is, however, abundant evidence from sources outside the religious institute to which he belonged. One document is quite remarkable: a memorandum presented in 1854 to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda describing the religious situation in the island. Extracts from this submission may be prefaced by an opinion expressed to the same Roman authority by Bishop Collier "I am happy to be able to announce to you that religion has made remarkable conquests since my departure (the bishop was writing in 1845 after a two-year absence in Europe). The blacks have notably benefited by the ministry of a zealous ecclesiastic, a true apostle who has dedicated himself to their instruction and salvation. I see with consolation that the church of Port-Louis is filled every evening with these onetime slaves who flock there most eagerly and behave there with edifying piety."

The Irish priest, Joseph O'Dwyer, author of the 1854 memorandum, does not show the bishop's reluctance to name Laval:

"I have never seen so complete a change in the conduct of such a large number of people as that which has taken place among the blacks. Under God the credit for this great work belongs to Fr. Laval, the man destined by God to work the conversion and the reform of this unfortunate people. These blacks, formerly so coarse, so sensual and so lazy have risen in a few years to the level of the best peasants found in Europe. Drunkenness has disappeared. Blasphemy is no longer heard. In the fields, in the workshops, in the houses, on the roads everywhere in place of the obscene songs of the slavery days, they sing the praise of God and of the Blessed Virgin. These people live happily in their little dwellings without ambition and without anxieties. Among them there are still some who have not returned to their religious duties. Never at least do we see brawls, riots or licentious scenes. Formerly men and women lived together without marrying, forming unions or separating as passion, whim or interest dictated. Since their conversion they all enter marriage. Scandalous homes don't exist save among those who have not taken up religion and of these the number declines daily.

The blacks never grow tired in church and they attend religious services willingly. In rural churches you see them waiting from Mass until Vespers without the least sign of impatience. It is sometimes necessary to send them back to their work; they would neglect it if the priest allowed them to remain all the time in church . . . They are very docile and are led by the missionaries whose word for them is law."

(ii)

Such was the state of affairs as Fr. Laval's ministry had its long term effect on the island of Mauritius. The system he had evolved, which would support the growing Christian community, was a combination of traditional elements and of his own invention. Mass and the Sacraments were essential Christianity as he preached it; the catechism, as we have seen, was the basis of his instruction. But by his own fervour he could give the basic liturgical rites a meaning and appeal which drew and held his black neophytes. He fixed the time of Mass in Port Louis first in the afternoon when the white employers were taking the siesta. But as numbers increased, he had to have two Masses, one at four thirty in the morning, the other at eleven thirty in the forenoon.

The numbers kept on increasing because of two decisions taken by Fr. Laval: the use of lay catechists and the network of little chapels which he dotted over the island of Mauritius. Each initiative came from his own insight. Each forestalled much that would be said and written about missionary method in the century ahead of him. To each he brought his own sensitive spirit, and his unflagging energy. To hit on ideas of this kind is one thing; to sustain the practical programme entailed day in day out is altogether different. Constancy was deeply part of him.

Fr. Laval was fortunate in his time and social situation. The very reversal of all known customs, ideas, behaviour patterns, assumptions and even instinctual reactions which was caused by the emancipation of the slaves gave him his opportunity. Men and women suddenly introduced to a

new world were ready for new values, ripe for spiritual education. True, a similar opportunity was given to the Church in other lands at the same time, without perhaps the peculiar gifts of the Mauritian negros, but with sufficient scope for great preachers of the Good News. Preachers in the mould of Jacques Desiré Laval were not available. Let us leave it at that. The Church has since had to count the cost, may have to do so for generations. When men enter a new world there is at times no limit to what they will accept and make part of their new existence.

So the catechists of whom we have heard so much in the twentieth century missionary phase, whose zeal has helped to transform whole regions like Southern Nigeria, were already quietly at work, pioneers of the Lay Apostolate, in the distant island of Mauritius a century earlier.

The names of the first catechists have been preserved in the religious history of the island. Their number would increase as the numbers of catechumens grew. In 1847 Laval thought of the little chapels which would serve as catechetical centres; ten were begun that year, in the neighbourhood of Port Louis; twenty were constructed by the end of the year and a year later this number was doubled. Sometimes the site or even the building, rudimentary as it may have been, was given by a pious individual, or by a married couple, but generally the interest and the effort of the community were dominant from the first moment: the community, if it need be stated, under the impulse and guidance of Fr. Laval. He seemed to multiply his presence, spending long hours still in the confessional and yet coming in at the right moment in construction work, checking the simple designs, altering them where necessary, determining the site and often stirring the generosity which would ease the financial burden.

Some of the chapels were modest structures, wooden stakes and a straw roof; elsewhere more durable wooden materials were used on a stone foundation. The smaller chapels could hold about 100; others more spacious would accommodate several hundreds, even a thousand. The larger chapels in time became permanent parish churches.

