



The Holy See

BEATIFICATION OF FR. JACQUES LAVAL, C.S.S.P.
AND FR. FRANCIS COLL, O.P.

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

29 April 1979

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 now 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 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 Sacred 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.

3. A second reason for ecclesial joy is the beatification of another figure that the Church wishes to exalt today and propose to the imitation of the People of God: Father Francis Coll. A new glory of the great Dominican family and equally so, of the diocesan family of Vich. A religious and at the same time a model apostle—for a large part of his life—in the ranks of the clergy of Vich.

He is one of those ecclesial personalities who, in the second half of the nineteenth century enrich the Church with new religious foundations: a son of Spain, of Catalonia, which has produced so many generous souls that have bequeathed a fruitful heritage to the Church.

In our case, this heritage takes on concrete form in a magnificent and tireless work of evangelical preaching, which culminates in the foundation of the Institute known today as that of the Dominican Sisters of "La Anunciata", present here in large numbers to celebrate their Father Founder, together with so many members of the various organizations which the Congregation has created.

We cannot now present a complete portrait of the new Blessed, an admirable mirror—as you have been able to observe from a reading of his biography—of heroic human, Christian and religious virtues, which make him worthy of praise and of imitation in our earthly pilgrimage. Let us merely speak briefly about one of the most striking aspects of this ecclesial figure.

What impresses us most on approaching the life of the new Blessed, is his evangelizing zeal. At a very difficult moment of history, in which social upheavals and laws persecuting the Church make him leave his convent and live permanently outside it, Father Coll, abstracting from human, sociological or political considerations, dedicates himself completely to an astonishing task of preaching. Both during his parish ministry, especially in Artés y Moya, and in his later phase as an apostolic missionary, Father Coll shows himself to be a true catechist, an evangelizer, in the best line of the Order of Preachers.

In his innumerable apostolic journeys over the whole of Catalonia, through memorable popular missions and other forms of preaching, Father Coll—Mosén Coll, for many—is a transmitter of faith, a sower of hope, a preacher of love, peace and reconciliation among those whom passions, war and hatred keep divided. A real man of God, he lives fully his priestly and religious identity, made a source of inspiration in the whole of his task. To those who do not always understand the reasons for certain attitudes of his, he answers with a convinced "because I am a religious". This deep consciousness of himself is what directs his incessant labour.

An absorbing task, but which does not lack a solid foundation: frequent prayer, which is the driving power of his apostolic activity. On this point, the new Blessed speaks very eloquently. He himself is a man of prayer; he wishes to introduce the faithful along this way (it is enough to see what he says in two publications of his "La hermosa rosa" and "La escala del cielo"). It is the path he points out in the Rule to his daughters, with stirring words, which because of their relevance today I also make my own: "The life of Sisters must be a life of prayer... For this reason I urge you over and over again, beloved Sisters: do not abandon prayer".

The new Blessed, recommends various forms of prayer to sustain apostolic activity. But there is one that he prefers and which I have particular pleasure in mentioning and emphasizing: prayer while contemplating the mysteries of the rosary; that ladder to go up to heaven", composed of mental and vocal prayer which "are the two wings that Mary's Rosary offers Christian souls". A form of prayer which the Pope too practises assiduously and in which he calls upon all of you to join, particularly in the coming month of May, dedicated to the Virgin.

I conclude these reflections in Spanish with a greeting to the Authorities who have come for these celebrations in honour of Father Coll. I invite everyone to imitate his example of life, but especially the sons of St Dominic, the clergy and particularly you, Dominican Sisters of the "Anunciata", who have come from Spain, Europe, America and Africa, where your religious activity is carried on generously

4. The hope that I express this morning, in conclusion, is that today's double Beatification will serve to strengthen and promote commitment in the catechetical action of the whole Church. It is well known that the subject of the Fourth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held here in Rome in the autumn of 1977, was precisely that of catechesis. The Synod Fathers—of whom I too was one—tackled and studied this theme of prime importance for the life and action of the Church at all times. They stressed the urgency of giving catechesis definite priority over other initiatives,

less essential even if, perhaps, more spectacular, because the absolutely original aspect of the Church's mission is carried out by means of it. A mission—they confirmed—which involves all members of the People of God, though in their different functions, and commits them to a continual search for adequate methods and means for a more and more effective transmission of the Message.

The thought of the Synod Fathers was addressed particularly to the young, of whose growing importance in the world of today they were well aware: for amid uncertainties and disorders, excesses and frustrations, the young represent the great force on which the fate of future humanity depends. The question that troubled the Synod Fathers is precisely this one: how to get this multitude of young people to have a living experience of Jesus Christ, and that not just in the dazzling encounter of a fleeting moment, but by means of a knowledge of his person and his message that becomes more complete and luminous every day? How to kindle in them the passion for the Kingdom, which he came to inaugurate, and in which alone the human being can find full and satisfying self-fulfilment?

To answer this question is the most urgent task of the Church, today. It will depend on the generous commitment of all, if a testimony of the "message of this salvation" (Acts 13:26) can be offered to the new generations, a testimony capable of winning over the minds and hearts of the young, and of involving their will in those concrete choices, often costly ones, which the logic of the love of God and of one's neighbour demands. It will depend above all on the sincerity and the intensity with which families and communities are able to live their adherence to Christ, if the young are effectively reached by the teachings imparted to them at home, in school, in church.

Let us pray, therefore, the new Blesseds to be close to us with their intercession and to guide us to personal and deep experience of the Risen Christ, who will make our hearts also "burn within us", as the hearts of the two disciples burned on the way to Emmaus, while Jesus "talked to them on the road and opened to them the Scriptures" (cf. Lk 24:32). In fact, only he who can say: "I know him"—and St John has warned us that anyone who does not live according to Christ's commandments cannot say this (cf. Second Reading)—only he who has reached an "existential" knowledge of him and of his Gospel, can offer others a credible, incisive and enthralling catechesis.

The lives of the two new Blesseds are an eloquent confirmation of this. May their example not be proposed to us in vain!

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