

1979

Beatification of Father Laval: Panegyric of the Bishop of Evreux (St Louis des Français)

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Recommended Citation

(1979). Beatification of Father Laval: Panegyric of the Bishop of Evreux (St Louis des Français). *Spiritan Papers*, 9 (9). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol9/iss9/6>

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**MGR. HONORE'S PANEGYRIC
(St LOUIS DES FRANÇAIS)
the 27th April**

"The life of every saint belongs to what may be called THE PARADOX OF GOD".

"Who would have ever imagined that the country, in which he (Laval) was born in 1803 and which is one of the most dechristianised areas of France to-day, could have been a fertile soil where the sanctity of one of its sons would strike roots? Other Norman saints were nurtured in a Christian humus. But though his family milieu was religious, not so the surrounding countryside . . . This region on the banks of the Eure . . . which for centuries had known the greed of kings and dukes, never knew the stability and quiet necessary to the penetration of the Gospel and to its own conversion to a deep and enduring faith . . . Yet, it was there, to the extreme south of the plain of St André, that the future missionary was born. There was only one sign of what was to be his future destiny: love of the poor, who always found a ready welcome at the family farm".

(Passing over his early years as student, doctor, man of the world to the day when "he could no longer resist God" and decided to leave all and enter the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice).

"There he met the young convert Jew, Libermann, who dreams only of bringing the Gospel to the recently-freed Black Slaves of the Islands. Laval, whose rigorous observance and piety are already causing astonishment, is carried away by the same dream. But, he returns to his diocese of Evreux where

the Bishop, always short of priests, appoints him parish priest of Pinterville". (The fastidious doctor, of the fancy waistcoats and the love of horses, now yields place to the more modest role of a country priest, totally dedicated to his ministry).

"Two years and some months – we are now in 1839 – is more than sufficient for us to discern in the incumbent of Pinterville the features of a Cure d'Ars of this Norman parish. We see in him the same inclination as in Vianney to seek refuge in prayer, in dialogue with God, when his dialogue with men seemed to short-change him, the same indifference to ordinary things, of house and table, the same desire to strip himself of unessentials, the same desire of asceticism, . . . Four times he reheats the same soup and when he visits his own family he wants only what is left over after the meal! Later in Mauritius never once will he taste the mango or other exotic fruits. Having spent the night sleeping on an old sheep-skin on the ground, he rises at four and goes to the Church near the presbytery. His catechism classes, his visits to the sick are not enough to occupy his time fully. He returns to the Church, to offer to God the time men will not take from him. For long hours he kneels behind the altar, lost in silence and in prayer".

(But, unlike the Curé of Ars, his mission is elsewhere. Libermann has founded the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary: the work for the Blacks is about to begin. Once more Laval hears the call and leaves everything to follow an English Bishop to the Island of Mauritius).

"He is thirty-eight. He starts anew, more correctly he starts his real life-work. Until then he had been waiting on God's Will. Now he was on the way: there would be no turning back. The Blacks of this little island, so recently freed from their slavery, would take him over, take possession of every fibre of his being".

(The "paradoxes of God continue". . . fifteen years tolerated on a temporary permit of residence . . . a religious who never did a Novitiate and is not too well-versed in the Rule, he is made Superior of the missionaries of Mauritius and Bourbon . . . a member, he believes, of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he suddenly discovers that he is now a member of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost!)

"None of these things changed his determination to preach the Gospel to the Blacks. Men could be for him or

against him, approve or disapprove, threaten or mock, this tenacious Norman continued his own way. Silent when the storm raged: astonished when the demon of stupidity refused to declare its name. Always alone and serene. In a hurry to do what would not wait. Impressing himself on all by his self-mastery, his disinterestedness, and the sort of challenge he presented to the closed world of this little colony by his indifference to all that he considered unessential, all that was not related to the conversion of the Blacks".

(Out of a population of 140,000, in 1841, less than 12,000 were White; the others were coloured, mostly Creoles who, as Father Laval put it, tried to "imitate the Whites", newly-freed, incapable of handling freedom, ... laxity of morals, drunkenness and debauchery, laziness and misery ... riches, power and privilege were restricted to the Whites, who tolerated the situation when it was not too excessive, and who satisfied their consciences as civilised persons by recourse to prison and hanging as deterrents to robbery and rape, when things got too much out of hand!

Having learnt Creole, and moved into a little house away from the Cathedral, where his Blacks could come to him at any time, Father Laval began catechising and offering Mass for his poor friends).

"The hour of God had struck for the Blacks and Creoles of Mauritius. At first timid but curious, gradually some plucked up courage to approach this white missionary who was trying to snatch them from their vices and wretchedness. Then from house to house, from village to village, the movement of conversion began to spread and grow. In clusters, heavy and coloured, Father Laval reaped the harvest of God's vineyard, assisted later by two, three, five missionaries. Visitors to the Mission, at the end of their stay, express their surprise and admiration".

