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FIORETTI OF FATHER LAVAL

Jacques Désiré Laval was born Septembre 18, 1803 at Croth in the Diocese of Evreux, France. His parents were good Christians and more than comfortably well off.

His pious mother, wishing to obtain all Heaven's blessings for her son, dedicated him to the Most Holy Virgin in the church in Croth. She then placed him under the protection of Saint Rock in a nearby pilgrimage chapel. She was only able to guide his first steps along the way of piety, however, because she died in 1811 leaving six motherless children.

* * *

From his earliest years, young Laval was remarkable for his gentleness, his obedience, his kindness to his playmates and his charity to the poor. For example, he would not take a snack to eat unless his playmates had something too, and he was happy when he had the task of taking something to the poor.

*

Divine Providence prepared a refuge for him in the house of his uncle who was then Parish Priest at Tourville-la-Campagne. Mr. Laval and Jacques lived with him for three years, Jacques' first years at school.

*

Jacques went to the Diocesan Junior Seminary, but God — having other Providential plans for him — permitted this first trial to fail after a few months. The same thing happened when he went back a second time soon after. Each time, he fell into a deep melancholy and had to return home.

*

His father wanted his eldest son to complete his education, — all the more so because the second boy showed a preference for farm work. So the father set out to disgust Jacques with the rigors of country life. He made him feel the full weight of the work. Every day he had to load carts with earth or manure, dig around trees, turn the winnowing-machine by hand. It was really hard for him, because he was not very strong, but he had to obey. His sisters pitied their poor brother, but his father showed no sympathy and told him: *Ah! you say it strains your mind to study Latin; well, I'm going to strain your muscles a bit!*

* * *

Some time later, Jacques Désiré was admitted to Stanislaus College in Paris. Here he studied hard and began to think about his vocation. Two careers attracted him equally: medicine and the priesthood. He saw in both of them the possibility of reaching souls.

During his holidays, his chief joy was to talk with a fellow-student . . . about religion and to get explanations for passages in the Sacred Writings.

He always got good marks . . . In 1825 he received his diploma as Bachelor of Letters.

For a while, he was perplexed. Then he returned to his childhood idea of becoming a doctor and helping suffering humanity, fulfilling for the dying a ministry which often complemented that of the priest. He resolved to enter medicine.

* * *

In Paris he joined some other fine young men who, like himself, were resolved to live as true Christians. They lived in the house of a kind old professor of the Faculty of Medicine.

At the School of Medicine, he was so far from concealing his spiritual and religious convictions that he became the target of the criticism of those classmates who had different ideas.

In 1830, a few days after he received his degree of Doctor of Medicine, he took great joy in coming to offer his uncle his doctoral thesis. It was about articular rheumatism and bore on the title page the words: *Dedicated to the memory of my father as a sign of my respect, gratitude and filial love. Eternal gratitude also to my uncle for all he has done for me.* The thesis is preserved in the Archives of the Congregation in Paris.

DOCTOR LAVAL

Doctor Laval settled at St. André. He quickly acquired a clientele drawn from the neighboring manor houses and friends of the family . . . A circumstance, which he later regarded as providential, caused him to leave there and go to Ivry-la-Bataille . . . It was the way people misinterpreted the assiduous care he was giving to a sick young girl. He was very deeply hurt and began to understand the malice of people to whom he had been devoting himself. He thought it better to go and practice his profession at Ivry-la-Bataille.

He had begun to live luxuriously and seek the company of the most wordly people. He made it a point of pride always to have a spirited horse and loved to canter about on his white mare and attract attention. But grace was working on him all the time.

* * *

Doctor Laval never asked for pay from those who were hard up; he even often bought the medicine they needed out of his own pocket. He would tell people who owed him something that they could pay him by saying a decade of the Rosary during the month of Mary. Above all, once he settled at Ivry-la-Bataille, he put an end to all his worldliness and gave himself to a life of prayer, penance and good works, while still being faithful to the duties of his profession. All luxury disappeared from his house . . . Spiritual reading and visits to the Blessed Sacrament occupied the time he used to devote to visits and legitimate amusement . . .

(Indeed, he had been leading a quite wordly life. One day his sister, surprised at no longer seeing in him the Chris-

tian he had once been, asked him how he could reconcile his conduct with the religious books she saw he had. He replied: *You are right! my conduct is strange. I am resisting God!*

*

To convert him, God had made use of the advice of a pious lady, Mrs. Rose Simon. At his request, this lady lent Doctor Laval a spiritual book. He brought it back a few weeks later and told her it had done him a lot of good. The book was . . . the Catechism. He then bought an abridged version of the Bible, the Lives of the Saints, meditations on the Gospel, the "Essay on Indifference" of Abbé de la Menais, and other works. His soul sought from them the bread of life and the understanding he thirsted for. He often continued his reading far into the night.

* * *

Finally, a riding accident made him fully see the light from on high. On the way back from Villier-en-Deseuvre his horse threw him so violently that he might well have been killed. He thanked God for His mercy and resolved to resist grace no longer.

It was God who did not want me to die yet, because I had not yet done enough penance. I shall have to double my fervor and my spirit of penance!

A few days later he went to the Senior Seminary with the intention of becoming a priest . . . To prepare himself for entry into the seminary he wanted to make a general confession of his whole life. Fearing that he might not make it well, he humbly asked the pious ladies who had helped in his conversion for a detailed book of examination of conscience. *I have been so negligent, he said, that I am not even able to recognize all my faults.*

* * *

When his family heard about his decision to enter the seminary, they were greatly disappointed . . . He replied that he was not doing this lightly. He saw clearly that he had

made a mistake when he chose medicine rather than the ecclesiastical state, and now he wanted to enter upon his true vocation.

*

During the fourteen months of his practice at Ivry, he always showed great patience and gentleness to those who criticized him. He was always interested in people who were suffering, and gave himself unselfishly to the poor sick people for the love of God.

