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Laval and Libermann

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LAVAL AND LIBERMANN

Many years have passed since the Causes of Beatification of three Holy Ghost Fathers were introduced in Rome: that of Fr Libermann in 1886; that of Fr Laval in 1918; and that of Fr Brottier in 1956. Normally, to our human way of thinking, Fr Libermann's Beatification should have come first. It was, after all, the first in order of time, and usually Religious Institutes cherish the hope that their Founder will be the first of their number to be honoured in this way. This will not be so in our case: the cause of Fr Libermann drags on for want of the necessary miracles, possibly also because of lack of interest among his disciples! Fr Laval who will be beatified on Oct 22, 1978, takes the lead. The cause of Fr Brottier is also making good progress and his beatification may well precede that of Fr Libermann.

It would however be wrong and stupid to see this as a kind of race for first place, whose success depends on manoeuvring intrigue and even financial backing, or on the degree of zeal and "know-how" of the "supporters". True, Beatification and Canonization have earthly effects and confer on those so chosen only an increase of external glory. Nevertheless, these steps concern the supernatural and involve the authority of the Church and the spiritual good of Christian people. The Imitation of Christ (III, 58, 2) warns us against discussing the relative merits of different saints. It would be an impertinence for us to claim that because one has been declared Blessed officially he is therefore holier than another who has not. Instead of wasting time on such vain speculations about Frs Laval and Libermann, let us more fruitfully examine briefly the relationship that existed between these two servants of God.

* * *

I shall not attempt, even in summary, to tell the whole story of the life of Fr Laval, nor of what followed his death,

i.e. the devotion even to this day which is evident at his tomb, in Mauritius. His biography was written by Fr DELAPLACE in 1876, by Fr PIVAUT in 1931, by Fr PIACENTINI in 1949. A new life written by Fr Joseph MICHEL has recently been published which one may conclude will be definitive.

I have myself drawn on these sources: and, for what concerns the life of Fr Libermann on the biographies of Fr BRIAULT and Mgr GAY and "The Spiritans" by Fr KOREN. I have also used that inexhaustible mine of information, the "Notes and Documents" collected by Fr CABON. Finally, I had at my disposal the writings of Fr LAVAL himself, by courtesy of Fr Marcel MARTIN, Postulator of the Cause.

I shall in this article limit myself to a broad outline of the development of the vocation of Fr Laval which brought him to the apostolate of the Blacks and to the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Then, I shall seek to trace his relationship with Fr Libermann until the death of the latter 126 years ago: February 2, 1852.

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* * *

FATHER J. D. LAVAL

Early years

Jacques Désiré LAVAL was born on Sept 18, 1803, in the little village of Croth in the diocese of Evreux, Normandy. His family was one deeply rooted in Christian traditions. His father, an authoritarian person, was a comfortable farmer and was local Mayor for 25 years. His mother was very pious and most charitable to the poor. She died in 1811.

Her little son, James, until then always bright and full of energy, become serious and a dreamer. When he was 11 he was sent to his uncle, parish priest of Tourneville-la-Campagne, to join with some other young boys to whom he gave an elementary education.

After two years, the uncle sent Jacques to the junior seminary at Evreux, with unhappy results. Soon the boy returned home to work on his father's farm. He tried the seminary a second time without success. Finally, he entered the College Stanislaus in Paris where he got a baccalaureate in

Letters in 1825 and in Science the following year. He then decided to do medicine. After 4 years study he presented a thesis on Rheumatoid-Arthritis and was admitted. These years in Paris did not in anyway disturb his convictions or lead him to forget his religious obligations. That was most unusual at that time and in those circles in which he moved.

The doctor

In Sept 1830, Dr Laval opened a practice in St-André, a large suburb on the outskirts of Evreux. At first, he had a measure of success. But this was soon spoilt because of the intrigue of a republican colleague: Laval was a royalist. At the same time, he grew slack in his religious observance. He next practised in Ivry-la-Bataille, where some of his family lived. Here he was successful as a doctor and socially. Good-looking, a skilful horseman, a commandant of the National Guard, he had a easy entry into good society. He was not ambitious for money and showed no interest in marriage. Little by little he ceased the practice of religion and even failed to make his Easter Duties. His faith however was not dead, but merely dormant. A good local priest became his friend and led him gradually to make his peace with God. A fall when riding, from which he had a miraculous escape, was to be the beginning of a true conversion. Fr Koren, a Dutchman, writes: *The young doctor was converted radically as only a Frenchman could be. It was good-bye to fine clothes, valuable furniture, delicate meals, high society and wordly gatherings. What he saved as a result he dispensed to the poor, for a decade of the Rosary: He spent many hours before the Blessed Sacrament.* Already the two essential aspects of the future apostolate of Laval were coming clearly into view: love of prayer, love of the poor:

Seminarian and priest

He entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice on June 15, 1835. A young doctor 32 years old, he must have found it hard to apply himself to the studies and to the discipline of seminary-life. He became nevertheless a model seminarian, distinguished by his humility and his austerity. *Remain in the back-ground as if dead*, he said. His studies were not brilliant but he was a great success with the children, to whom he

taught catechism, and the poor, to whom he was appointed to give alms on behalf of the seminary.