They embodied a phase of Christian life and of genuine self-sacrifice.

Of this generous spirit the most striking example perhaps is the voluntary work given for the Chapel of the Holy Heart of Mary, erected in successive phases on the spot where a bakehouse once stood, its final form fruit of a vast combined work-force. To bring the materials to the site a huge cart was hauled on the rope by women and children while men kept it on a steady course: the kind of labour which reminded the workers of the days as slaves, the kind of work nothing on earth, no one save Fr. Laval, would make them do.

His catechists gave their lessons faithfully, often coming to his own lesson once a week to draw still more knowledge, or leading their subjects to Port Louis to benefit by the priests' instruction. Some of these newly appointed teachers of religion were illiterate. Yet it was with them that the island of Mauritius was, under the watchful eye of the saintly priest, transformed, led to a point where their whole lives took meaning from the faith.

(iii)

Faith that issued in works of charity as well as exercises of piety. Mutual help was stimulated and channelled by the good father. He even thought of a subscription which was generously supported for the victims of the Irish Famine of 1847. Here as in so many other sectors, it was the poor who found giving easiest.

Giving on an organised scale. Already in 1846 a relief fund (*Caisse de Charité*) was set up by the newly converted Christians at Fr. Collin's suggestion. He could not remain on the island so the burden of running it fell on Fr. Laval. A treasurer with two assistants held the funds which were contributed at the Masses held for the blacks, at weddings and, spontaneously, by individuals here and there. As to distribution to deserving cases, men and women counsellors already working among the poor would, at a monthly meeting, describe the needs they had encoun-

tered which seemed most urgent. Women visiting the poor were particularly well informed in this matter.

Besides casual needs, the *Caisse de Charité* took permanent responsibility for certain deserving cases, lodgers old or infirm with no means of support. And there was discretion between the monthly meetings in regard to gifts deemed particularly urgent by the treasurer. The whole enterprise of charity was ruled by written statutes. That on Fr. Laval read as follows: "Father will maintain general supervision. He will take the greatest care to see that the treasurer and the men and women counsellors discharge their duties well. The cashbox will never be left in his hands. He will himself give no alms from the cashbox; he will always refer people to the men and women counsellors. On the first Sunday of the month he will give an account during Mass of what has been received and spent during the previous month."

So the apostolic energy of the missionary was spent in many directions. As numbers kept on growing he could station his colleagues in outlying districts, where the same methods would achieve the same success. As a result of all he did and directed it has been said that some 60,000 souls were eventually led into the Catholic Church.

Parallel with this mass Christian movement among the blacks, Bishop Collier could sustain his own administrative drive to equip the diocese with the necessary Christian institutions. He travelled to Dublin in 1844 and succeeded in obtaining a foundation of the Loreto Sisters on the island. They came in the following year and have worked in the educational field ever since. Later the De la Salle Brothers opened a school for boys. Schooling which was practically non-existent in the years before the bishop arrived, was now launched and would expand. Charitable bodies such as the Vincent de Paul Conference likewise engaged the bishop's attention. Diocesan organisation was improved, the clerical personnel increased. It was an age of renewal; a Christian community was moving ahead into times of promise, of happiness and, in places, of great fervour.

Accepting change

(i)

In point of heroic holiness Laval and Libermann were conspicuous among the first members of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. They had much in common and also differed very much. They were bound by deep, unshakable mutual trust. Fortunately so, for Libermann, three years before his death, took a decision affecting the very status and existence of his society, which some of its members found difficult to accept, Laval not least among them. He agreed to join forces with an older religious Congregation, to merge with it in such wise that his own society would face dissolution.

A young Breton nobleman had, in 1703, founded in Paris a seminary to educate priests who would be willing to undertake especially menial tasks. He was Claude Poullart des Places, a friend of St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort since their student days in the Jesuit College in Rennes. He died in 1709 at the age of 30. His work survived. It was given the status of a religious Congregation in the early eighteenth century and, what was important in a country where Church and State were enmeshed, civil, that is royal, guarantees and privileges. Eventually it was made responsible for the supply of priests in the French colonies. A symbol of its status among clerical institutions in the kingdom was a fine city house near the Latin Quarter, within sight of the Panthéon; Soufflot dignified this edifice by the church he designed for its inhabitants.

The Congregation of the Holy Ghost weathered the storms of the French Revolution. It never recovered the spirit of its early days and suffered loss of prestige by the misconduct, scandals even, associated with some of the priests it had sent to work in the colonies. We find Libermann mentioning this fact as early as 1842 in his letter to Fr. Hand. Laval, some eleven years after the union of the

two Congreations, will write that "the Holy Ghost Congregation was not exactly held in the odour of sanctity in the world at large." One reason for the bad reputation of priests working in the colonies under the Congregation's aegis was inexcusable. Diocesan bishops found it convenient to unload on this area their misfits and undesirables; the colonial clergy risked becoming an association of odd-fellows.