* * *

On June 14, 1835 he went to Issy. Father Pinault, commenting upon the four months he spent there before entering the Seminary of St. Sulpice, said: *Doctor Laval greatly edified us by his piety . . . Our seminarians admired a man of his age who could submit so simply and conscientiously to the least of the seminary rules . . .*

*

Mr. Faillon, the Director of Catechetics, asked him to teach the first elements of the Faith to some little girls. He taught catechism to about 40 of them, five — and six — year olds, very poor children. Using large pictures, he taught them the chief mysteries of the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother.

*

The transition from the world to the seminary seemed a bit brusque to him, but he felt too strong an attraction for the priesthood to give way to temptations to discouragement . . . On August 14, 1835 he wrote to the Parish Priest of Epid: *My change of life seemed a little brusque and sometimes I have looked back a little and found myself wavering at the thought of the long road ahead of me. However, I invoked the help of our Good Holy Mother Mary and my regrets grew less. I began to have a certain fore-taste of the happiness God promises to those who serve Him faithfully.*

*

He entered the seminary in Paris on October 10 and began his theological studies. For his four years there he was a model seminarian. Everybody admired his naturalness, his childlike Christian attitude and his deep humility.

He acted with the naturalness of a child, studying carefully and conscientiously, preparing for Holy Orders with ever-growing faith. He was ordained a priest in December 1838.

PARISH PRIEST AT PINTERVILLE

The Bishop of Evreux had no hesitation in placing him in charge of the parish of Pinterville . . . He began on February 2, 1839 by placing his ministry under the protection of Jesus and Mary . . . He said to himself: *I want to become a saint in order to save these poor souls and correspond with the mercy God has shown me . . .*

*

The Servant of God devoted himself to everything in his parish: care of the poor and the sick, children and adults, good people and sinners, decoration of the Church and the ceremonies of divine worship, — all received his paternal interest. Still, in spite of all this activity, he complained of not having enough to do in Pinterville . . .

* * *

He took great care in preparing the children for their first communion. In his pastoral zeal, he made them go to confession twice a month, and he gathered them together three times a week for catechism classes.

*

Once when the autumn rains had caused the river to overflow its banks, the various roads leading to the Church were

scarcely passable for the children. The Servant of God took care of it: he had them all assemble at a spot they could easily reach and then, wearing his large sabots, he carried them one by one over the bad spot. On the day of the first communion, they were so well prepared that he was totally delighted with them.

* * *

During the month of January 1841, the River Eure was in flood. All the surrounding country was under water and it was even coming into the houses. His first care was to gather into the presbytery all those parishioners who had to leave their homes . . . He put everything at their disposition: rooms, bed linens, cellar, provisions.

Then, while the people from the manor houses were taking provisions by boat to flooded areas, he courageously went on horseback to the least accessible spots and thus multiplied the available help to meet the needs. In some places the water was so deep and the current was so swift that he had to pull his legs up onto the horse's back and even then just managed to go on. His confidence in God inspired him to keep going.

*

He set up a night school in the presbytery for the children and young people. The desire to learn brought a few at first, then a larger number. As he had promised, he began with elementary reading lessons, and then gave them the word of God in various interesting ways adapted to their capacity.

*

Father Laval, as well as being parish priest of Pinterville, also served the parish of Acquigny for several months. Here too he was greatly esteemed . . . He performed the ceremonies with great dignity and spoke with strong faith. *If all priests were like Father Laval, one person said, people could not help but believe in the truth of what they preach.*

*

As a seminarian I went every year for two years to spend a fortnight of my holidays in Father Laval's presbytery. I found him to be a man of most admirable virtue, — a faithful priest who kept to a strict rule, getting up at four o'clock, making meditation until his Mass at eight o'clock. Usually he made his meditation in the church. His thanksgiving lasted a half-hour. When he came back to the presbytery, he ate a piece of bread standing up. He then either went to his room or went to visit the sick if there were any. At noon he ate a simple meal which I shared with him. Then he took a ten-minute walk. He said to me one day: *I am like the wolves: once I have eaten, I am good for nothing* (Father Alexander Pomnier).

*

He was always thinking about God. He said to my mother: *Ah! cousin, how happy one is when he is serving God!* (Rosa Godard).

*

Once, while he was parish priest at Pinterville, he was walking with his own step-mother in the presbytery garden. He said to her: *When I die, I don't want any distinction other than to be buried in a place where everybody passes by and walks over my body . . .*

*

When somebody wanted to speak to the parish priest, they only had to go to the church, as they were almost always sure to find him kneeling behind the altar.

*

While at the Seminary of St. Sulpice, Father Laval had given his full support to the formation of a little society for the care of the Blacks. He said: *When your society gets going, I shall be one of you.* Bishop Collier had asked Rome for priests

for the Island of Mauritius and the Congregation, taking this request as a command from God, sent Father Frédéric Le Vasseur to see Father Laval in Pinterville and let him know about this call.

*

Charity had motivated his beginning at Pinterville. Charity would also mark his last days there. He distributed everything he had to the poor. His spare room contained a bed with good furnishings; — this he gave to the presbytery to serve as needed for some poor or sick person in the parish. His dishes were given to the Sisters at Acquigny and he left the parish priest a big chest of medicines. His farewell to his parishioners was very touching and accompanied by his good advice to all.

*

His time at Pinterville ended on February 19, 1841 . . . While he was in Paris, he went to consecrate himself and his future work to the Immaculate Heart of Mary at the altar of Our Lady of Victories. He offered Mass in that sanctuary with fervent love and confidence. Then he went to get the blessing of the venerable founder of the Confraternity, Father Desgenettes. Having consecrated himself, his strength and his life, to Our Lord through the hands of the Holy Mother of God, Father Laval completed his sacrifice by giving all his possessions to the Congregation . . .

He then made the vows of Poverty and Obedience into the hands of Father Libermann and all the superiors whom Divine Providence would give him in the future . . .