The summit of his aspirations, we read in an account of him written by M. Tisserant, is to be in the most hidden place in the world, working for the poorest, the most abandoned souls in the world. Here already in germ was a true Spiritan vocation.

He was attracted to the Missions for several years and thought even of entering the Vincentians with that intention. M. Gallais, his director, thought it better to dissuade him.

At Saint Sulpice and Issy, he could not fail to meet Messrs Le Vavas seur, Tisserant and Libermann. He would have heard them speak also of their plan for a work for the Blacks which Le Vavas seur and Tisserant were the first to think of. But, obeying a resolve of self-effacement, he took no active part in the realisation of it. He was secretly determined to be one of the number. But he told no one except his director whom he asked to call him when he was needed. Meantime he was ordained priest at Saint-Sulpice on December 2, 1838. As the proposed work for the Blacks was not yet fully matured, he took up temporary ministry in his own diocese. The Bishop put him in charge of a small parish of 450 people, not very fervent, at Pinterville. The presence of factories at Louviers also did not help morally.

He took over the parish on February 2, 1839. He proved to be another "curé d'Ars" and was soon known as "the holy man." *Night and day, writes M. Tisserant again, he was at the disposition of his neighbour. He clothed the poor of the parish and gave them all he had. He made a rule for himself which he would never break: to make himself more abject than the poor themselves, that they might be encouraged to bear poverty patiently. He slept only on the hard ground or on a wretched strawmattress, his only covering a sheep-skin. Although very sensitive to cold, he never had a fire. He took no breakfast, ate only a little coarse vegetable boiled in water and seasoned with salt. Meat, butter, eggs, he never used. This was his daily regulation: three hours spent catechising the children of the Parish, never impatient because of their lack of intelligence. The rest of his time was spent visiting the sick, if there were any, hearing confessions, and studying, for which he had a fixed time. After that he took his recreation in the form of hours spent before the Blessed Sacrament. There, from 4 to 9 each morning and during the day whenever he had an hour or two to spare, he kept Our Lord company. Details of the life of this holy and zealous priest*

which would greatly edify others, if I had time to talk of them, I have heard from his own lips. This life-style, this apostolate of the parish priest of Pinterville, we may add, would be the same as that of the Apostle of the Blacks in Mauritius later on, only the scope would then be much greater.

Entry into the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

In 1840, LAVAL learnt that the Work of the Blacks was taking shape. M. BLAMPIN and another student from Saint-Sulpice went to Pinterville to bring him up-to-date. M. Tisserant had already committed himself to Mgr Collier, newly appointed Vicar-Apostolic for the Island of Mauritius. But he needed a companion. This was the moment chosen by M. Gallais, as already agreed, to call on M. Laval. Without delay, he left for Paris, with the intention of making a retreat under the guidance of his Director to see what God willed of him. *He hung a big rosary around his neck, writes M. Le Vavas seur, and wearing an old hat, and soutane and cape to match it, he set out in this garb of poverty. When he arrived at M. Gallais's room, he prostrated himself and asked a blessing. He then went to say Mass, in the seminary chapel. The missal was a Parisian one: the Mass was that of a martyr and the opening words "Dirupisti vincula mea." Reading them Fr Laval wept and went on to celebrate with great tenderness and devotion.*

At the last moment the Archbishop of Paris would not release M. Tisserant. At the same time Mgr Collier, for a number of reasons had to delay his departure also. While waiting, Fr Laval spent some days in Paris with M. Tisserant and then went to stop with his uncle, the parish priest of Tourville. There M. Levavas seur collected him and brought him in haste to London to catch a boat, the *Tanjore*, on June 4, 1841.

It was a long journey and Fr Laval, suffered greatly from seasickness. Finally, Mgr Collier and the priests accompanying him landed at Port-Louis. It was Sept 15, 1841.