The Roman authorities saw in France a young fervent society which had now shown its value and an older spiritually impoverished institute which had canonical and legal status. Their work to a large extent coincided, even geographically. Would it not be better to unite them? The thought that such a demand would be made of him had crossed Libermann's mind in the early days of his own society: "The union of our two societies has always appeared to me within the order of God's will. They aim at doing the same work, follow the same line; it is not in the order of divine Providence to create two societies for a special work if one would suffice." Pressure did come from Rome on Libermann through the Nuncio in Paris. Instead of vague conjecture the matter then became one of practical negotiation. Did Libermann state any conditions which he would press? How did he view the matter in general? Did he consult his missionaries before committing himself and them?

He did not hold a consultation, for he thought that if the hour of decision was postponed, a valuable opportunity might be missed. The time seemed ripe in 1848 when the Congregation of the Holy Ghost chose as Superior Fr. Monnet, who had worked side by side with Le Vavasseur in Bourbon. This man judged accurately the difficulties facing his own Congregation and he thought that the union would benefit both. He had confidence in Libermann's integrity. He went to visit him and opened negociations, leaving detailed discussion to one of his abler colleagues.

Libermann did not fear for the essential direction of his society after the union, which has been customarily called a fusion. The purpose of the two congregations was prac-

tically identical. He would accept a change of title to the *Congregation of the Holy Ghost and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary,* for thus the new body would retain the legal privileges granted to the older institute. He would be satisfied with the short rule of the Holy Ghost Congregation with two added prescriptions on poverty and community life; in due course a more detailed set of Constitutions would be drawn up—here Libermann could incorporate the ideas and provisions of the *Règle Provisoire* of his own society.

Before the charter documents on the fusion were signed, Libermann was adamant on one condition; it was entirely spiritual: "The matter is well advanced and seems certain to be concluded" he wrote to Le Vavasseur. "I repeat to you that, even as things now are, I shall withdraw if I cannot have the certainty that after the fusion has taken place our congregation will preserve its fervour and its perfect regularity." One of those who knew him best said that he acted against his personal inclination and knowing quite well that he would face the brunt of any dissatisfaction and criticism. He was armed against such things by a deep conviction that Providence had guided the whole affair. All were agreed that he should be Superior General of the joint body. This was rendered easy by the appointment of Fr. Monnet, Superior of the Holy Ghost Congregation, as Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar.

Subsequent events would justify Libermann's decision. But not at once. The bishops on the west coast of Africa were sharply critical of the change; they feared that the areas hitherto supplied by the Holy Ghost Congregation would now claim priests whom they would otherwise have got. The bad odour surrounding the seminary was not dispelled overnight. When Le Vavasseur, now back in France, visited a number of French dioceses on a public relations tour he found little but antipathy to the house of clerical training. Those he met thought badly of it and they thought it beyond redemption.

(ii)

Out in the Indian Ocean Fr. Laval and his brother missionaries were victims of a considerable delay, if not breakdown, in communications. They were at the mercy of press reports and casual stories told by missionaries passing through Mauritius. The younger men, especially Frs. Thiersé and Thévaux, reacted vigorously when they were officially informed of the fusion. They were given to understand by some of their friends that their congregation had ceased to exist, that they had been absorbed into the older society. Even the change of name displeased them.

What of Laval? Years later he admitted to the Superior General who had succeeded Libermann, Fr. Ignatius Schwindenhammer, how deeply he had felt the break with his old allegiance: "You must know the great attachment that we older members had to the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. In truth its union with the Holy Ghost (Congregation) broke my heart because this Congregation was not held in the odour of sanctity in the world at large and it even happened that I complained of the fact by words which were imprudent or which, as it were, I let fall in spite of myself."

Fr. Laval had come to the religious life and the missionary vocation later in life than many of his brethren. He had given himself completely to the new society and it appeared to answer very fully by its form of dedication a spiritual aspiration deep within him: he had a profound, sensitive feeling for the Blessed Virgin Mary. He had not returned to France, as, even at that time, others did. This explains the impression of one forlorn which his letter gives. He was helped by his absorption in work and by his confidence in Libermann. We find him writing to Libermann on 14th January, 1850, in this vein: "May Our Lord restore your health and keep you for some time still with us, for we need you greatly. We await eagerly the rules of our new congregation. Here God keeps us in great union, peace and friendship." Five months later he wrote again asking for news of the new congregation; he

could say: "it seems to me that everyone is well disposed to join the congregation and not to separate from our good fathers and brothers." Not a frequent letter-writer he sent another missive in June of that year: "We are quite anxious to know how things are working out in France and to have our new rule." It had been forwarded from Paris towards the end of October, 1849 and did not reach Mauritius until some weeks after Fr. Laval's last letter, that is in July, 1850.

