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The Ven. Msgr. de Laval

by Rev. Georges-E. Demers
(translated by Rev. Georges Abel)

The Venerable

Msgr. de Laval

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CAUSE DE MGR DE LAVAL

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I

Vocation to the priesthood

The Venerable Servant of God, François de Montmorency-Laval, was born on April 30, 1623, at Montigny-sur-Avre, a small village of Normandy, Beauce (France). His father, Hughes de Montmorency-Laval, belonged to one of the most illustrious houses of France and was the scion of two great families of outstanding nobility and virtues, the Montmorency and the Laval, His mother, Michelle de Péricard, was the sister of the bishop of Evreux.

Young François received at the hands of his parents an education firmly grounded on piety and the love of duty.

At a very early age the child already felt the yearnings to consecrate his life to God and become a priest. So, in 1631, when barely 8 years old, he was sent to the famous Jesuit college of LaFlèche to begin his classical studies. As it was the custom then for children destined for the Church, François, on entering on college donned the cassock and received the clerical tonsure.

The young student was not yet 15 years old when his uncle, Msgr. de Péricard, Bishop of Evreux, appointed him Canon of his cathedral church. This function did not keep him from his studies ; a deputy resident cleric recited in his name the canonical hours at Evreux.

In 1641, after ten years of literary and philosophical studies at LaFlèche, François de Laval undertook his theological formation at the College of Clermont, in Paris.

While in Paris, his vocation was very seriously tried. By the death of his two elder brothers in 1644 and 1645, he became the head of the family and thereby the Lord (Seigneur) de Montigny. He did not, however, give up his project of becoming a priest, in fact he did not even leave the ecclesiastical state of life. To console his grieving mother and settle the affairs of the estate, he retired to Montigny momentarily.

The different administrative activities he then displayed reveal, in the abbé de Montigny, as he was at the time called, that firmness of character which was to be a striking feature later on of the Bishop of

Quebec. As soon as the family affairs had been settled he resumed his interrupted studies.

It was while François de Laval was a student in Paris that was founded in the capital the most important group of a society under the mysterious vocable of Aa. This society, of which the public was unaware, grouped together the members of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin who wished to live with the greatest perfection their christian ideal, and it suggested as a means of sanctification the strict observance of the rules of the Congregation. It constituted an elite in the midst of the Congregation.

François de Laval had been one of the initiators of this society when it was first introduced at the college of LaFlèche. In Paris, he also participated actively in the founding of the group, which, it was decided, was to be called the Good Friends. He remained a member of this association all his life. Most of the priests he brought to Canada with him to found his Seminary of Quebec, were also members of the Aa, and it was they, who, in conjunction with the Bishop, spread the devotion to the Holy Family and the Holy Apostles, the patrons of the Aa.

The 1st of May 1647, François de Laval was ordained to the priesthood in Paris ; and the next day he ascended the altar steps for the first time with admirable fervour.

On December 7th of the following year, Msgr. de Péricard invited François to assume pastoral duties in his diocese and made him Archdeacon of Evreux.

II

Missionary vocation

Providence had other designs than to keep in France this fiery-hearted priest, who, due to his noble extraction, could aspire to the most illustrious French bishoprics. A totally different destiny was in store for him.

While still at LaFlèche college, the young student has hearkened to the voice of Christ inviting him to devote his life to the spreading of His Kingdom in foreign countries. Now in 1653, Father de Rhodes, a Jesuit missioniary of the Far East, was in Paris seeking to obtain apostolic workers for China and Tonkin. The zealous missionary mentioned his project to the pious members of the Aa. All the members unanimously agreed to leave their native land to promote the glory of God. Three of them were chosen, one being François de Laval, who was immediately recommended to Rome as the Apostolic Vicar of Tonkin.

To release himself from all worldly ties and to prepare his soul for the high function entrusted to him, the abbé de Montigny gave up his inheritance in behalf of his younger brother, and retired to the Hermitage of M. de Bernières, at Caen. Under the guidance of this master of the spiritual life, he applied himself to the practice of the most austere virtues.

Among the usual exercises the Venerable servant of God practised we may note : long mental

prayers, hair-clothes, fasting, penances, rugged pilgrimages on foot while begging his food as the last mendicant, care of the sick and pestiferous of the city. It is related that, at a sick bed-side, this worthy emulator of Saint Francis Xavier the noble François de Laval carried on mortification and self-denial to the point of kissing the most loathsome sores of the sick.