During the weeks which preceded his departure, Fr Laval was able to talk with M. Tisserant, already a priest, and M. Le Vavas seur, still in the Seminary. He did not meet M. Libermann however. He was in Strasbourg at the seminary there, preparing for ordination to the priesthood. This had not yet

been decided upon, even though Mgr Collier had agreed that the new priest be ordained to the title of his diocese. Probably M. Tisserant was the intermediary, for it is in a post-script to a letter of his to M. Libermann that Fr Laval confided to the latter the administration and use of his possessions which, in land and cash, amounted to the handsome sum of 50,000 gold francs. This must have caused Fr Libermann some worry even though, as we know, he had a good business-head. Indeed, we can be sure that Fr Laval's estate was one of the principal sources of money in the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in its beginnings.

Whatever Fr Laval could save from his salary or from gifts received in Mauritius he also contributed to the Congregation. Thus, in a "Register of Benefactors" drawn up by the Venerable Father at the end of 1843, we read: *M. Laval, priest, member of the Congregation, left France before the novitiate was opened. He gave all his possessions to Fr Libermann. These consisted of some farms, which brought in 1300 francs a year. In the course of the year 1842, he also sent 1100 francs for the Novitiate. No doubt he had to pinch and scrape to send this money, having nothing of his own and living in a foreign land* (III, 391). This gesture of solidarity in 1842 would be repeated many times afterwards.

In 1848 Fr Laval made his will. In it we read: *I request the afore-mentioned, M. Jacob Libermann to apply what remains of my possessions for the welfare of the Blacks, whether in the colonies or in any other countries they may be. I leave him entirely free to use the money as he judges best: to pay the fees of aspirants or the fares of missionaries, for the missions themselves or to defray other expenses contributing to the welfare of the Blacks.*

On receipt of M. Tisserant's letter, Fr Libermann replied: *Tell our good friend, M. Laval, that I am profoundly happy to have him for brother. I should have liked to have talked with him for a while but Our Lord has so arranged things that we shall not see each other again in this world. We look forward then to greeting each other in the kingdom of our Heavenly Father, where we hope his divine mercy will admit us. During this year when he has to be on his own he must not yield to discouragement. He is not alone: our Lord and the Blessed Virgin are with him: and we are all moreover ever-united in the bonds of charity which the Good Lord is pleased to pour into our souls. I hope that charity will be always lively and never be extinguished. While waiting the arrival*

of his brethren he can prepare the way for them, and so arrange things, that they will enjoy the good-will of these poor souls and be in a position to serve them to the utmost. From this we can draw several conclusions:

1) That Fr Laval considered himself already a member of the Work for the Blacks and of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary: and that for his part Fr Libermann had no doubt about it. We may to-day be astonished that this young Society was made up of members who had not done a novitiate: La Neuville in fact did not open until 27 Sept, 1841. Fr Laval had already reached Mauritius then. And yet, all the first members were convinced that they were both religious and missionaries.

What arouses wonder to-day was in those times current practice. The Novitiate in its strict sense concerned only the great Orders. After the Christian renewal that followed the troubles of the Revolution and the Empire in France there was a great increase in old Congregations striving to restore themselves and new Congregations were mushrooming every where. Rome seemed hesitant in the circumstances to accord the privilege of a regular novitiate to Congregations which possibly had no future. Thus, M. Libermann at the beginning was dissuaded by Propaganda from setting up his Society as a Religious Institute. Almost five years would pass before he could establish a regular Novitiate. It was only in 1892 that the decree *Auctis Admodum* imposed the obligation of a canonical Novitiate on more recent foundations and older Orders.

In the absence of a novitiate promises were made to the Congregation. In October, 1842, Fr Libermann wrote to Fr Le Vavasseur, acting superior of Bourbon, Mauritius and even Madagascar where a possible mission was envisaged: *I appoint you to receive the promises of M. Laval. Should he wish to make vows you may receive them in my name. There are, and there will be, several who have made, or will make them, here* (III, 301). But it was only in 1859 that Fr Laval made perpetual profession in the Congregation.

There is no doubt of Fr Laval's attachement to the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. On October 18, 1844 he wrote: *I tell you as my father, it is our Mother Mary who supports and consoles me in all my trials, my moments of discouragement, even at times my weariness and disgust. Pray, dear brother, and have our brethren pray, that I never disgrace my*

holy title of missionary of the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary. I'd rather die a thousand deaths than that.