Due to a delay, caused by Bishop Collier making a trip to Ireland, he went to spend some time with his uncle at Tourville-la-Campagne . . .

The priest of a neighboring parish was ill, so he offered to replace him for Sunday Masses and the preparations for first communion. Almost every day he went a long distance on foot, his weariness being softened by his love for souls. In addition, he prepared himself for his coming labors and battles by asking everybody for prayers.

* * *

One day a student from St. Sulpice arrived at Tourville-la-Campagne. He went straight to Father Laval's room and told him: *Dear brother, the departure time has come. You must leave now and be on your way to London by this evening.*

Deo gratias, replied Father Laval. He took his breviary and his crucifix, said good-bye to his uncle, and left for Paris and from there for the Capital of Great Britain . . .

*

The *Tanger* sailed on June 6 (1841). The Servant of God began to feel sea-sick, and then became dangerously ill . . .

*

I have heard it said that he left for Mauritius so poor that he had to do his own washing on board ship, much to the amusement of the passengers. (Harel Emilion, Canon of St. Louis, a native-born Mauritian).

When he arrived, (on September 14) he said to Bishop Collier: *Monsignor, what a beautiful day it is for you to take possession of your Vicariate! . . .*

ON THE ISLAND OF MAURITIUS

From that moment on, he had no thought for anything but souls . . . Wherever he met Blacks, on the street, near their houses or at their place of work, he talked to them with the greatest kindness and a naturalness that put them completely at ease with him.

*

The admiration of the Blacks expressed itself in the expression: *That's our Father Laval . . . ; Father Laval represents God for us.*

*

He was respected by all groups of people, Catholics, Protestants, etc. Even the Government officials put aside their racial prejudices to the point where one Governor had to say: *Father Laval can twist me around his little finger!*

*

He could do whatever he liked with the Blacks . . . During a Corpus Christi Procession some young men kept their hats on before the Blessed Sacrament. Father Laval had only to say: *Take your hats off, boys, and get down on your knees* and at once, as if by magic, they obeyed. When some Protestant policemen kept their hats on before the Blessed Sacrament, he had only to say: *Take your hats off, gentlemen, show respect for Catholic worship . . .* and they obeyed at once.

One Shrove Tuesday some young people wearing costumes and masks met Father Laval on his way to say Mass in a parish. They surrounded him, some seized his donkey by the bridle and others by the tail, each pulling in a different direction. For a quarter of an hour they tested his patience. But Father Laval finally disarmed them by his gentleness when he said: *Let Father Laval go, boys, let Father Laval's donkey go!*

* * *

After Father Laval arrived in Mauritius, all superstitions disappeared. There was no more talk of sorcerers or witches, nor of relations with devils . . .

*

You could not find more fervent Christians . . . The marvels of the early Church were repeated on that little island in the Indian Ocean . . . Between 1841 and 1847 the Catholic Church converted the whole population . . .

*

He preached the word of God with a heart and mind filled with love, and supported his teaching by his example and the

holiness of his life. He had declared war upon sins of the flesh . . . As the regular means of avoiding sin and fulfilling one's duties, he recommended frequent Confession and Holy Communion.

*

One day an individual, finding him alone in the sacristy at six o'clock in the evening, struck him rudely, spit in his face, slapped his cheeks and threw him down on the ground,—all this because Father Laval had advised his concubine to leave him if he would not marry her.

After the missionary had put up with all this with heroic patience, he showed his charity by keeping silent about the outrage inflicted upon him and by praying to God for his persecutor.

Meanwhile, the aggressor admitted his fault, publicly begged Father Laval's pardon and became a faithful admirer of the good priest's virtue.

*

One day, as he was leaving the hospital, a possessed person spit in his face. The humble missionary, as if to thank him for thus making him resemble his Divine Master, lifted his hat.

*

On Palm Sunday 1842, an irreligious crowd invaded the lower level of the Cathedral of Port-Louis. They began fighting one another with blessed palms. The Servant of God, who was kind to the sinner but unable to put up with disorder of any kind, tried to make them respect the holy place. The crowd was shouting louder and louder and crying out: *Father Laval is angry and is scandalizing the assembly of the faithful!*

Going into the crowd, Father was insulted and received several blows with the palm branches.

*

Another time, a large group of malcontents came to the church and, as soon as the faithful had left, started to insult the Servant of God who was kneeling before the high altar.

* * *

In spite of difficulties, Father Laval, either alone or with the help of his confreres, converted at least 60,000 Blacks on the Island.

This miracle of conversion was assisted by something, if not miraculous, at least surprising, which happened in the Cathedral. Some libertines came into the church while Father Laval was giving a retreat to his new converts. They began to insult him, walking around with cigarettes in their mouths, picking out people and attacking and bothering them in all sorts of ways.

The holy missionary was seized with righteous indignation and called out: *My children, do you even insult your God in His own temple? Get out with all your filth! Filthiness has even entered into the house of God. . . . Get out!*

The group was terrified to find itself outside, without knowing too clearly how it got there.

Someone said: *I heard Father Laval preaching a sermon against impurity. It was extremely beautiful!*

* * *

Someone once tried to stop his going into a particular house because, they said, he would only be met with blows. *You say they will hit me. Well, so much the worse for them, poor people, but nothing will keep me from going to show them the miserable state they are living in.* He went; but his kindness was such that he had the consolation of seeing what had been a bad union turned before long into a Christian marriage.

*

Once he was even threatened with death; some were planning to take him and do away with him. But, without being disturbed, he got up in the pulpit as usual and said in a firm voice: *I have heard, my children, that some of those here present have taken an oath to kill me. Well, whoever you are, I want you to know that I am not afraid of you or your threats, nor*

am I afraid to die. Look, here is my Master (showing the crowd his missionary cross); *He is the only one I fear!* (He often used to say: *better to die a thousand times than to offend God*). *If you want to take my life, you can find me in the presbytery.* Then, from the pulpit, he asked the faithful to pray for those who desired his death.