The plan of sending missionaries to China andTonkin fell through because of the opposition of Portugal, which had the protectorate of the Far East. It was for New France, expanding beyond the Atlantic, that Providence set apart this pious ascetic. The latter, still retired at the Hermitage of Caen, awaited the call of God with a profound tranquility of soul.

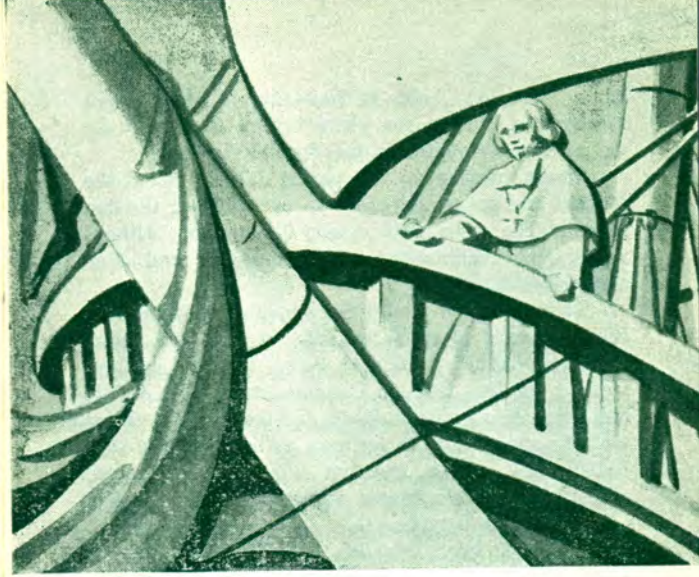
III

Canadian vocation

This call soon came.

At the very moment the project for the Far East was wrecked, Canada was demanding the presence of a Bishop. The Jesuit Fathers, the Saint SulpiceCongregation and Mother Mary of the Incarnation had frequently written to France to expose the urgent need of a Bishop in New France, both for the administration of the sacraments and the organization of the recently founded Church. King Louis XIV, on the advice of the Jesuits, thought about the Abbé de Laval and proposed to him to become Bishop of Quebec. The latter was very willing to go to the stern missions of Canada, but in his humility he, at first, refused the mitre. All the authority of M. de Bernières was required to convince him that God wanted him to be a Bishop. He accepted.

The 13th of April, 1658, Pope Alexander VII made him Bishop of Pétrée and Apostolic Vicar of Canada. On the following 8th of December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception for which he always had a special devotion, François de Laval was consecrated by the Papal Nuncio, Mgr Piccolomini, in the Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in Paris.



IV

Towards the Canadian missions

On Easter Sunday 1659, Bishop Laval left his native land on his way to the immense regions of America, full of unknown forest trees, where, in a rugged climate, lived uncivilized savage tribes of barbarous and cruel manners, and where, perchance, the most horrible martyrdom would one day put an end to a long life of toil and sacrifices. Yet the perspective of eventual sufferings in no wise lessened the enthusiasm of the young Bishop. On the contrary, in his thirst for immolation he ardently wished to endure martyrdom

out of love for Christ, in imitation of those Jesuit missionaries, who a few years before, had been the victims of their apostolic zeal for the Indians.

Ocean crossing at that period did not afford the comfort and luxury we enjoy in our modern floating palaces. The ships were small, ill-equipped, without ventilation, overcrowded with passengers and even animals.

It took over a month for the ship with the new Bishop aboard to reach Canada. It anchored before Percé on May 16, 1659. At Percé, Bishop Laval set foot for the first time on Canadian soil. The Jesuits had a flourishing mission there, and the Apostolic Vicar took the opportunity to perform, on behalf of the local Indians and settlers, the first acts of his episcopal ministry : he administered confirmation to more than a hundred and forty people.

A month later, Monday, June 16, 1659, Bishop Laval landed at Quebec. Great was the rejoicing in the small capital of New France, on the evening of June 16, at the news of the arrival of the Bishop, with several secular priests, a young theological student and a Jesuit father. The following morning a procession assembled near the docks of Lower Town : its ranks were formed by the reverend fathers and the students of their college, the citizens of Quebec and nearby villages, Governor d'Argenson with the principal officers of the colonial government, and then came Bishop Laval advancing majestically in his episcopal robes, wearing the mitre and holding the pastoral staff in his hand. In the midst of the general joy, the procession winded its way to Upper-Town where the Vicar Apostolic entered the parochial church, which thus became the cathedral of his farflung diocese.