When the "Fusion" took place, if we are to believe Fr Thévaux; a confrere of Fr Laval, the news was not too well received in Mauritius. *What most displeases Fr Laval was that he learnt of it only through the press or in other indirect ways . . . The three other missionaries with me (Fr Laval, Lambert and Thiersé) will accept but on one condition: the Congregation must not abandon the mission of Mauritius but continue the good work begun . . . As to regularity, it seems as if people are being very liberal since they are considered released from their promises . . . Thus, Fr Laval and the others have almost given up hope of revival of the Congregation: in consequence, each one does what he wants, with discouragement in his heart and little willing to accept correction.* It should be pointed out however that Fr Thévaux too easily gave his own impressions as those of his confreres. That was why Fr Le Vavas seur, who had visited Mauritius, was very suspicious of him when he returned to France. Six months later, in fact, when the new Rules arrived, the same Fr Thévaux would write to Fr Libermann: *Ignore all letters received from me in the last year . . . I submit completely to the Society of the Holy Ghost under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary . . . Fr Laval and Thiersé were not inclined to accept but to-day they are ready to continue with us (XI, 588-589).* Does it not appear that Fr Thévaux leader of the resistance was now taking over as leader of the party? While it hurt Fr Laval to see the Congregation of which he had been the first missionary no longer in existence, it is equally certain that he must have submitted quickly and unreservedly to the decision of one he never ceased to regard as his superior and dear Father in God.

2) The short excerpt quoted from M. Libermann's letter to M. Tisserant allows us to conclude that Fr Libermann and Fr Laval did not know each other too well. They could only have met at Saint-Sulpice and Issy, where Fr Laval lived from 1835-1838. Already during the holidays of 1837, Fr Libermann had left there for Rennes to begin his sojourn with the Eudists. In view of the principle of self-effacement Fr Laval had adopted in the seminary, it is most unlikely that he would have attracted the attention of the seminarians who surrounded Libermann or were members of the "Prayer-Groups" he conducted. When M. Libermann writes that he rejoices to have M. Laval as brother, he seems to express a happy sur-

prise. And when he adds that he would have liked to talk to him more, he implies that their previous conversations were few . . .

Moreover, as we saw, M. Libermann was not in Paris, but in Strasbourg, when Fr Laval passed through on his way to Mauritius. As a matter of fact, he was ordained sub-deacon on June 5, the day after Fr Laval sailed from London.

Fr Libermann and Fr Laval knew each other therefore largely through correspondence. And though Fr Libermann had a ready pen, Fr Laval wrote rarely: quite apart from the fatigue consequent upon his work he was not given to letter-writing. Our Venerable Father regrets this in a letter dated October 15, 1843: *It's a long time since I heard from you as I should very much have desired. Write therefore more often and tell me what God pleases to do with your ministry, the trials and difficulties you have. I am sorry to see you live amongst us as one who has been excommunicated. You belong to our little Society, without drawing any benefit from it . . .*

He returns to the same point with greater insistence on May 22, 1844: *How long it is since I heard from you. I can only remember having received one letter. I implore you to write more often. It is important to maintain relations between Communities. They are even more important between the various houses and the Mother-House. I tell you frankly that this silence undoubtedly well-motivated does not for all that accord with the Rule or with the will of God.*

Finally, in a post-script to a long letter dated June 28, 1847, the Venerable Father goes on: *I always regret not hearing from you. I do not know whether your letters go astray or not but it is certainly a long time since I had news of you. I suggest you read ch. 9, Part III of our Rules . . .* This treats of "Letter-Writing". Amongst other things it says: *All members of the Congregation should write to the Superior-General each year. They should tell him what they judge in the best interests of the Congregation and the salvation of souls. They may also write at any other time should they feel the need or the desire to do so.* Most confreres were faithful to this. Fr Laval was an exception. He humbly admitted it and never dreamt of excusing himself by appealing to the burden of ministry or the slowness and irregularity of the postal service. On October 18, 1847 he writes: *You complain, dear Father, of my laziness in not writing: you are quite correct. I am indeed often gripped by laziness. I no longer have my old enthusiasm for the glory of God*

and His blessed Mother. I am truly dull and dry, luke-warm and without interest at the moment. I am tired in body and in spirit. I would need a full year's novitiate to give me a little fervour but that consolation will never be mine. I must work, sweat it out till the end of the day. When, alas, will it all be over, and what would it matter if I was sure it would end well for me . . .

Whatever the reasons, only 17 letters of Fr Laval to Fr Libermann are preserved and these are mostly short. Once he had confreres living with him he willingly unloaded the burden of correspondence on them. It was to them Fr Libermann writes for news of Mauritius and especially to Fr Le Vavasseur at Bourbon: he was the intermediary used by Fr Libermann to communicate with Fr Laval.

That no doubt explains why in the 13 volumes of "Notes and Documents" only 12 letters are to be found written personally by our Venerable Father to Fr Laval, and some of these are quite short notes with references to the money and property left by Fr Laval to be managed by Fr Libermann.