(iii)

Libermann died on 2nd February, 1852. It took months for word of the event to reach his missionaries in Mauritius. Laval's last letter to him was composed towards the end of April of that year and expressed acceptance of the institutional change. He repeated his conviction that he was personally unsuited to the office of superior because of his soft, undecided character and his ignorance of community spirt. But he could add; "I forgot a word on our community life: union and peace exist among us, as does charity, apart from a few little clouds which appear from time to time, but they are dispelled by the sun of justice —the fault is mine because of my undecided character; a firmer hand would prevent all that. The rule and community spirit are being maintained as much as is possible in the midst of incessant work; yet everyone is faithful to prayer, the Breviary, preparation for Holy Mass, particular examination of conscience—then it is work, and more work, the sick, confessions, especially the sick at home which takes a great deal of time; the rule suffers from it but what can we do? The fathers ask God in their prayers to keep you still with us; we can go, but you must stay, my dear father."

Some years later Laval showed something of the immense esteem he had for Libermann in a letter to the new Superior General: "What we would very much like to receive is the life of our good and venerated Fr. Libermann, to relive through the reading of it the holy virtues

we saw him practise, myself especially during the five years I had the happiness of spending with him in the seminary of St. Sulpice. As I shall read it, I shall hear him again, he who knew so well how to have Our Lord and his holy Mother loved; this we need greatly, myself in particular with my soul in ruins because of the work we do almost mechanically for these poor and ignorant souls. I need this reading to revive in my heart the holy love of Jesus and Mary. Do please send us some copies (of the life) for the missionaries; I hope they will reach us soon."

(iv)

The man to whom this letter was sent was an autocrat. Ignatius Schwindenhammer, chosen Superior General at the age of 34, an Alsacian, deeply religious, had been a professor of theology and novice master. Libermann asked on his deathbed to name his successor had preferred him to Le Vavasseur, at one time his choice for the succession.

The dying founder could not create another Libermann. Schwindenhammer was an administrator, a man in the mould that would dominate Catholic religious leadership for a century. In his first circular letter to the members of the Congregation he set forth clearly his ideas of "reform" for the members whom he compared to a "troop of soldiers disorganised, disbanded, physically and morally exhausted, decimated as after a murderous battle." His remedy: total submission to established authority, uniformity throughout the society, devotion of each one to the Congregation, primacy of the religious life over the apostolate, concentration of power in the hands of the Superior General.

It was all done with the best intentions. Future developments over the entire institute do not concern us here. For Fr. Laval and his colleagues in Mauritius painful problems would arise, particularly from Schwindenhammer's mistaken view that in the society religious observance held priority over the apostolate or missionary life.

Libermann's idea had been the contrary: the apostolate was the goal, religious life the means. In such a succinct

statement one risks distorting the founder's thought, for, as we have seen, the apostolate was identification with the very saving mission of Jesus Christ himself. The debate has a curious way of recurring in the history of his society. Laval did not know Schwindenhammer. He made his formal submission to the new Superior General without delay and without reservation:

> "As a member of the Congregation I give you my entire trust and absolute obedience. In obeying you I shall obey God; this consoles me." The missionary felt bound to deal with the problem of the rule: "Fervour is sustained in our little community despite the activity needed for our works; God's grace supplies what we lose by a life that is so active and so exterior; we long for a little withdrawal but helping the sick who constantly call on us prevents us from withdrawing."

In the following year Laval returned to the point—he was writing in reply to Schwindenhammer's letter which named him provincial of the missions in the Indian Ocean:

> "In the name of holy obedience you have imposed a great burden on me; you should also have given me the ability. Fr. Superior and very dear father, we wish as much as you to be able to lead the religious life and be exact in our rule and our little exercises; we feel that this is a necessity and, perhaps more than any members, that it is a need; we all long for a quieter life and we should be ready, if the salvation of souls were not seriously at issue, to enclose ourselves in our house at St. Croix, there to give ourselves to meditation and to a little study; but the sick and the poor souls keep on calling on our care. Nevertheless, to fall in line with your wishes we are going to give up part of our work to be more together and live a community life; we are for the moment leaving the mission of Grand Port, those of Flacq and Petite Rivière and we shall gather our resources at Port Louis and Pamplemousses where Fr. Thévaux is temporarily parish priest."