LAVAL'S LOVE FOR THE POOR

Ever since his earliest years, Jacques showed his great love for the poor. He was happy when his parents would make him their messenger to take an alms to them . . .

At St. Sulpice Seminary he soon merited the title of Almoner to the Poor. He liked to see in the disinherited of this world the person of Jesus Christ. With respect and devotion he used to give the poor whatever was left over in the refectory. It was noticed that, when he came back from speaking to them, he seemed filled with joy at the opportunity to perform this pious task . . .

One very cold day, he was shivering as he carried out his daily task of Almoner. A poor man came up who was miserably clad and perishing from the cold. The Servant of God did not hesitate, but took off his own coat and threw it over the poor man's shoulders. Then he continued his task there in the bitter wind.

*

At Pinterville his food was always a little better on Sunday and feastdays: *That's the day when he invited Our Lord to his table in the person of poor people.*

On those days he had the food prepared with the poor in mind and, as they would invite one another to come along, Father Laval wanted them to be well taken care of. Even so, one day the cook had to put more water in the soup seven times, which naturally weakened the mixture. *If this keeps up, she said, we'll soon have nothing left but water.*

His charity was particularly warm in the case of a "poor unhappy man who was rejected by everybody" . . . "and looked upon as an idiot." Father Laval made this man his special project, inviting him to his table not only on Sundays

but often during the week. He started to teach him and, due to his perseverance and his care never to discourage the man, he brought him along until he was able to receive the Sacraments.

*

One day a workman came looking for the parish priest. When Father appeared, the man demanded a shirt. Father called the maid and said: *Marie, go and get a shirt for this man.* The maid objected: *But Father, you know you only have three left!* And Father replied: *Marie, I did not ask you how many I have; I merely told you to go and get one.* The maid obeyed at once.

*

Another day, he was cleaning the church, when a poor man came two or three times and asked for an alms. *But Father,* the sacristan said, *don't you see that it's the same man coming back again and again?* The reply was: *Let's do good for the sake of God; that way we'll never make a mistake.*

*

A priest who, as a seminarian, used to spend his holidays there, related that "I have seen the poor coming in crowds; he never turned anybody away."

*

They used to come to the windows to see him go down the street, and, as soon as they saw this venerable priest so poorly dressed but so cheerful and so charitable, they used to say: "There's St. Vincent de Paul passing by."

*

He gave up the coat he had as a doctor to make suits for two first communicants... When he used to go and say Mass at Acquigny on Sundays and once during the week, he went home fasting and gave his Mass stipend to the poor.

* * *

In Mauritius his charity went on as usual.

"I admired his kindness to the poor, the elderly and especially the unfortunate. He used to chat with them and greet them as friends..." (Ernest Huron, born in Mauritius in 1832).

*

One day he scolded one of his young confreres for having accepted a gold watch: *Sell it*, he said, *and let the price be added to the patrimony of the poor.* At that time Father Laval was feeding more than two thousand people by means of gifts he received from all over.

*

In order to make it possible for some poor working people to have a Christian marriage, he not only offered to celebrate gratis, but even paid the other wedding expenses if necessary . . .

During the last years of his life the resources he had at his disposal were far from sufficient for the needs of his poor children. This made his fatherly heart sad indeed, and he said with tears in his eyes: *There was a time when I sometimes did not know anyone to whom I could give an alms; now everybody is in need and I have nothing to give them.*

Often he reproached himself for the little bit of food he ate.

*

He practiced this virtue of charity for the poor up until his last days. Several members of the St. Vincent de Paul Conference came to visit him, and, when he saw them lined up by his bed, he said. *My good men, keep up your interest in the poor. They are the friends of Jesus Christ. Never forget that a cup of water does not go without reward when it is given in the name of Jesus Christ. As for me, I can tell you that, if I have a*

little bit of confidence as I go to appear before God, it is because I have loved the poor and always worked on their behalf.

*

At the hour of his death, Father Laval's great consolation was the thought that, according to the words of the Apostle Paul, he had spent all and had been spent himself for his brothers: *What happiness it is to have worked for Jesus Christ's poor! What a good idea I had to consecrate myself to the salvation of the poor! I bless God for it; I thank Him for it!*

*

The funeral service . . . After the Gospel, Father Etch-
every, S.J., went into the pulpit. The words of Isaiah *evan-
gelizare pauperibus misit me* which he took for his text were an
excellent expression of the mission of Father Laval.

THE SICK AND THE PRISONERS

The sick in the hospital were also the object of his
zeal. He looked upon the spiritual care of the sick as one of
the most important, and at the same time most consoling,
parts of the priestly ministry . . .

In that abode of suffering he made no distinction between
Whites and Blacks, natives and foreigners. He lavished his
fatherly care upon idolaters, Moslems, Protestants, just the
same as Catholics.

He called upon his doctor's training to join the doctors in
giving physical as well as spiritual care to the sick.

"When he was parish priest at Pinterville," recalls a priest
who at that time was a seminarian, "I was doing my spir-
itual reading with Father Laval from a book about Peter Clav-
er. I came to the passage where the blessed one is shown
caring for a negro who was covered with ulcers and licking the
sores. Father Laval stopped me and said: *Repeat that pas-
sage.* Raising his eyes to heaven, he said: *Isn't that beauti-
ful!* It is my conviction that he was already preparing him-
self for his ministry among the Negroes. He said that he had
nothing to do there and — indicating the surrounding country
— *I wish I had all that to evangelize.'*

*

Father Laval had a very special devotion to St. Peter Claver, *the Apostle to the Blacks*. Like him, according to a good witness, he is supposed to have instantly cured an abandoned leper by embracing him in a great spirit of faith and charity.

When cholera broke out in 1854 . . . , he went to the poor people who were sick, consoled them and gave them the Sacraments. His charity knew no bounds. The distances were great. My father-in-law had placed at his disposition a carriage and two mules — one for trips in the morning and the other for the afternoon. The Father was happy to be able to visit and console so many sick people and, like St. Francis of Assisi in his love for animals, used to say when he returned: *I cannot believe that these poor mules that help me to visit and console so many sick people will go without a reward.* (Hortense Collin).