Clearly, the tone of these letters is less free, less intimate and paternal than that of those addressed to other confreres. With one exception, they also lack those spiritual considerations which flowed so easily from Libermann and which are such an enrichment of his correspondence. One feels, that because he did not know Laval well and never had him as novice he treats him more like a brother than a son. This did not prevent him from praising highly the work and virtue of Fr Laval when writing to others.

Thus, on November 28, 1844, he writes to Quesnel, a relative of Fr Laval: *The good he does is incredible. When he arrived first at the Capital, he found the most terrible disorder amongst the poor people and a total ignorance of the sacred truths he had come to teach them. The excess of evils he saw, and had no means of curing, discouraged him a little at first. Soon however his zeal took fire and God blessed his work beyond belief. He is daily overwhelmed by the hosts of Blacks who come continually to receive instruction and be prepared for the Sacraments. In this first 18 months he has baptised, given First Communion to, and married over 500 of these poor Blacks. He has done far greater good since then. His Bishop, Mgr Collier, tells me that. Our priests, 100 miles away from Mauritius, tell me that he can do more than the three of them together: and yet, they are not sufficient to do what they have undertaken and strive to carry out. All these Blacks in Mauritius are Christian solely be-*

cause of the care and instruction received from our dear confrere. The Vicar-Apostolic, whom I saw recently in Paris, spoke to me most enthusiastically about M. Laval, and the good he was doing in the Vicariate. He told me he never dared speak to M. Laval on his manner of doing good for he saw only too clearly how successful he was in all his undertakings. Two of our priests who visited Mauritius found amongst the Blacks an incredibly warm piety and a high rate of perseverance in following instructions. They are extremely fond of their father. They say: "This one is ours". They say he is better than all the others, better even than the Bishop. That is to say, they could not have anyone better.

3) Finally, in a letter to M. Tisserant, M. Libermann writes: *He (Fr Laval) must not be allowed to lose heart in this year when he is alone.* The isolation was, in fact, to last much longer. The first visit of a confrere he received was at the end of June 1843, when Frs Collin and Blampin spent a day in Port Louis on their way to Bourbon. On the instruction of Fr Le Vasseur, Fr Laval spent some weeks in community at Bourbon towards the end of 1845. Shortly afterwards, Fr Le Vasseur himself went to keep him company in Mauritius, from Lent until the end of 1846: he was then replaced by Fr Collin who stayed until March 1847. Only in December 1846 however, did Fr Laval have a permanent companion, Fr Lambert. Then, in 1847 and 1848 respectively, there arrived the «escapees» of the unfortunate Australian Mission, Fathers Thévaux and Thiersé.

This solitude of Fr Laval was due to the opposition of the British officials to French priests. At first, they would not recognise and remunerate Fr Laval. Frs Thévaux and Thiersé were given temporary permits of residence only because they came from Australia, then an English colony. Faced with this difficulty and his virtual failure to recruit English or Irish priests, our Venerable Father considered at one time leaving Mauritius in favour of a new foundation at Madagascar. On the intervention of Mgr Collier, he agreed to leave Fr Laval on his own in Mauritius. Then, through the good offices of Mgr (later Cardinal) Wiseman, Vicar-Apostolic of the London area, and of M. Quiblier, a Sulpician from Canada, in 1848 and 1849 he obtained permission for the situation of French priests in Mauritius to be considered. Mgr Collier was authorised to submit names of those he considered suitable appli-

cants. The Government for its part would pay a certain number of their salaries. From there on, the Mission of Mauritius seemed soundly implanted, assured as it was of a steady personnel and the means to keep them.

Fr Laval's isolation weighed heavy upon him during these first five years, not only because he was overwhelmed with work, and that of a particularly ungrateful kind, but also because he so highly prized community life. Sadly he writes on February 22, 1842: *I feel discouraged sometimes at being alone. If only I had one of you to help and encourage me it would not be so bad but to be alone, all alone! . . .*

There was only the Bishop, Mgr Collier, an excellent man, who understood and supported him, to turn to. *Mgr Collier*, writes Fr Laval, *is a worthy bishop, a holy man, a man of God, who thirsts for God's glory and the salvation of souls . . . He is a man who prays, orally and mentally. Happy indeed are those colonies which have bishops of this calibre.* For his part, Mrg Collier would write to M. Gallais: *I continue to benefit of the ardent zeal of my dear Laval, whom I consider the greatest treasure of my Vicariate-Apostolic: he is a true apostle and I cannot help believing that if Heaven had not special graces in reserve to this colony, it would not have sent me this most admirable ecclesiastic* (II, 114).

