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Beatification of Father Laval: Homily of Holy Father

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HOLY FATHER'S HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF FR LAVAL'S BEATIFICATION

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Alleluia! Alleluia! On this third Sunday of Easter, our paschal joy is expressed as an echo of the overflowing joy of the Apostles who, from the first day, recognized the Risen Christ. On Easter evening, "Jesus himself stood among them". "See my hands and my feet". He invited them to touch him with their hands. And he ate before their eyes (cf. Lk 24:36, 39, 40). Amazed and slow to believe, the Apostles recognized him at last: "The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (Jn 20:20; Lk 24:41); and no-one could take their joy from them (cf. Jn 16:22), or silence their testimony (cf. Acts 4:20). A few moments earlier, the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus were also burning within them while Jesus spoke to them on the way and explained the Scriptures to them; and they too had recognized him at the breaking of bread (cf. Lk 24:32, 35).

The joy of these witnesses is ours, dear Brothers and Sisters, we who share their faith in the Risen Christ. Glorified at the Father's side, he never stops drawing men to him, communicating to them his life, the Spirit of holiness, while preparing a place for them in the Father's house. Today, as it happens, this joy finds a striking confirmation, since we are honouring two admirable Servants of God who, last century, shone forth on our earth with Christ's holiness and whom the Church is now able to declare Blessed, to propose them to the special veneration and imitation of the Faithful: Father Laval and Father Coll, whom we must now contemplate.

2. It is plainly impossible to point out here all the outstanding events in the life of Father Jacques-Désiré Laval, or all the Christian virtues that he practised to a heroic degree. Let us remember at least what characterizes this missionary, with regard to the mission of the Church today.

It is in the first place his concern to evangelize the poor, the poorest, and, in this case, his «dear Blacks» of the island

of Mauritius, as he used to call them. A Frenchman, he had begun by practising medicine in a little town in his native diocese, Evreux, but gradually the call to an undivided love of the Lord, which he had repressed for a certain time, made him abandon his profession and worldly life. "Once I am a priest, I will be able to do more good", he explained to his brother (cf. biography).

A late vocation at St Sulpice Seminary in Paris, he was at once put in charge of service of the poor; then, as parish priest of the little Norman parish of Pinterville, he shared all he had with those in want. But on learning of the misery of the Blacks of Africa and the urgency of bringing them to Christ, he obtained permission to leave for the island of Mauritius, with the Vicar Apostolic, Mons. Collier. For twenty-three years, until his death, he dedicated all his time, used all his strength, and gave his whole heart to the evangelization of the inhabitants: indefatigably, he listened to them, catechized them, and made them discover their Christian vocation. He often intervened also to improve their medical and social condition.

His tenaciousness is an unending source of astonishment for us, especially in the discouraging conditions of his mission. But, in his apostolate, he always went to what is essential.

The fact is that our missionary left behind him innumerable converts, with a firm faith and piety. He was not given to sensational ceremonies, fascinating for these simple souls but with no lasting effect, or to flights of oratory. His educational concern was closely integrated in life. He was not afraid to return continually to the essential points of Christian doctrine and practice, and he admitted to baptism or to first communion only people prepared in little groups and tested. He took great care to put at the disposal of the faithful little chapels scattered over the island. Another remarkable initiative which links up with the concern of many pastors today: he had recourse to collaborators, men and women, as leaders of prayer, catechists, people who visited and advised the sick, others in charge of little Christian communities, in other words poor people, evangelizers of the poor.

What is, then, the secret of his missionary zeal? We find it in his holiness: in the gift of his whole person to Jesus Christ, inseparable from his tender love of men, especially the most humble among them, to whom he wishes to give access to the salvation of Christ. Whatever time was not dedicated

to the direct apostolate, he spent in prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament, and he continually combined with prayer mortifications and acts of penance which deeply impressed his confreres, in spite of his discretion and his humility.

He himself often expresses regret for his spiritual lukewarmness—let us say rather the feeling of his aridity: is it not precisely that he sets the greatest store by fervent love of God and Mary, to which he wishes to initiate his faithful? That is also the secret of his apostolic patience: "It is on God alone and on the protection of the Blessed Virgin that we depend" (Letter of 6 July 1853, cf. biography). What a magnificent confession! His missionary spirituality had been, from the beginning, in keeping with the general pattern of a young Religious and Marian Institute, and he was always anxious to follow its spiritual requirements, in spite of his solitude and geographical distance: the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, of which he was one of the first members alongside the famous Father Libermann, and which was soon to merge with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The apostle, now as in the past, must in the first place maintain spiritual vigour within himself: he bears witness that he is continually drawing from the Source.

That is a model for evangelizers today. May he inspire missionaries and, I venture to say, all priests, who have in the first place the sublime mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ and training the Christian life!

May he be, in a special way, the joy and stimulus of all religious of the Holy Spirit, who have never stopped implanting the Church, particularly in the land of Africa, and are at work there so generously!

May the example of Father Laval encourage all of those who, in the African continent and elsewhere, are endeavouring to build a brotherly world, free of racial prejudices! May Blessed Laval be also the pride, the ideal and the protector of the Christian community of the island of Mauritius, so dynamic today, and of all Mauritians!

To these wishes, I am happy to add a very cordial greeting to the Delegation of the Government of Mauritius, as well as to that of the French Government, which have come to take part in this ceremony.