Fr. Laval kept his new Superior General informed on the dispositions of the bishop. The Frenchman admired

Bishop Collier's faith and piety; he still found him frightened of the government, hesitant where Frenchmen were in question, torn between this sentiment and a desire to entrust more pastoral work to the Holy Ghost missionaries. The most pressing cry to go to Paris was ever for reinforcement. "We are like besieged soldiers, fighting desperately, looking daily to see if some relief is on its way. We are truly very tired; it is constant work which scarcely leaves you time to breathe: confessions all day and then visits to the sick—that is how hours, days, weeks and months pass by and one is surprised to find that the year is ended. This continual work exhausts and ages the poor missionary in soul and in body; it is very fine to work, but a little rest and quiet is absolutely necessary to the poor missionary worker; and yet, despite these constant efforts (on our part), the mission suffers greatly, we are barely able to do what is strictly called for. With the arrival of our fathers the mission will surge ahead to greater developments. What good remains to be done here, what shortage there is of workers to gather the harvest, O poor country! I hope that God will take pity on you."

(v)

Fr. Schwindenhammer was not deaf to this cry of distress. That year, 1854, three missionaries arrived in Mauritius. Within a few days they and the Bishop would be summoned to a joint crusade of charity. On 14th May cholera struck the island. It appeared first in the prisons of Port-Louis and quickly spread out through the population; the blacks were notably its victims. Laval, exhausted by years of prayer, fasting, overwork, found mysteriously a new self, capable of meeting every demand. He even changed in character, planned the campaign of relief and spiritual ministry in a way which ensured that orders clearly stated were binding on his subordinates—normally he preferred another more sensitive approach to those who owed him obedience.

Cooperation was total and when the crisis passed he could forward a satisfactory report to Fr. Schwindenhammer:

> " May God be blessed in all things. The cholera took numerous victims, sending many souls to heaven, causing a multitude of conversions; it is justice and mercy together. Your children were admirable in dedication and their works are glorified before God and men. The bishop of Port Louis is completely with us, does not know how to show us his gratitude. He himself, bishop and all that he is, proved admirable in the attention he bestowed and continues to bestow in visiting, consoling, giving his ministry especially to the poor, for he scarcely visited the rich. He goes from shanty to shanty among the dwellings, in the most remote corners, visiting up to thirty sick people each day: it's really admirable, the man is great before God."

After the tragedy there was exhaustion. One of Laval's fellow missionaries even showed passing symptons of the disease. All were forced to take a respite; all save Laval to whom a witness bore this testimony: " I don't know how the poor old man did not succumb. What a tough nut to crack."

CHAPTER VI

The Final Phase

(i)

Fr. Laval was, after the crisis of the cholera outbreak, a community hero. He and his religious brothers were henceforth to have a secure place in the local church. They, as all others, rejoiced in the special triduum of thanksgiving which, on the 18th, 19th and 20th May, 1855, commemorated the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, solemnly defined by Pius IX on 8th December of the previous year. Soon afterwards, the annual procession of Corpus Christi was another sign of the growing numbers of Christians and their vibrant faith.

There were still problems inherent in the conditions of the island, physical and social. Small-pox appeared in 1855 and cholera once again in 1856. There was an outburst of anti-clericalism, fomented by Freemasons of the continental type centering on matrimonial legislation and there were complicated educational controversies: in part the solution to the latter was the opening of schools by the De la Salle Brothers.

The central religious personality in the country remained Fr. Laval, a father figure not only to the thousands of blacks who owed him their faith, but to many others, who sought his advice, looked to him almost as an oracle: "our shield", as his brother missionaries described him. The parish church of St. Croix on which he had lavished special attention, which would be his last physical monument, near which he would lie in death, was raised and then enlarged by donations which appeared to be so many gifts to him personally.

His brother religious in Europe held the venerable missionary in equal esteem. They would have wished him to return to Europe, if only to be seen by those to whom he had become a legend but, at his urgent request, he was allowed remain in Mauritius. They asked him to tell his story, but again yielded to his genuine modesty. He gave way, though reluctantly, on the suggestion that he must be photographed.

Before 1856 the Congregation had not the right to receive the customary religious vows of its subjects in public; each took his privately and for one year. In that year Rome sanctioned the change, giving the Congregation full status. After a special retreat held in Mauritius in August, 1859, timed to coincide with that in Paris, Fr. Laval with three others took perpetual vows. There is a feeling of finality in the letter which he addressed then to the Superior General: "I have had the happiness of making my perpetual vows on 27th August in our parish of Holy Cross in the presence of our Revered Father Visitor. It seems to me, before Our Lord Jesus Christ, that I have made them most willingly, desiring to keep the Rules and Constitutions of our Society. As a

prodigal son I am now back in my father's house to begin there a completely new life and, with the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Heart of Mary, to make amends for all the faults committed as a member and a superior against the rules."

