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**INTERVIEW WITH Fr. TIMMERMANS
(VATICAN RADIO)
the 28th April**

Father Laval was born in Normandy in 1803 but spent 23 years of his life in Mauritius, a small island in the Indian Ocean. Don't try to tell the Mauritians that he was a Frenchman, though: you will always get the reply: "Our Father Laval is a Mauritian".

Two years ago I had the pleasure of visiting this lovely island. I was amazed to find that, though dead for 120 years, Father Laval seemed to be still living. Throughout the island he is far and away the best known person. One meets his name in streets, shops, everywhere in the island, even on the coach that at frequent intervals carries pilgrims to his tomb, about 12 miles outside Port Louis, the capital.

Father Laval died on the ninth of September, 1864. That day is now officially celebrated as a national holiday and between 70 and 80 thousand pilgrims visit his tomb. Christians, Hindus, Moslems: all these pilgrims come to tell "their" Father Laval, their problems, their secrets, or simply to unite with him in prayer. Though in every-day life they live in isolation from each other, on this day these three groups of European, Asian and African origin, are one. Barriers down, side by side, they pray together, sharing their common confidence in Father Laval.

The story of how Father Laval came to be the "Apostle of Mauritius" is a fascinating one, such as Providence often surprises us with.

In his early adult life as a doctor in Normandy, Laval did not show himself particularly religious, though in his work he was always the friend of the poor. God intervened suddenly one day however and his whole life was changed. He abandoned medicine to become a priest. Poor and forgotten in a little village in Normandy, he lived a life remarkably like that of

the saintly Cure of Ars. While there he heard talk of this distant island of Mauritius and of the miserable conditions of life of some 75,000 former slaves there. The Abolition of Slavery Act passed in Great Britain in 1838 had set them free but that was all. Without experience and apparently without preparation, Father Laval volunteered and was accepted as the first missionary to be sent out by a recently founded Congregation. It was 1841 when he landed in Mauritius.

He was not without preparation in spite of appearances. Unknown to himself, God had been preparing him. His love of God, nourished in prayer and sacrifice and expressing itself in his tender love of the poor, was preparation more than enough. He left all to become poor with the poorest: to be their servant and their friend. That he would be till his death in Mauritius 23 years later.

An "old world" was then dying: a new age was beginning for mankind: the future looked bright. The times were rather like our own, in which, though with perhaps less euphoria than that of 100 years ago, we assist at the birth of a new world.

The same is true of THE MISSION. Father Laval lived through the beginnings of a particularly fruitful period of missionary endeavour. Out of that, flourishing new Churches would spring up, especially in Africa. That era is now drawing to a close: the new, Younger Churches are coming-of-age and are themselves beginning to send out missionaries in their turn. It would be wrong to see this as MISSION ACCOMPLISHED then: it is rather the opening of a new stage in the story of THE MISSION. Over the last 5 years it has been my privilege to visit most of my 4,000 confreres in their mission territories. I am in a position therefore to claim that there are many points in common between THE MISSION of to-day and that known by a Father Laval. Like him in his time, we have no ready-made models to follow. Like him, we have need of a creative Faith, a love of God made visible in our lives and a closing of ranks in defence of the poor.

This same concern for the poor led Father Laval to become one of them, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them. For the first time, these former slaves, considered to be deprived and good-for-nothing, saw a white man who loved them sincerely. To them it was clear, Laval was their Brother, a man sent by God. With that realisation there was awakened in their hearts a confidence in themselves. It was

the beginning of an irresistible movement that would change their milieu and transform their lives. The love and respect shown them by Laval would give him the right to expect much from them in return. He even presumed to call on them to share responsibility with him. He trained catechists and confided to them the evangelisation of their brothers and the whole material organisation of their community. Most astonishing of all, perhaps, was the way in which at length, hatred and strife gave way to reconciliation and conversion, of both the former oppressors and those oppressed, between the old masters and their former slaves!

Man of God, man of prayer, friend of the poor, man above religion, race or class: all that Laval is for us. That too is his message to the Church and the World to-day.