V

The Vicar Apostolic

The Apostolic vicariate the Holy See had just committed to the pastoral care of Bishop Laval was undoubtedly the largest ecclesiastical circumscription in the world. It included all the possessions already acquired by the French Crown, as well as all those the King of France could conquer in the future. Hence it extended to all of North America, except the English colonies, from the islands of the Atlantic to the distant Pacific, from the eternal snows of the white polar solitude to the Gulf of Mexico.

Bishop Laval came into personal contact with but a very small portion of his vicariate, of which a large section was not even explored during his lifetime. In fact his episcopal ministration was limited to the territories bordering upon Saint-Lawrence river. However, his apostolic zeal was felt in the furthermost regions to which he sent missionaries to spread in his name the good news of the Gospel.

The first concern of the young thirty year old Bishop was to organize parochial ministry in his apostolic vicariate.

Until the arrival of Bishop Laval, the Jesuit Fathers had attended to all the parochial ministry both for the French settlers and the Indians. The parish of Montreal alone was entrusted to the care of the Sulpicians on their arrival in 1657.

Scarcely had Bishop Laval reached Quebec that he committed the care of the Indian missions to the Jesuits, while reserving to the secular clergy the parochial duties of the French colony. Barely two or three parishes were then well organized. Bishop Laval devoted his best energies to the task of establishing new parishes in all the localities of the colony where the parishioners could support a parish priest. As a consequence of his efforts, when he resigned in 1688, there were in Canada fourteen canonically erected parishes where zealous priests exercised their ministry to the settlers of more than thirty localities in the Saint-Lawrence valley.

In all these parishes, Bishop Laval left no stone unturned to intensify parochial life as much as circumstances permited.

VI

The Seminary of Quebec

Bishop Laval understood that the parochial ministry in New France required numerous apostolic workers, well trained in the practice of virtues. In fact, it was in view of recruiting, assuring a sound formation, and seeing to the maintenance of a holy and devoted clergy that he founded on March 26, 1663, the Seminary of Quebec.

The Seminary of Quebec, the Bishop's enterprise of predilection, was not, as its name seems to

imply, simply a school for the clerical formation of youth. It had, indeed, a far wider scope. To ensure permanently an intense spiritual life in the clergy, the Bishop had made of his Seminary a real community to which all the priests of the diocese would be incorporated. The Bishop could choose, as he wished, among the priests of the Seminary, those he judged qualified to see to the formation of the young clerics of the Major Seminary and the children of the Minor Seminary, and he sent the others to minister to the French settlers and even to the Indians the consolations of our holy religion. Whether educators or pastors, all the priests had to surrender their personal belongings to the community.

In return, they obtained the assurance of being received by the Seminary as brothers when illness or old age obliged them to suspend their pastoral activities. Each priest was to consider the Seminary as his home. It was within its walls that he made his retreat ; there also he could contact devoted priests to enlighten him by their advice or encourage him in his trials; there again he was provided with all that was necessary for his subsistence, such as clothing, food, books, when the parish he administered was too poor to maintain him ; finally when worn out by labour, his health undermined and weakened by age, he was sure to find a peaceful and consoling atmosphere to prepare himself to die well.

There Bishop Laval welcomed his priests to the Seminary with great fatherly love, " Joy was reflected in his face ", wrote Latour. " He gazed with admiration at these men exhausted by climate and work, whose features bore a written testimony of their zeal. He would hasten to meet them, he would kiss them and shower caresses on them, he would listen sympathetically to the least detail of their sorrows and did his utmost to relieve their needs. He was particularly pleased when they appeared before him in a tattered cassock, a poor sailor's bonnet, stout shoes with hooks, in a word, as savages ; it was then that he recognized them as his own true children, indifferent to the superfluities of living, despising all external vanity so as to give themselves entirely up to their apostolic duties ".

The Bishop dedicated his Seminary of Quebec to the Holy Family and affiliated it to the Seminary of Foreign Missions recently founded in Paris.

VII

Apostolical trips

Bishop Laval was not satisfied with merely sending to the Canadian colony zealous priests who would keep christian faith alive in New France. He indeed wished to verify for himself the outcome of their efforts by frequently visiting his diocese. In so doing, besides, he was fulfilling one of the most important. duties of his function.

Bishop Laval had to undertake these pastoral visits o the diocese in particularly trying conditions " In summer he was conveyed in a small bark canoe by two peasants, with no other suite than a single

ecclesiastic. He had with him merely a wooden crozier a very simple mitre, and only such other ornaments as were absolutely necessary for a *golden bishop*, as the authors say when speaking of the first prelates of Christianity " (*Jesuit Relations, 1676*).