Without ever a shadow of misunderstanding between these two there were from time to time nonetheless those stresses and tensions inevitable in relations between the Bishop and the Religious Superior. For example, on April 23, 1852, Fr Laval writes: *Monseigneur is constantly telling me that if we only had two or three British subjects in our little group in Mauritius, we would have the biggest parishes, of which we would be parish priests and in which we could establish communities.* But, that was something repugnant to Fr Laval: The members of the Congregation were in Mauritius as missionaries to the poor, not to be parish priests: so he goes on: *For the poor Superior (himself), Monseigneur is wary of him and I am also mistrustful of him. He is on his guard with me when we meet as I am with him. This is enough to cool the enthusiasm one must have for the success of the mission. And he repeats his old refrain: I think it would be a good thing to replace me as Superior of Mauritius.*

The other priests concerned themselves with the Whites alone and shared their prejudices concerning the evangelising of the Blacks. Fr Laval writes in 1842: *The priests up to the*

present would not mix with these poor abandoned ones, as if they were animals and yet there are great possibilities of good amongst them. If the Blacks had been served like the Whites, a better work would have been done. Unfortunately it is not souls that are sought here but money and sometimes worse.

Some of these priests were such that they could not be frequented. On October 18, 1844, Fr Laval writes: *We have been at work in Mauritius now for three weeks with little result so far. People were so prejudiced and we were misrepresented before we came, that all, Black and White, were against us. And if you ask why, it was because of the scandals of every kind given by the priests before us; my dear brother, what harm a bad priest can do and how long it takes to forget his misconduct, the scandals given. So many bad priests have passed through Mauritius, that one wonders any faith at all remains . . .*

This severe judgement, we might be tempted to think, was a consequence of the high ideal of the priesthood Father Laval had. That would be however to ignore his great charity for people. There were also, unfortunately, too many well-established facts to confirm the exactness of what he said.

For myself, he goes on, Monseigneur has given me a wide berth. I live hidden away in a little house on its own where I receive my poor Blacks. I eat alone and have practically no conversation with other priests. I'm known now and no one interferes with me. I am without friend or enemy: I consult only Monseigneur. I live here in Mauritius as I did in my little parish of Pinterville. All my spare time I pass before the Blessed Sacrament: that's where I go to relax. I have not yet called on any wealthy person: my visits are confined to the sick poor. I have no duties to carry out in church . . . (III, 457).

Fr Laval was delighted to spend some days in Bourbon at the end of 1845: *I am very happy here in our little house in Bourbon. Weary of soul and tired in body, for some time now I've been asking Our Lord for a little break. How good it is to find oneself with kind confreres to whom one can speak freely from the heart. For the last four years my life has been that of a solitary: I did not know to whom I should speak, to whom I could reveal the secrets of my soul.*

It was a great joy for him indeed when at last a community was set up in Mauritius. But, his joy was tempered with regret at his appointment as Superior. He describes the situation in the following terms:

We live here in perfect peace and harmony, in the union of

the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. We love each other as sons of Jesus and Mary. Only one thing is missing: a Superior. M. Le Vasseur appointed me, but it was not a good choice. Here's why: 1° I was never trained for the common life; 2° I do not know the Rule; 3° Never having had an opportunity of a novitiate formation, I am not a faithful observer of it; 4° I lack the necessary strength of character: I would prefer to obey a thousand times rather than to command; I think it would create problems, if the number of missionaries increases, which another could handle much better. God's Holy Will be done! . . .

The Will of God clearly was that he remain in office. In spite of repeated requests and expressions of unworthiness he was not changed.

As Superior, he was charitable and kind to the point where some confreres, especially those in Bourbon, blamed him for not being sufficiently vigilant and firm in applying the Rule.

Fr Libermann had a gift of inculcating in his novices an instinct for exact observance. In 1842 he had sent a copy of the Rule to Fr Laval with the advice: *Read it carefully and try to observe it as far as possible, given the isolation you are in, at present, by the will of God.* Fr Laval however not having done his novitiate, had neither an opportunity of sharing in its elaboration nor of hearing Fr Libermann's commentary on it. From the first moment of arriving in Mauritius, he was caught up in a ministry which increasingly absorbed his time and attention and which he had to face alone: this made it very hard for him to lead a strictly regulated life. He had however a personal time-table, based on that of Pinterville, which he describes in a letter of October 18, 1844:

Here, Father Superior, is my little daily regulation: 5.00 a.m. rise and go to the prison to say morning prayers with the prisoners, men and women; 5.45 a.m. half-hour mental prayer in church followed by half-hour preparation for Mass; 7.00 a.m. Mass, half hour, thanksgiving, confessions till 9.30 a.m.; 10.00-10.30 a.m. recitation of Little Hours, a little Scripture reading. This is followed by 1/4 hour for lunch. The rest of the day is spent teaching people how to pray or hearing confessions, performing marriages, baptising, visiting the sick; 4 p.m. confessions; 5 p.m. to the prison for evening prayers with the men and women there; 5.30-7.00 p.m. confessions; 7.00-8.00 p.m. Rosary and Instruction; 8.00 p.m. Evening Prayers followed by some hymns.