During that epidemic, there were 900 marriages, 700 confessions and first communions, and 4.000 converts.

*

A white lady came to Father Laval to go to confession. At first she was met with a rebuff, although not a rude one. *Leave me to my poor black people, Madam, there are other priests for society people.* But the woman immediately answered: *Father, don't send me away. I am more unfortunate than your poor black people. They at least can see their children and caress them; whereas I am in an everlasting night.* Then Father Laval brushed away a tear and said: *That is very touching, Madam. Go to the church. I'm coming . . .* (Joseph Loiseau, born in Mauritius in 1835).

* * *

Until Father Laval's arrival in Mauritius, the prisoners had never had the happiness of having a minister of the Lord come every day to talk to them about God. In this work, he had some hard struggles. Still, by dint of patience, kindness and zeal, he broke down all resistance. Soon there was a big

change in the prisons. The convicts responded to the prayers the Father recited: Our Fathers and Hail Marys arose from that place which had never before echoed anything but blasphemies.

His exhortations were listened to. The moral lessons in The Gospel were received with joy. Prisoners even came to see in their chains the means of doing penance to make up for their past crimes and they watered them with their repentant tears.

HIS CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Father Laval liked to say: *Our Lord will not reject the poor missionary who has left everything for His sake.*

*

Sometimes he said: *As far as temporal goods are concerned, my pocketbook is very sick, but God will provide.*

*

When his missionaries hesitated to undertake the enlargement of the parish church because of the expense, the Servant of God put their minds at rest by saying: *Well, if you are financially embarrassed, pray to St. Francis of Assisi. The poor man of Jesus Christ will know how to find you the means.*

*

At a time when there seemed to be a threat to the future of the mission of Bourbon (which depended upon him as Provincial), he wrote to the local superior: *I don't think you should get discouraged; but rather rely totally upon God: men don't amount to much, especially in His Church.*

It was this same feeling of unshakable confidence in God that dictated these words concerning the mission of Madagascar: *Great good could be done among those people. The problem is that the Queen does not want to let white people go into the interior of the country. But, if it is God's will, it will work*

out. He always reacted to objections with that simple faith and used to repeat the words of Jesus Christ: *Omnia possibil-ia sunt credenti.*

BUILDING CHAPELS

As soon as he could, he built or had built beautiful churches. Some said that he was a bit extravagant in this regard. He replied: *Let us work for God. These constructions create work for the men, — that's an act of charity. Don't the rich get richer by reason of the work of the slaves? Must there not be ways of letting them make some compensation to them?*

...

He got the wealthy to make generous offerings. When he met a hardened sinner, he would say to his confreres: *Get him to give alms; make him give something to the church, — that's the greatest service you can do him.*

FATHER LAVAL'S MORTIFICATIONS

When he was parish priest at Pinterville . . . , his cassock was of coarse material and often patched. He wore over it a sort of cape with a hood that served as a hat when he went out in the village. He had an enormous rosary with a heavy cross hanging about his neck. Usually he wore big sabots instead of shoes . . . his poverty would have done credit to a disciple of St. Francis.

*

He never went near the fire, even though he was naturally very sensitive to cold. During several months of the year he was seen to have chilblains and little sores all over his hands and fingers, but he took no care of them.

*

There were rumors at Pinterville that he wore a coarse hair-shirt day and night and that he disciplined himself severely. Under his clothes he wore around his neck a rough cord

of horsehair long enough to be crossed over his chest. His old servant used to say: "That poot priest, he always wears something like that. He says it's for penance, but surely he gets enough penance in this place."

*

At first his bed was a simple mattress laid on the floor of his room; but, on the orders of his confessor whom he obeyed as if he were God Himself, he used a few planks to keep the dampness from injuring his health. Finally, in place of a mattress, he simply stretched a sheepskin on the ground . . .

*

In Mauritius he had no decoration in his room except a crucifix, a picture of the Blessed Virgin and a holy water font. His only furniture was a chair, a bed (or rather a sort of coffin roughly made from the wood of the trunk he had travelled out with).

This was the bed he used for the rest of his life and in which he died. It must have been most uncomfortable during his sleepless nights in the hot season of the year.

*

Father Laval lived on rice and a few eggs. When ordered to so by his Bishop and Father Libermann, he ate a little cheese and meat and drank a little wine. He never ate the delicious fruits of the country.

*

Although he was often sick, suffered a heart attack and had three or four hernias, he never wanted to depart from his strict rule of life. He always used the same confessional, although it was very uncomfortable and had caused a deformity in one of his shoulders. Several times he was found unconscious and had to be carried to the presbytery. Perhaps with some regret for his excessive mortification, he said to his confreres: *Oh, I see well enough that it is better to work without hobbling oneself.* He looked after the health of his confreres, especially in times of epidemic, with great solicitude.

*

Mrs. Midlemore noticed that Father Laval had very coarse handkerchiefs and that he was using them to wipe a sore on his face, so she brought him twelve white ones, begging him to use them. Father thanked her, but she was hardly out of the house when he sent the servant to sell them, saying they were too fine and that he wanted to use the price to help the poor. The lady heard this on the way out and reproached him. Father Laval simply said: *They are too fine for me; you did it for God, didn't you? . . .*

FATHER LAVAL'S HUMILITY

One day he was introduced to a religious who was wearing a cape with purple piping. Thinking it was a bishop, he knelt down and asked for a blessing. The religious replied: *I am not even a priest; I am only a brother. — . . . And I'm only a sinner.* And he would not get up until he received a blessing.

*

He never talked ostentaciously about the work of his ministry nor of the success with which it had been blessed . . . *Let's stay in the background*, he often said. That might in fact be said to be his motto.