In winter the trips were far more severe. As the lowest of his missionaries, the humble prelate travelled on snow-shoes, a blanket on his back, frequently unable to find food, sleeping in barns or on straw near a fire, and he covered long distances enduring incredible fatigue well understood by all who are aware of the rigours and discomforts of the seasons in Canada; and all these inconveniences he patiently endured till his death (Memoir on Msgr. de Laval, 1708).

But what of it all ? His love for souls, added to the responsibilities of his office, prompted him to visit his flock, to comfort those who suffered, to give courage to others of weakening faith. The warm-hearted apostle in such cases never hesitated to brave any suffering whatsoever.

It was only the very isolated regions of the remote missions which the valiant apostle was unable to visit. And yet how his heart was consumed by the desire to devote himself to the poor children of the forest. He even aspired to live and die amongst them as a simple missionary. He was, however, obliged to be satisfied with sending to these far away lands, missionaries to spread the light of Christian Faith to these uncivilized tribes.

VIII

Liquor traffic

One of the greatest obstacles to the propagation of the Faith among the Indians, against which Bishop Laval had to display all the resources of his energy was the liquor traffic with the natives. The unrelenting struggle he waged against this pernicious calamity "constitutes one of the most admirable titles to the gratitude of the inhabitants of Canada"(Ferland, *History of Canada*).

Of all the merchandise the French traders offered to the Indians in exchange for their rich furs, none appealed more to their cupidity than liquor. But fire-water, as they called intoxicating liquor had upon these poor dwellers of the woods the most deplorable results. The Relation of the Jesuits for 1659 and 1660 sketches in a few lines a distressing picture of the disorders introduced amidst these savages by liquor ; the narrator wrote :

"Those who have mingled somewhat with the Savages (I speak only of those living near our settlements) are well aware that drink is a demon that robs them of their reason, and so inflames their passion that, after returning from the hunting richly laden with beaver-skins, instead of supplying their families with provisions, clothing, and other necessary supplies, they drink away the entire proceeds in one day and are forced

to spend the winter in nakedness, famine and all sorts of deprivation. There have been some whose mania was so extraordinary that, after stripping themselves of everything for liquor, they sold even their own children to obtain the means of intoxication. Children, too, when they are overcome with drink, beat their parents without beeing punished for it : young men use it as a philter, corrupting the girls after making them drunk ; those that have any quarrels pretend to be intoxicated, in order to wreak vengeance with impunity. Every night is filled with clamors, brawls, and fatal accidents,which the intoxicated cause in the cabins. Every thing is permitted them, for they give as satisfactory excuse that they were bereft of reason at the time : hence one cannot conceive the disorders which this diabolical vice has caused in this new Church."

The Indians themselves deeply deplored the immense harm that liquor wrought in their ranks. Mary of the Incarnation related that an Algonquin chief complained to her in these words : "Ononthio (the governor) is destroying us by allowing liquor to be given to us" (Letter to her son, August 10, 1662). And we know that several Indian chiefs begged the Governor to edict stringent laws against these traders or at least to see that the laws already in force be strictly observed.

Unfortunately there were people in Canada, governors even and intendants, who encouraged or allowed such traffic to go on. An excessive ambition to promote commercial benefits in the colony, or perhaps a wish to guarantee their private interest made them, as it were, lose a judicious viewpoint of the problem. Hence as they were more concerned about the material advantages of the country than about the preservation of good morals and the conver-

sion of the Indians, they simply saw in liquor traffic a means of activating fur trading between French and Indians.

Some went so far in trying to justify their attitude as to propound the specious false reasoning that the Indians, thus drawn to the French by liquor, would perhaps be more easily converted to Christianity and civilization.

Shortly after his arrival in Canada Bishop Laval became fully aware of the situation. He foresaw the baneful consequences such traffic would ensue both to the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Indians, as well as to the eventual progress of the Canadian colony.

Strengthened by the advice of the theological doctors of La Sorbonne, and supported by his clergy, he stood "like an insurmontable obstacle" against the rising flood which unfurled in its wake the most despicable vices in New France. Nothing could stop him, neither the ill-will of the traders, the remonstrances of Louis XIV and his minister, nor the persecutions of civil authority.