Some who don't know their prayers or are ignorant of the mysteries or the Sacraments remain and the instruction continues till 9 p.m. 9 p.m. on the stroke, I close the church, say a short prayer, take a light supper and go to bed, to commence the same routine at 5 a.m. next morning.

Here is my Sunday programme:

7.00 a.m. Prayers and a short Instruction, to male and female prisoners, in the prison; 8.30 a.m. return, say office, High Mass, confession of Blacks in the house; 12.00 a.m. Mass for about 500-600 Blacks, an hour's (sometimes three quarters of an hour's) Instruction. After Mass, some decades of the Rosary; a short instruction for the household staff until about 3 p.m. I then take some food and visit the prison again for prayers. 5.00 p.m. end of Vespers, confessions till 7 p.m., Rosary and Evening Prayers for Blacks unable to attend Vespers. That, Father Superior, has been my way of life for the last three years: sometimes a little tired but managing always to hobble along.

The first confreres to join Fr Laval adopted a similar life-style and had to adapt themselves to a ministry that was ever more demanding in itself, and ever more wide spread in its scope. Parishes were taken over and chapels built all over the island. The Community of Mauritius had earned itself however a reputation for not being too regular, On February 24, 1851 the Venerable Libermann felt it his duty to write to Fr Laval: *Our Community of Mauritius is one of those that most rejoices and consoles me . . . One thing however is lacking: regularity. Fidelity to the Rule is most important for us. In the first place, to be unfaithful to Rule is to fail God, who expresses His Will through the Rules of our Congregation. Moreover, the spirit of the Congregation, the fervour and perseverance of missionaries depends on faithfulness to Rule. Believe me, sooner or later neglect of the Rule will lead to laxity in Community. You are the first, the founders of your Community. Your influence on those who follow will always be great. If the Rule is not kept now, it will be kept still less later on: all the reasons given for your own lack of observance will be invoked later as justifications of even the greatest breaches. Your failure then to keep the Rule perfectly is a kind of original sin. My dear confrere, do your best to help our brethren to keep the Rule well. Encourage them to help you in this, so that together you may restore regularity, to the greater glory of God and the good of souls.*

The Venerable Father then goes on to exhort his confreres about regularity in rising and going to bed, time given to

sleep, mental prayer, particular examen meals and recreation. He also gives directives on absence for ministry and especially on Community and Council meetings. The first concern of these should be observance of Rule, the second, the welfare of the Mission. *It is a great mistake, he writes, to think souls will suffer. Even if there were a loss, it should be compensated for by the results of these Councils. And this, not only by reason of the fervour of the missionaries resulting, but even more by the good consequences for the conduct of the Mission and the unity of purpose coming from them. I can understand the reluctance of a missionary to leave his flock in this way and that he can always find a good reason not to. But few, indeed very few, of these reasons hold water. You must tear out your heart with both hands and determine to be firm. The general good demands it. It is necessary!*

Fr Schwindenhammer would raise even more strongly this problem of regular observance and missionary apostolate. In 1857 he wrote to Mauritius: *You are too much missionaries; too little religious.* Fr Laval replied: *We are as anxious as you to lead the religious life and be faithful to our exercises. We feel the necessity of that and possibly more than anyone else, the need. We all long for a quieter life, and were it not for the grave harm done to the salvation of souls, we would all be happy to lock ourselves up in Sainte-Croix and devote ourselves to prayer and study. But, the sick and the poor need our care. Nevertheless, in conformity with your wishes, we are reducing our work-load in order to concentrate more on Community life.* Old problem indeed, even still not resolved!

I shall not delay over Fr Laval's ministry in Mauritius, the difficulties he met with, the methods he adopted, the results obtained. That would lead us too far afield.

It was very hard at first. On December 13, 1842, the Venerable Father in a letter to Fr Laval counselled him: *Be patient a little longer. Our Lord will hear your prayers and will perhaps have pity on this poor island of Mauritius. Do not yet abandon this country so unfortunate and so forsaken. Try again and wait on God's good pleasure. If later on it becomes clear that we really have not the resources needed for this country and if an opening presents itself in Madagascar, there will always be time to go there* (III, 353). But, Fr Laval's work soon bore fruit and, once started, the movement continued to gather speed, as we shall see.