*

When the Servant of God was relieved of the duties of superior of the missions, the Provincial wrote to the new superior asking him to have a photograph taken of Father Laval to be placed beside that of Father Libermann.

He obeyed the superior's orders, but he wrote to the Superior General begging him not to do this: *The place which belongs to me in the Congregation is that of one who remains unknown and who, after his death, is hidden under ten feet of earth. I hope that you will change your plan.*

*

He often used to say that his life was totally useless, but that he waited at the gate of Heaven in the hope that God would be willing to open it for him.

*

A few days before his death they heard him cry out when he thought he was alone: *O my God, these good people think I am a saint, when actually I am only the most miserable of all miserable sinners.*

FATHER LAVAL'S FAVORITE DEVOTIONS

During his vacation while still a seminarian, Father Laval was sometimes seen in Ivry-la-Bataille prostrated at one of the side doors of the church pouring out his adoration and prayers to God hidden in the tabernacle out of love for us. Another time he was seen praying on his knees before the outside door of the church at Parc, not far from St. André, where he had first worked as a doctor.

He spend his free time before the Blessed Sacrament, reading the lives of the Saints and the Holy Scriptures.

*

When somebody complained of falling asleep during meditation, Father Laval remarked:

What could Father Laval say,—he who falls asleep nearly every day, and almost always in front of the holy tabernacle? . . . Everybody does the best he can, but we must never get discouraged. If we can't stay wide awake before the Lord and make our meditation with great fervor, — Well, let's begin it with good will and if, like a faithful little dog, we fall asleep at our Masters's feet, don't worry about it. God knows the poor clay of which we are made and He will have compassion upon us and, if our intention are good, He will reward us for the little bit we do for love of Him. Just remember, however, when you wake up, you must humble yourself gently for your lack of generosity in fulfilling

your duties and ask God to help you next time to overcome that heaviness and drowsiness . . . but don't ever get discouraged . . .

*

According to trustworthy people, Father Laval one day brought Holy Communion to a sick person who immediately threw up the Sacred Host. With no concern except for the Holy Eucharist, the Servant of God bent over and consumed the Species himself.

* * *

At Ivry-la-Bataille, Doctor Laval had started the devotion of the Month of Mary, coming at 5 : 30 every morning to the altar of the Blessed Virgin to say his rosary. Little by little, he was accompanied by other people. Besides the rosary, he read a passage about the Blessed Virgin and sang a hymn.

*

He always joined the Holy Name of Mary to the Holy Name of Jesus. He must have recited the Our Father thousands of times, alone or in teaching it to his poor Blacks, and he always followed it with the Hail Mary. He never spoke of Jesus without also speaking of Mary, and always in a tone of voice which showed the affection and veneration he felt for the Mother of God.

*

In his favorite church, that of the Holy Cross, he instituted the recitation of the rosary before Sunday Mass and he often said that it was to this practice that he owed the very special protection of the Blessed Virgin for the conversion and the good of souls.

*

Our situation in Mauritius, he wrote to the Superior General, is always the same. We rely upon God alone and the protec-

tion of the Blessed Virgin, and up to now we have always found ground to stand on.

* * *

Father Laval found exceptional joy in talking to his elderly Blacks about the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He preached the Way of the Cross every Friday evening in the Cathedral, and drew a crowd from near and far. To prepare himself, he used to prostrate himself for a while behind the altar. Then he went into the pulpit and spoke with real emotion. He wept as he described the drama that took place on Calvary, and all his hearers wept with him. Thousands of souls were touched by Divine Grace and bitterly regretted their past faults and made good resolutions for the future. Fifteen years after his death, they still spoke enthusiastically of Father Laval's Way of the Cross.

*

If Father Laval saw a Black in the church during regular working hours, he said to him: *Who is your employer? Go and do your work and then come and work for God.*

* * *

He also had great love for the Church and for his Congregation. *Let us pray for Our Holy Father the Pope*, he would say with emotion from the pulpit of Port-Louis.

He was always in total submission to the decisions and the teaching of the Church and the Holy See; even in doubtful or controversial questions he held to what he believed was most in conformity with what was believed and taught in Rome. He looked upon the Vicar of Jesus Christ as the sure instrument of the Divine Will... In the Supreme Pastor of the Church he saw the very person of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

* * *

As a religious of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, he preached the devotion to Our Lady of Victories, having con-

secrated himself to her in Paris along with his apostolate among the Blacks.

*

Father Laval loved all the missions and, while giving large donations in Mauritius, he used to say: *We have novices at the Motherhouse, and, as you know, they like to eat. Our founder is not a rich man. We must try to send him some help.* While very mortified himself, he was good to his confreres.

*

When Father Thévaux asked the Servant of God if he didn't find it a consolation to die in the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and if he wouldn't like to renew his vows of religion, he replied: *Oh yes! I am filled with gratitude to God for letting me die in our beloved Congregation. With all my heart I renew the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, my consecration to the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary. I commend to God and to Mary my body, my heart, my soul, my whole life.*

GIFT OF PROPHECY?

Father Laval had the gift of looking into the future. One day, Father Thévaux said to him: *You must know that those doctors have decided to amputate my leg and that in the meantime they are making me rest.* — Yes, Father Thévaux, replied Father Laval, *I know all that, but those doctors are not going to have the last word in the matter. God does not want them to amputate your leg . . .* And the leg was not amputated.

*

One day he told a lady who had been sick for seven years that she was going to get better and become a nun, — and that is what happened . . .

*

One afternoon a Jewish actress came and asked Father Laval to baptize her child whose father she could not

name. He went to the church at once and, after pouring the water upon the child, wrote in the register the names of the mother and of the child, carefully leaving a blank line. Then, with all the gentleness and charity he was capable of, he said: *Jesus, my Master, who did not turn away Magdalen, does not turn you away either, my daughter. He accepts among His brethren the child you have given to Him today. I hope that by your good conduct and your virtue you will deserve to have the father of your child recognize you publicly and accept you. When that happens, come and tell me. Then I shall be happy to write in the missing name there where Our Mother the Church guards as precious the title of her children to the heavenly inheritance.*

A short time later, Father Laval's wish came true. The Jewish lady became a Christian, married one of the richest men on the Island and showed her gratitude to the missionary by giving him money for his poor people.