The saintly man went into detail on the different ways in which he had failed in observance of the Rules and Constitutions. These enactments had been the subject of the retreat preached by the Visitor; for the humble avowal of alleged faults—impossible to take in the terms of the writer—there were special commendations from the Superior General. Who would know anything about him or the Visitor but for the posthumous fame of the man they were dealing with? What ironies history holds!

(ii)

History mattered little to Fr. Laval in these last years of his life. For though only fifty two years he was already aged, his health undermined by overwork, penance and climatic conditions. He did, to the very great sadness of his "children", consent to leave Mauritius and travel to La Réunion, where he spent the whole of Lent one year. It was in part a voyage imposed on him by duty since he was superior of all the missions in the Indian Ocean; in part it was a brief respite in the incessant round of missionary work in Mauritius; to this he soon returned.

The body which had been driven so hard and relentlessly finally showed signs of breaking under the strain. The first signal of breakdown came on 2nd May 1856. A colleague hearing confessions heard someone fall, came out and found Fr. Laval felled by an apoplectic fit.

The news had a dramatic effect among the population. Early visitors to see the sick man were the bishop, the French Consul, the Deputy Mayor of Port-Louis and the Venerable Head of the Order of Freemasons. There was a constant stream of callers at the missionary's modest dwelling where he was watched over by two of his faithful parishioners.

The sick man thought that the call was final and was probably surprised at his recovery. His first words on regaining consciousness had been: "Poor mission! How consoling it is to work for the poor." To the doctor who came to him he said "We fell on the battlefield." The old warrior would survive for eight years still, but attacks of one kind or another would so weaken him that in his last year he was forced to withdraw from almost all active ministry; he did still undertake a little catechism for the children and the aged.

His final trial was to bear the conflict of views between two men who resembled each other very much in character, one his Superior General and the other his friend since the day they first met, Bishop Collier. The bone of contention was the old one of duties of religious life and the claims of the missionary apostolate. "What are we" wrote Fr. Schwindenhammer to the brave, exhausted missionary in 1858 "in Mauritius as elsewhere in the Congregation? Missionary priests dedicated to the religious and community life. But what has happened in Mauritius? People have begun, continued and developed until now outside the rule of common life." The bishop alone was responsible for souls, Schwindenhammer thought: "We are there only to give him support to the extent and in the manner willed by God. And God expresses his will in this regard by our Rules and Constitutions and the intentions of the higher superiors." Repeating an old idea of his that the fathers in Mauritius considered themselves "almost exclusively as missionaries" he went on to the summary judgement, complacent and, in the light of history, more than a little absurd: "Good has been done but it has not been well done, because you were outside the holv will of God."

(iii)

There is no road to humility save humiliation, but you cannot humiliate a humble man. Two letters of Laval's set against the theorizing of Schwindenhammer—a good

priest allowing for his temperment and his narrow spirituality—will give some insight to a priestly soul matured in direct contact with the ministry of souls. In November, 1860, he wrote a letter full of simplicity and trust:

"I am honoured to write to your reverence to tell you of the state of my soul. First of all my health condition is still quite wretched: lack of strength, a nervous condition worsening each day, my great worry and fear being that in a short while, because of these nervous accidents, it will be impossible for me to say Holy Mass, the sole consolation now left to me; but if that is to be, even then let God's holy will be done.

As for practice of the holy ministry, this is daily more difficult for me and is now reduced to a few confessions from time to time. Catechisms twice a week for old people's First Communion. I keep to the parlour, where I act as porter; this gives me the opportunity to give a little advice to those coming and going, a ministry which is not quite without fruit. Then the remainder of my time is spent in meditation on Sacred Scripture, reading the lives of the saints, saying the divine office. Thus weeks, days, months pass by, too slowly for my liking. Time appears long to a disarmed soldier who can no longer do anything for the glory of his Master and the salvation of his brothers: *heu mihi* . . .

As to my soul it is at times in a state of great sadness, dryness abandonment and darkness. I try to endure these painful trials as patiently as possible. The older one grows the more one sees and feels the very heavy weight of one's great misery—I am longing for the end of the road."

The letter ends by asking for prayers and with a profession of profound veneration for the Superior General from "his very humble son in Jesus and Mary."

As we have seen, Laval had been requested to write his memoirs and then excused in deference to his modesty. The last letter which he wrote to the Superior General was intended to explain his apparent unwillingness to

obey; it is self-revelatory despite its brevity:

"Allow me to set forth in all simplicity the reasons which until now have caused me to put off writing anything about myself.

1. My life up to the time of my entry to the Seminary of St. Sulpice was so full of sins that my director, Fr. Galais of holy memory, did not allow me to go back over those unhappy years, so much did these memories fill my mind with upset and my heart with discouragement and sadness.