It will be enough to quote one letter, dated December 6, 1847. This was written by Fr Thévaux, whom Fr Laval appointed as soon as he arrived in Mauritius to report to Fr Libermann on the state of the Mission.

... Besides 2.000 faithful, wholly exemplary, there are 6.000-7.000 converts being prepared for the Sacraments. There are numerous catechism lessons, instructions and exercises of piety held in this parish church and in 20 chapels-of-ease built in districts away from the main church. Each of these can take at least 100 people. The Blacks meet in them each evening and one of them, appointed by Fr Laval, teaches them the essentials of the Catechism and of prayers.

Fr Thévaux continues: We have in Port Louis 6.000 people approximately every three weeks: thus, each day we spend 4, 6, 8 hours, and sometimes more, in the confessional, especially on the eve of the great feasts. Communion? I've never seen so many in my life. This land is truly blessed and fruitful. There are some who have reached a high degree of perfection... I have never seen greater zeal, piety and devotion than that which exists in the small, chosen group of men and women known as Counsellors. They have to make sure the sick do not die without the Sacraments: they prepare and instruct them, so that the priest has only to administer the Sacraments when he comes. Then Fr Thévaux speaks of another activity, begun by Fr Collin during his time in Port-Louis: the fund for the poor, made up of alms collected each Sunday and administered by the Blacks themselves, under the guidance of Fr Laval. You would scarcely believe that our poor people, all in domestic service or tradesmen, living from day to day, or off an acre or so of ground around their cabins, subscribe more than 100 piastres, that is 300-400 francs, each month. It is nonetheless true. It is not surprising to find vocations to the religious life springing up in such fertile soil.

In 1846, Fr Laval recommended to Fr Le Vasseur two people, one white, one black, ready to consecrate themselves to God. These were the first Mauritians who, in 1849, became members of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary.

As Mgr Collier saw the number of missionaries of the Congregation grow (they were 4 in Port Louis in 1848) he wanted to hand over to them the abandoned parishes in the rest of the island. As this would have meant sacrificing Community Life, the Venerable Father did not agree. Later how-

ever, when reinforcements arrived, it became possible to set up other communities to serve the parishes further away.

Fr Thévaux's opinion of his Superior is expressed in a letter of May 1, 1848: *Before I ever met him and merely from reading some of his letters, I called him the Peter Claver of the Congregation. How right I was and how grateful I am to God for leaving me for a time in his community. I can never banish from my memory the examples of virtue he gave me every day . . .*

On April 23, 1852, Fr Laval sent to Fr Libermann one of the longest letters he had ever written. This would have made the Venerable Father very happy but unfortunately he was already more than two months dead. We do not know the inner feelings of Fr Laval, when he heard this news. But, we are certain he venerated Fr Libermann in whom he always had the utmost confidence and to whom he was totally submissive. On June 15, 1852 he wrote to Fr Schwindenhammer: *Superior and very dear Father, that was how we addressed him whom God has taken to Himself and we shall continue, Father Superior, to address you in the same way. We share deeply the sorrow of the whole Community, while submitting at the same time to the Will of the Master: He has gone to heaven to pray for his sons. In the midst of our sorrow, we thanked God for the choice he made of our new Superior. We have also prayed Jesus and Mary to give you the light, strength and courage you need to carry out the task God has given you.*

As a member of the Congregation I give you, my Superior and dear Father, full confidence and absolute obedience. I shall always regard you as the Superior given us by God and shall find comfort in the knowledge that in obeying you, it is God I obey. I am the first missionary sent to work for the salvation of the Blacks. God has blessed Mauritius, has sent good confreres to work with me. I hope the Mission of Mauritius will continue to be a consolation to the Mother-House and that you will send us reinforcements. I am growing very old: I've been hard at it for 11 years now and daily my strength grows less: my dear confreres themselves are also very tired. The work requires half as many missionaries again as we have now.

My Superior and very dear Father, excuse me from writing long letters. I no longer know how to speak or write. Having to make myself understood by these ignorant people, I have become as ignorant as they. I shall not again give you such full details of the Mission. Fr Collin when he comes shortly will keep you fully briefed . . .

Fr Laval only survived Fr Libermann by 12 years. He joined him in heaven on September 9, 1864. And now, on the road of Beatification, he has caught up with him, even passed him out! May they both intercede for us before God. And may their works and virtues be an inspiration to us. *Fili sanctorum sumus . . .*

Joseph BOUCHAUD, C.S.Sp.