FATHER LAVAL AND THE ARRIVAL OF FATHER BUGUEL

"I arrived in Mauritius on December 8, 1855, the feast day of the Immaculate Conception. I greeted my dear confreres for the first time . . . , all except Father Laval who at the moment was on his knees in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in the Cathedral . . .

"I went to the sacristy where he joined me almost immediately. I fell into his arms like a child into the arms of his father. He said: *May God bless you, Father! You are welcome! God has given you health and strength! You will find no lack of work here, thank God! You will have ample opportunity to exercise your zeal among our dear children, the good Blacks. As soon as you get to know them, you will love them just as we do . . .*

"A moment later, when we reached the presbytery, he placed his hand affectionately on my shoulder and said: *You come at a good time, Father Buguel, for the rest of us are getting pretty old and can no longer do very much. We'll soon be ready for our trip to the cemetery! Be of good courage! God and the Holy Virgin will always be with you! . . .*

"The next day I went to chat with him for a little while after Mass . . . From the very start he showed me the way to

go . . . *Don't forget that, no matter how difficult the situation in which you may find yourself, your first and surest refuge must be the Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ always open to receive us and welcome us in the midst of all our miseries and trouble . . .*

"I asked him what special advice he could give me with regard to my new superior, and he said:

Pray a lot to God and to our good Mother, and then be in agreement with Father Thévaux. If sometimes you find him a little severe, a bit rigorous with respect to the formalities, pardon him, because he is a holy man and can give you much good advice . . . In all things count upon God alone! Then if it should happen, as it happens to everybody, that you do something stupid . . . well, dear confrere, don't get discouraged, pull yourself up at once and calmly go on with your work without being disheartened. Only proud and silly people get discouraged because of their faults, because they are not aware of their own weakness. If they knew what our poor hearts are really like, they would be surprised at only one thing; i.e. that they don't fall more often and more drastically.

LAVAL AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

Father Laval had a particular attraction for meditating on the psalms. Everything in them spoke to him of the majesty and the greatness of God and of His Eternal Word made man for the sake of men, of His humiliations and His death, but also of His triumph and His glory, His immortal reign in the Holy Church and in souls.

*

Whatever time he found available he devoted to the study of Sacred Scripture. He would show the Bible to his confreres and say: *Here is what refreshes and strengthens the soul. All other books, except the Imitation of Christ, don't amount to much in comparison with this.*

*

Father Laval had particular insight for appreciating and interpreting the Sacred Scriptures. His preaching seemed to

carry a special unction of the Holy Spirit. It was sometimes said that he could read the conscience of people.

*

He had made the Sacred Scriptures so much his own that one could almost say that he spoke their language; *I am not wise in the ways of the spirit*, he once said to his confreres, *but here is what God said*, — and he backed up his position with texts from Sacred Scripture.

*

As markers in his breviary he used pieces of ordinary paper on which he had hand-written a few sentences from Sacred Scripture of from the *Imitation of Christ*. They had to do with the value of time and the need to use it well, the need to flee from evil and to keep one's soul always ready for death.

*

The love of God . . . inspired him to particular fervor in the recitation of the breviary. He often said . . . that the breviary was not only an obligation for him but a heartfelt need and a great consolation. The very day he died, after he received Holy Viaticum, he asked Father Lefèvre — his voice weak and hardly intelligible — to recite the breviary with him.

*

He also liked to refresh his soul by reading the lives of the Saints. There, he said, you find holiness in practice . . .

FATHER LAVAL AND THE DIRECTION OF PRIESTS

He always found time for the direction of priests. One of them said one day: "I was known to be quite a lad: good heart and few brains. I used to get discouraged, to fly into a temper. It took only a word from Father Laval to turn me into a meek lamb."

One day a priest who was very discouraged came to Father Laval for advice and encouragement. What do you do, he asked, *when you meet unexpected disappointments and frustrations?* — *Well, my dear friend, I don't have far to seek for what to do; I get down on my knees; I take my crucifix and look at Our Lord on the cross and I think of what He suffered for us; I listen for a moment to what Our Lord has to say to me, and I rest quietly before Him.*

*

Another priest has this to say: "I was coming to tell Father Laval all my troubles, my disappointments . . . I think he read it all in my face . . . , because I had scarcely arrived when he put a fatherly hand on my shoulder and said: *You came to talk to me, didn't you? I'll be with you in a little while. Just now the bell is ringing for church. Let's go and get God's blessing. Then we shall both be better disposed and can talk better.*

"Sure enough, after Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, I spoke to him for a while . . . He spoke with so much conviction about the duty of a Christian, and even more of a religious, to carry the cross of Jesus Christ every day and every moment that I was carried along, especially when he told me that it is at the foot of the cross that the missionary is called daily to save his own soul and the souls of others . . ."

FATHER LAVAL'S CATECHESIS

An eyewitness relates that Father Laval, during a catechism class on Confirmation, asked: *What is Confirmation?*

He gave the answer: *It is a sacrament that gives us the Holy Spirit . . .* When he said *that gives us the Holy Spirit*, he went on to explain God's infinite kindness which we cannot merit at all . . . that, in spite of our stupidity, all our sins, all our many crimes and acts of ingratitude, He gives us His Holy Spirit and a multitude of graces in such a merciful, fatherly and divine manner . . . He did this so well that many of his hearers were moved to tears . . .

*

In his practical catechism lessons to the Christians of *Persévérance*, he had a marvellously simple and clear way of explaining the obligations of married people, but at the same time solid and devotional.