"Two outbreaks of cholera, one in 1854, the other in 1856, shook those who still resisted grace. Father Laval was exhausted but always there. Long hours in the confessional have so bent him that the black children give him the nick-name, Father Hunchback. He who had doubts as to whether his health would stand up to the demands of an apostolate that had all the appearance of a term of "hard labour", was still there. He had already spent 15 years on the island. From 1856 nevertheless he could not baulk the signs. Two cerebral attacks in the confessional warned him

that time was running out. We are now in the last years of a life which he would himself consider to be "quite useless . . . since I can no longer catechise, confess nor visit the sick". At at Pinterville, he seeks refuge in silence and in prayer. The body is broken, the face emaciated, but his sight seems to become keener . . . : the eyes blaze out of this holy face in the two portraits we have of him in the years of his retirement. When he dies, on September 9, 1864, the whole island goes in mourning. Forty thousand Mauritians of every race, class and religion gather to make his funeral cortege a progress of sadness and of glory".

(The preacher here goes on to sum up the lesson of the life of our missionary brother and model).

"First, for we must repeat it, his determination always to be at the service of the Blacks and the Creoles. They are the poor, whose colour and birth have set them apart, on the fringe of a society of which the Whites alone are privileged and alone able to benefit. It is for these poor people, black or half-caste, that he has been called. For them he has come. To them he gives himself: for them he wills to be free. At the risk of being considered eccentric. At the risk of not being understood or even opposed by those, priests included, whose origins identify them with power and position, Laval will not falter, will not yield. To be wholly at the service of the poor he refrains from cultivating the rich.: he will "keep his hands clean".

"This same concern for the Gospel and the Blacks, lies behind his God-given obstinacy to be less preoccupied by the rules of Community life than by the urgent demands of the mission. The Fathers of the Holy Ghost and the Immaculate Heart of Mary have to examine themselves in the first place, not on their strict conformity to the Community regulation as spelt out by their Father-General, but on their apostolic availability to the imperious call of the multitude in search of God: 'he who loses his soul for my sake will find it'. Here again we touch the evangelical paradox of the missionary spirituality of Father Laval".

"Another aspect of his pastoral approach also merits our attention: the priority he gives to the TRAINING OF ADULTS. Perhaps it was a memory of his ministry at Pinterville . . . that there was no future in teaching catechism to children if their parents themselves set only an example of unbelief or religious indifference. In Mauritius, it was the adults

first of all that he sought to meet, to convert, to organise. For them he writes his Creole Catechism: to them he addresses his sermons in the first place. The children will follow, when the Gospel has penetrated parents now converted from licentiousness and eager to fulfil the duties of their Christian state.

"Father Laval had no hesitation in confiding to these adults the work of animation and of responsibility. As the Gospel gained ground amongst them, Christians gathered together in the villages and built chapels and churches. Labour was free, so was the supervisory work on the site. It was enough for Father to set things in motion and unanimously all gathered round the one appointed by him to be responsible for catechising the children and leading the prayer of the community. The missionaries were too few in number: the hour had come for "all to be responsible for the Church".

"We should not be misled either in thinking of Father Laval as a theoretical exponent of pastoral theology and of conversion. From his origins in rural Normandy he had preserved in his character a sort of intuition or sound judgement which goes right to the essential, and that peasant realism which put more store on action than on words. There's God, there are men: God to serve, men to convert. Missionary work knows no other law than that two-fold fidelity. The privileged place for apostolic influence for Father Laval was none other than that of the Cure of Ars: the CONFESSORIAL: hour after hour, week after week he spent there in the moist and heavy heat of a tropical climate. It is he himself who tells us in a letter written to his uncle, the parish priest of Tourville La Campagne, with whom he spent his holidays long ago. It is the Sacrament of Penance that lifts the burden of sin from souls and that opens them up to the tender love of God. From that starting-point, all is possible: purity of morals and reconciliation of hearts, constancy of faith and a sharing of apostolic life. What does it matter if one becomes like "a beast of burden with confessing": what does it matter if the work seems "almost mechanical to poor and ignorant souls".

"The Epilogue to Father Laval's singular destiny, after the triumph of his funeral in Port Louis in the last century, is his Beatification in St Peter's, Rome. After having searched so long, this son of a Norman peasant family never moved from the centre which God had determined for him. There lies the key to his story and his holiness. The simplicity of his missionary project was equalled only by the fidelity with which he

realised it. Ardent zeal to save the souls of his poor Blacks is one in his heart with the courage of prayer and of penance. Availability to God and availability to men know no frontiers: one evokes the other. They imply and strengthen each other. This is the spiritual genius of Blessed Jacques-Desiré Laval, whose memory remains so dear to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and to our Normandy countryside of which he is the first spiritual glory".