Here is the advice this wise and saintly director gave me: 'My friend,' he said to me several times 'before your entry to the seminary, you made a general confession of all these unhappy disorders, do not go back on them, do not stir this old dungheap, it would only trouble you to the point of discouragement.' This I followed to the present time and it has done me good. I have to say confidentially that the great cross of my old age is the memory of these disorders, which the demon strives to awaken in my imagination, which I rid myself of with great difficulty . . . think whether it would be prudent to stir the old dungheap, quite rotten that it is.

2. My life in the seminary of St. Sulpice was very mediocre and wretched; I sought as far as possible silence and oblivion, working to heal the deep wounds which sin had caused to my soul. These four years have nothing edifying or interesting to offer.

3. After my seminary life I was appointed to a very small parish in the diocese of Evreux; during the two years I spent there, having scarcely any ministry to do, I used my time in prayer, study of Sacred Scripture and study of theology, for my studies had been very weak; I led the life of a real Carthusian and I always recall these two years with great consolation.

4. In 1840 Fr. Blampin and another St. Sulpice student came to see me in my solitude and they talked to me about Fr. Libermann's plan to found a congregation of priests for the colonies, and how easy it would be to establish the kingdom of God among the blacks. Seeing

that I was not doing very much in my poor little parish and desired nevertheless to convert some souls to atone for the loss of those lost because of me, I felt impelled to join this congregation, especially as no great talent was needed to do good among these poor people; it was then that I set out for Mauritius. I spent five years here all alone; then Fr. Lambert came and two years later Fr. Thévaux. Frs. Lambert and Thévaux who are better writers than me could narrate what they have seen; my only task would be to refresh my memory on the first five years of the mission, something that would be very difficult for me with my failing memory and the inability I have in writing or unfolding my thought . . . You will see thereby, very reverend and very dear Father that there was neither stubbornness nor disobedience in the ensuing delay."

(iv)

There seems little point in adding much to this valedictory. It bears the stamp of Christlike humility. A great part has been played out on life's stage and the curtain was soon to come down to applause which would re-echo indefinitely. Before the final moment there were, on the man who had justified so many hopes, one or two calls to come forth again and accept full-hearted thanks. He went to the church of St. Croix to sing a *Te Deum* of thanksgiving for the completion of the building. Many in the church wept openly. He celebrated the feast of the Rosary one year and took the opportunity to survey the progress in the Catholic community since his arrival in the island: from some hundreds to the entire black population. But he warned that if there was a falling away in practice and in public morality they could see the reason in the failing devotion to the Rosary in the chapels. He preached the Rosary by daily example, reciting it as he hobbled along supported by a friend on his way to St. Croix.

There was one poignant moment. Bishop Collier was, for reasons of ill-health, obliged to resign his episcopal

charge and leave the island; he had resisted the measures to have him transferred earlier to Trinidad, where he would have been Archbishop. The entire clergy gathered around him to bid him farewell and it was for Fr. Laval, as senior among them, to pronounce the address. Instead he fell on his knees and asked for the bishop's blessing. Whereon the latter exclaimed: "Arise, Fr. Laval, it is you who should give me a blessing. Let us rather embrace." Then the two veterans parted.

The bishop lived on to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of his episcopal consecration and died at the age of eighty eight. An almost exact contemporary of Newman he has scarcely received due recognition among the great Catholic Victorians. Fr. Laval had predeceased him by twenty four years. The new bishop, Dr. Hankinson arrived in the island in May 1864. To him too at the first formal meeting with the island's clergy, Laval wished to kneel and ask a blessing. Gently lifting him the new prelate said: "My dear Fr. Laval, take not only my blessing but that of the Sovereign Pontiff; I have been charged to give it to you." Then he embraced the missionary and said to him: "I shall be happy to talk to you; for a long time I have wished to see and know you."

The broken body was not to hold for much longer the spirit eager for eternal joy. On the 7th September of that year he suffered an attack of hemiplegia. He was, he said "like an old shack creaking and shaking on all sides." Yet he recovered sufficiently to go to the cathedral next morning for Holy Communion. It was a momentary recovery. He felt very weak and the doctor held out no hope. He was anointed. Visitors came to see him, the bishop among them. His friend Fr. Masuy knelt by him and whispered in his ear: "Father how lucky you are. I seem to see the children you have sent to heaven before you. Do you hear them crying out 'Here he's coming; here he's coming'. How happy they are!" "They are happy" replied the dying man "but not as happy as I am to feel that at last I am going to join them." At 1.30 on the morning of the 9th, feast of St. Peter Claver, gently he gave his soul back to God.

(v)

In his end was a new beginning. His funeral was a unique event in the history of Mauritius. Forty thousand people formed the procession from the cathedral to St. Croix where he was buried. There, within a few years, a large vault was built for his tomb to allow the incessant stream of those who came to pray to him.