He told them how they must live in a holy manner in their holy state in life. They must show great love and devotion to one another and carry one another's burdens in all circumstances . . . They must be kind and charitable in bearing one another's miseries and faults, . . . and that not once in a while but all through life. Finally, they must work — husband and wife — at their own mutual sanctification and that of their children, so that one day they might see one another again in heaven and go on loving one another in paradise.

THE GREAT MAURITIAN

No priest was ever more loved and admired than Father Laval. If anyone had a serious worry, he went to pour it out to Father Laval. If someone had doubts, he went to him to seek enlightenment. If someone had committed a serious fault, he went to confess it to Father Laval, because it was thought that he, better than anybody else, was able to inspire contrition. First of all, he did not hesitate to reprimand; but, after the reprimand, came exhortation clothed in great gentleness. His exhortations moved us to tears, and the good missionary wept with us . . .

*

Governor Higgins said that the Servant of God was *the best policeman in Mauritius, that he kept crimes from being committed.*

*

The Bishop came to visit him often when he was sick. One day Father Laval asked him for his blessing. The prelate was moved to tears and could not help embracing him

as a child would embrace his father. As he left, he said:
What a man that Father Laval is! . . .

*

When the Bishop blessed him for the last time before his death, he asked him to pray in heaven for his Bishop and for the whole Diocese of Mauritius. *Yes, he replied with humble confidence, Yes, Bishop, I shall pray for everybody, for all Mauritius.*

FATHER LAVAL'S SICKNESS AND DEATH

On May 1856, vigil of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, while he was hearing confessions, he fell down, stricken by a kind of apoplexy. He was carried into the community. He was very calm and said to the first doctor who arrived; *We have fallen on the field of battle.*

*

On Sunday, May 16, 1858 he went into the pulpit at about 4 : 30 to give his usual instruction to the Blacks before their 5 : 00 o'clock Mass. He felt tired and had to make a great effort to make himself heard. All at once his voice faltered and he fell down in the pulpit as if he had had a serious stroke. He was carried unconscious to his room and did not regain consciousness for some time. He was obliged to take several days' rest, but soon returned to his ordinary work.

*

In his later years he had to walk with the aid of a cane and sometimes with a confrere helping him. Everything about him inspired respect and confidence. Some of my friends who did not go to church regularly agreed in time of trouble to go with their family to see Father laval and receive his words of encouragement and consolation . . .

*

One evening Artur Orioux came to see Father and noticed that his cell was brightly illuminated. He was so curious that he looked through the key-hole and a splendored spectacle met his eye. Father Laval was on his knees with his eyes raised to heaven, his face glowing with a celestial brightness, murmuring fervent prayers. There was neither lamp nor candle anywhere near him. The next day he spoke to Father Laval about what he had seen, but the holy priest said: *Ssh! Ssh! Don't say anything about it!*

*

When he was told that the doctor considered his condition serious, he cried out: *Thank God! I have been heard; now we can go along to the house of the Lord...*

They proposed giving him the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and he replied: *Yes, most willingly!*

After receiving the last sacraments, he kept repeating: *I rejoiced when I heard them say: 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord' ... O my Lord, God of truth, You have redeemed me ... I commend my soul into Your hands...*

*

He saw his end approaching. He had spoken of it to several people: *We shall not see each other again in this world. Try to join me in heaven.* He said to a friend of his: *Four days from now I shall no longer be on this earth; Let me go; I am tired out from my exile on earth.*

*

One of the Fathers said to him: *You are truly fortunate to be dying on the feast of Blessed Peter Claver, the great Apostle to the Blacks!* — *Very fortunate,* he replied. When they told him that Venerable Father Libermann and the other members of the Congregation already in glory would be coming to meet him, he raised his eyes and hands to heaven and his face lit

up. He seemed to see them already. They continually recited the prayers for the dying . . . All at once he broke his silence and cried out: *Oh! THERE SHE IS! Thank you, my God!* Perhaps he saw the Blessed Virgin.

*

In the midst of his sufferings, a Father asked him: *If God were to give you back your health, would you be contented? — Certainly,* he replied. *Whatever God wills; I do not refuse to go on working. "Non recuso laborem, non recuso laborem."*

They recited more prayers. All at once he opened his eyes, looked up to heaven, took two long sighing breaths, and gave up his soul to God. It was September 9, 1864, Feast of St. Peter Claver, the day after the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary . . .

It is well known, that after forty-eight hours of exposition in a burning hot chapel, Father laval's body was not in the least decomposed. His limbs remained supple and his remains gave off a pleasant odour. There was an enormous crowd of people around his body and at his funeral. One eyewitness estimated that there were 40,000 people present.

As soon as Father Etcheverry began his funeral oration, there was such an outburst of sobbing from the crowd that it almost drowned out his words. He had to stop and beg the people to control their grief.

*

The crowds who started coming when Father laval died have continued without interruption up to the present day. Nobody urged them to come; they just came.

In 1894 there were as many as 149,611 persons who came to Father laval's tomb,—this from a country which then had 200,000 inhabitants.

On the anniversary of Father Laval's death, Father Mazuy said before an immense congregation: *You are blessed to have honored in your Father a holy priest, an ardent apostle. Let us turn our hearts again to this guardian angel of Mauritius. His life was so pure, his death so beautiful!*

*

The very day Father laval was buried, this same Father Mazuy, his penitent and best friend, after his confreres in the Congregation, said to Father Thévaux: *We must pester him, oblige him to work miracles.*

THE MIRACLE FOR THE BEATIFICATION

The cure of the purulent eczema of Mr. Joseph Edgard occurred unexpectedly and instantaneously on July 17, 1923 at the tomb of Father Laval. *I am a Protestant. Don't turn me away. If you cure me, I shall become a Roman Catholic.* He got up and was astounded to find that he was completely cured.

His eczema had begun on his neck in June 1923. It soon covered his whole head and face, as well as other parts of his body. After the cure, there remained only a few red patches which disappeared in two or three days.

Drawn from the Process of Beatification
by Amadeu MARTINS, C.S.Sp.