

1979

# Beatification of Father Laval: And His Homily (French Seminary)

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### Recommended Citation

(1979). Beatification of Father Laval: And His Homily (French Seminary). *Spiritan Papers*, 9 (9). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol9/iss9/9>

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**Fr. TIMMERMANS'S HOMILY  
AT THE FRENCH SEMINARY  
the 1<sup>st</sup> May**

Father Laval once wrote: «Father Provincial wants me to have my portrait painted so that it may be placed alongside that of our revered Father Libermann. That must never be. My place in the Congregation is to be unknown in life and to be buried ten feet beneath the earth after my death". . . . And, behold to-day his portrait hangs above the apse of St Peter's, and the Pope has proclaimed to the People of God come from the four corners of the world the eminent sanctity of this humble confrere of ours.

The days we are living through have been extraordinarily rich and fulfilling. In the first place, the joy of the Beatification itself. Then the moving experience of being THE CHURCH, gathered together around Peter; of being present amongst the vast multitude as the Pope declared our vocation a sign and instrument of the coming of God's Kingdom to the ends of the earth. The attendance of so many members of other Congregations, our brothers and sisters, with whom we share the charism of the religious life. The magnificent manifestation of Spiritan unity and fraternity. The joy of meeting so many pilgrims from so many countries and continents, united in heart and mind in a diversity of languages and traditions. Rarely is it given to us to attain to such heights: it is a delicate gesture of the God of tenderness to strengthen us in our vocation.

Much has already been said or written about Jacques-Desiré Laval, our brother. Many highly qualified people have helped us to grasp the actuality of his life and message. After such a harvest, are there still a few scattered grains, typically Spiritan, to be gleaned? Has Father Laval a special word for us, his brothers, in this glorious hour?

YES, MY HEART REJOICES,  
YOU WILL SHOW ME THE ROAD OF LIFE,  
JOY IS PERFECT BEFORE YOUR FACE!

Whoever meditates upon the life of Father Laval is struck by the similarity of his spirituality and missionary vision to that of Father Libermann. Is it not strange that one who scarcely knew Libermann should be so possessed of the spirit that he sought to communicate to his Congregation? Laval loved his Congregation dearly, and followed faithfully the way it indicated, sometimes in the midst of difficulties and conflicts: in this way he found sanctity.

May this Beatification help us to realise better that our Spiritan charism is a road that leads to God. May it urge us all not to neglect the treasure of spirituality that is ours. Our Congregation can be through this, should be through this, a school of MISSIONARY HOLINESS and a privileged place to live.

"I HAD THIS GOOD INSPIRATION  
TO WORK WITH THE POOR"!

"He's a saint", people said, "because he loves the poor". Love of the most abandoned was at the heart of the life of Father Laval. It was the poor who traced the way his life would take, first as doctor, then as priest and missionary. His gift of himself was always fundamentally the same but was always growing more total, more absolute.

This gift of self was simple and complete. It did not stop half-way as can so easily happen to us, missionaries. Sometimes we make compromises which shelter us from the vicissitudes of the poor and which enable us to escape awkward choices. Laval, for what concerned him, identified with the poor without any doubt or ambiguity. He shared with them, contempt, persecution, violence. There was no question of reserved seats, privileged places for him'. Nor did he need them: the Lord was enough... and his confreres. This places him truly at the core of the Spiritan vocation, of the ideal which should be the point of reference for all of us: the

focal point towards which all Spiritan life and ministry should converge.

What happened in consequence was as incredible as unexpected: these poor people whom everyone considered degenerate, from whom nobody expected anything, these outcasts of society, felt themselves for the first time loved and respected. And they responded! The Beatitudes came to life before all eyes. First, in the hearts of individuals, then in the community, which prayed and welcomed the Word of God. They discerned the love of God, the Father, in the loving face of Laval and they became aware of their human dignity, of their own proper qualities and possibilities. With that all is changed, all is possible, even the reconciliation of former masters and former slaves: perhaps, the most astonishing thing of all in Mauritius. It is characteristic of Laval, even to the present time, not to set people against each other but to get rid of all barriers of race, class or religion.

"IT IS OUR DESIRE TO GIVE YOU NOT ONLY  
THE GOSPEL OF THE LORD BUT ALL THAT WE ARE".