His name is surrounded with the aura of a miracle-worker. It is reliably reported that during his life he cured a man of leprosy and restored sight to one blind. From the day of his death stories were being told of signs of various kinds, cures, favours, small and great, attributed to his intercession. They have continued.

In view of these happenings, of his whole lifework and his reputation for holiness, the process of his Beatification should have advanced without difficulty. The first stage, a factual inquiry into the life and work of the man being proposed for such an honour, was bungled. It was so badly done that the sponsors could not decently present the document sent to them to the responsible Roman authority. Prejudice? Mere incompetence? The priest who had conducted the inquiry was dismissed from certain posts of responsibility he held in the diocese of Port Louis.

The Cause was reopened in 1911 and sixty years ago, on the 26th June 1918, Benedict XV signed the official document for the "Introduction of the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God, Jacques Désiré Laval."

Progress was still slow. There had been difficulties raised in the course of the first inquiry: Fr. Laval was soft on Freemasons—had he not been visited after his first serious illness by the Venerable Head of the Order in the island? Had the Freemasons not wanted to oust Bishop Collier and put the Frenchman in his place? In regard to ecclesiastical affairs did Fr. Laval not urge Bishop Collier to bar the entry of the Jesuit Society to his diocese?

The suggestions that Fr. Laval would have willingly

stood as a Freemason candidate for the bishopric of Port Louis, or that he differed from the bishop in policy were easily shown to be fantasy. The visit to his sick bed was just a sign of the universal esteem which he had won by his apotolate among the poor—nowadays it would be enthusiastically hailed as a triumph of openness! The story of the Jesuits, who had come to the island and left after a short while, was more complicated; it seemed unanswerable in the absence of the necessary documents. These were discovered as late as the year 1970 and a painstaking investigation led to this conclusion: "According to the documents which have reached us not only is there no proof that the Servant of God opposed other missionaries, but they throw a full light on the goodwill and charity with which he received and helped them as far as was possible to him."

Would Fr. Laval reach the honours of the altar before Libermann? The convert Jew's Cause has also been introduced in Rome, has indeed reached the ultimate stage: his writings have been examined and found orthodox, *nova sed bona,* his virtues studied and pronounced heroic; miracles alone are needed that he may be declared Blessed. Members of his Society have felt in a quiet way that Laval, known to be an eminently suitable candidate for the highest honours the Church gives, would give first place to Libermann: without presuming to judge between them or to discern moments fully known only by divine Providence.

Rome has spoken. Paul VI dispensed in Fr. Laval's Cause from the requirement that two miracles of the first order must be presented. One would suffice. It was striking and was examined in Mauritius and Rome; each tribunal, that in Mauritius assisted by expert medical advice, accepted the miracle as genuine. In 1923 an Anglican business-man Edgard Beaubois, sixty-seven years old, suffered from an infectious disease that covered his face, head and neck with a constantly purulent sore. In a pitiful, worsening condition for which doctors could do nothing he was induced by Catholic friends to visit Fr. Laval's tomb. To the dead priest he said: "Father Laval,

if you rescue me, I will become a Roman Catholic." Finding that his condition had changed instantaneously he suddenly cried out "I am cured." Immediate witnesses on the day were the man's family and seven hundred workers of the firm of which he was accountant, the Rose-Belle sugar plantation.

Pope Paul by fixing the Beatification for Mission Sunday, 22nd October, 1978, pointed to the essential meaning of Fr. Laval's vocation, its relevance to the Church in our time. Mauritians rejoice, not only the flourishing Catholic community, which still owes so much to the French missionary, but every race and creed. For the Government of the state have declared the anniversary of the saintly man's death a national holiday.

LAVAL

C.S.Sp.

Jacques Désiré Laval, a former medical doctor, for a while a secular priest in his native Normandy, was the first missionary of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary founded by the convert Jew, Francis Libermann. His field of action was the island of Mauritius where he arrived on September 14th, 1841. From first to last he was the apostle of the blacks, most of them newly emancipated slaves. In the capital of the island, Port Louis, and the outlying districts his labours bore astonishing fruit; in the twenty three years he spent in Mauritius his ministry gained some 60,000 souls to the Catholic faith: the figure is probably unequalled anywhere in the missionary world of his time.

Fr. Laval is not only the apostle of Mauritius; he is a national hero, a legend to those of every religion, race and colour. A Frenchman, he was brought to work in the island by Bishop William Collier, O.S.B., a Yorkshireman —Mauritius colonised by the Portuguese, Dutch and especially the French was in his time a British dependency. From his time there has been an Irish presence in the Mauritian church with three Irish bishops before the appointment of Mgr. Jean Margeot, the first Mauritian to hold this office.

A great European, a true Christlike servant of the Third World; a miraculous healer of sickness in life and death, a still more powerful healer of all human division and dissension.