Sensitised as we are to-day, we are quick to comment on the emancipation of these poor people, the liberation of these oppressed ones. It is well, nonetheless, on this occasion to recall the PRICE WHICH HAD TO BE PAID for that! Nothing more or less than love: not any love but that most demanding of all, which St Paul hymns in his Letter to the Corinthians: the Hymn of Charity. This is not a condescending love but a love full of confidence and respect; a love that is quiet and discreet; a love that is humble, patient, totally dedicated in service; a love that is disinterested, peaceable, working for justice. Don't think that comes ready-made. To achieve it, one must not be discouraged, nor worried by set-backs, nor confidence betrayed. "Love pardons all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". That is what is meant by "He who loses his life, gains it". That is what is meant by "begetting in sorrow", according to St Paul.

We must also speak of the Cross. THE CROSS lies at the heart of every authentic missionary life, at the heart, as is said of "this hard labour, this continual work, which finishes by destroying the soul". It is found in solitude, in misunderstanding and persecution . . . "If the grain of seed does not

die, it bears no fruit". Are we really convinced of the truth of that? Men are not liberated by ideologies but by "that which is weak and foolish in this world", by the Cross, which is the hall-mark of our message of resurrection and salvation.

Laval added another dimension to that which we are inclined to forget to-day: Penance. The Sacrament of Penance was central to his ministry. His life itself was a life of penance. Behind the sufferings and the various disorders he met with, he discerned the mystery of sin. He knew that to conquer sin one must die to sin. For Laval, his identification with the poor led him to that depth of faith where he was ready to die for their sins in his own flesh. Sometimes we ask what was the meaning of St Paul's mysterious saying: that we must fill up in our bodies what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ? This was no problem for the Saints: they applied literally the Word of God!

And, what was the result? We see a people raised up out of the dust, Christian Communities develop, an upsurge of what we to-day call "lay-ministries". In so many ways our times are similar to those in which Father Laval lived, by reason of the political, economical and social changes taking place. We have ample reason to learn from the school of Laval if we are looking for the best way to evangelise the people!

### "GOD HAS, IN FACT, PUT US TO THE TEST IN ORDER TO CONFIDE THE GOSPEL TO US"

"My poor soul is become very dry and arid: it is this whirlwind of ministry . . . We long for a little recollection".

Reading the letters of Father Laval, one thing impressed me deeply: his burning desire for solitude, in which to be free to make his way to the Lord in prayer combined with a fear of losing his soul in a ministry that was overwhelming. A strange complaint it seems to activists like ourselves! Yet, he writes to Father Libermann that, in the silence of the dawn each morning, he spends two hours in contemplation . . . We find the same hankering after the desert in Father Libermann himself. Both were in love with God: it is essential to any portrait of them: it is the secret of the fruitfulness of their ministries!

We, who have invented the "dialectic between prayer and action", and the true or false dilemma it hides, welcome quite simply this witness to a thirst for God. Neither should we forget that, despite the desire, Laval experienced weariness in prayer, a sense of emptiness, the silence of God: he tells us so himself.

This brings to my mind all my confreres, who experience crises in their lives and in their ministry. May Laval obtain for them the grace to pass through these moments of darkness and of doubt with humility, the grace to wait patiently and faithfully until God shows Himself again, till we feel again the touch of His hand, till hand in hand we go forward with Him who leads us forward.

"GO INTO THE WHOLE WORLD  
PREACH THE GOOD NEWS"

Let us turn to Laval himself for the last word. In one of his letters, he writes: "What is to be done? Must we leave fallow the land we have reclaimed and planted in the sweat of our brow? And, where there is a harvest so rich and beautiful, shall we allow it to become choked with weeds? Certainly not! Rather death than that!"

The final temptation for a missionary, even for a Missionary Institute, is "to drop things", to cease to see any future for the work. In the heat of missionary discussion such things are said: it is even suggested we draw out altogether. Let us pray for the gift of discernment! The weight of the daily burden can indeed grow so heavy that we are tempted to throw in the towel. To-day, Father Laval urges us to hold on, to continue his work. He tells us to believe in the Mission, in OUR MISSION. He recalls to our minds the fidelity of so many confreres gone before us who sowed in tears this loyalty to our Spiritan charism.

In his footsteps, after his example, let us enter with courage into this "new age of Mission that is already opening up before us", in the words of Paul VI. By the grace of God. Father Laval, our brother, pray for us.