He first of all appealed to the governor to obtain a strict observance of the laws previously promulgated by the Royal Council against the traders. Realizing the uselessness of his appeals, he solemnly proclaimed, in a sermon at the Cathedral on May 5, 1660, a sentence of excommunication against those who traded liquor with the Indians. At the beginning, this menace held back the traders ; but as they soon resumed vile traffic, the Bishop repeated the sentence of excommunication reserving to episcopal authority the absolution of the offenders. Three times, in 1662, 1671, and 1679, he undertook the perilous trip to France to plead with the King the cause of tempe-

rance for the Indians. Unfortunately the Court had been won over by the specious reasonings of those who encouraged such commerce. After an energetic resistance, and on the advice of his friends, the Bishop had to accept a regulation of the King, which did not fulfill his hopes relative to the cause of temperance, but which seemed then the only possible solution to the problem. According to this regulation the French could traffic in liquor with the Indians but only in the forests. Thus thes ettled agglomerations would no longer be the scenes of scandals as in the past.

However the Bishop never conceded defeat. Till the very end of his life, he continued by his preaching and that of his clergy, by his prayers and his mortifications, the arduous battle against the traffic of intoxicating liquor with the Indians.

IX

The Apostle of Youth

Bishop Laval loved children and youth above all. He was particulary concerned with the problem of education and he did his utmost to find a solution to it. Quite true, he never formulated sholarly pedagogic systems, but his acts reveal a constant solicitude to provide the advantages of instruction and sound education for the youth of his diocese.

A particularly touching scene at the end of his life symbolizes his paternal fondness for the young. It is related, that one winter day, on a street in Quebec,

he came upon a poor child, shivering in tattered rags inadequate to protect him against the cold. The old Bishop, moved to compassion, led the needy waif to the Seminary, humbly knelt before the child to wash his feet, gave him warm clothing, and sent him away happy. In this small child he had seen the Child Jesus to whom he had a deep devotion.

It was the same delicate and considerate love which inspired the Bishop's affection for Canadian youth. Youth constituted his greatest hope to firmly establish his Church. Under his pastoral crozier, many flourishing entreprises were founded to ensure the Christian education of children and youth.

Soon after his arrival in Quebec, the Bishop dreamed of a native clergy for his apostolic vicariate ; he even thought of forming priests drawn from the ranks of the Indians, who eventually would be sent back to convert their countrymen.

With this in view, he began by accepting a few children in his small house and sent them as day scholars to the Jesuit College.

Then in 1668, he founded the Minor Seminary of Quebec. This foundation, dedicated to the Child Jesus, was his most cherished entreprise. He bestowed upon it his most delicate attention, and left in his will very substantial legacies in favour of the children to be educated there. A good number of candidates to the priesthood received clerical formation there ; and the Bishop had the consoling privilege of confering the sacerdotal unction to several of them. The little Indians, so dearly loved by the Bishop, were the only ones who did not respond to his expectations; their flighty temperaments could with difficulty bend to the restriction of a boarding life.

However, Bishop Laval did not wish to limit his

minor Seminary only to students aspiring to the priesthood. As his letters clearly reveal, he was keen on forming good christians who later on would become excellent family heads, capable of spreading a Christian atmosphere throughout the colony.

For the children who had no aptitude for successful theological studies Bishop Laval established at Cap-Tourmente an Arts and Trade School where they received the fundamental elements of instruction while being initiated to farming, the fine arts, and other industrial technique useful to the colony.

Primary education was also the object of the Bishop's concern. He encouraged the teaching intitutes such as the Ursulines of Quebec and the Congregation of Notre-Dame of Montreal ; he himself saw to the establishment of primary schools in Quebec and rural parishes.

X

Bishop Laval and civil authority

On Bishop Laval's arrival, New France was still a young Country with very little definitive organization. Since the King wanted him not only to establish Catholic Church in Canada, but also to collaborate in the organization of the colony, the first Bishop of Quebec could not remain aloof from any of the problems concerning the prosperity of the country or the welfare of the settlers. Accordingly he took an active part, in conjunction with the civil authorities, in promoting all the means liable to bring about this prosperity and increase this welfare. On several occasions he earnestly entreated the Court of France to send only strictly well chosen settlers of sound physical and moral health and upright conduct who would insure the colony a sane population. Often times he made use with the King, of his influence to support the requisitions of the governors in favour of the poor settlers. He never failed to encourage most strongly colonization, agriculture and industry in the colony. On his trips to France, he personally saw to the recruiting of workers and artisans : carpenters, joiners, sculptors, and farmers to ply their trade on the farms of the Seminary or elsewhere in

the colony, thus contributing to a greater prosperity of New France.

However, the role of the first Bishop of Quebec in the material organization of the Colony was not limited to this. He was, indeed, asked to participate in governing the country. In 1663, Louis XIV created in Quebec the Sovereign Council witn extensive political and judicial powers. Wishing to enrol the collaboration of the clergy in the administration of New France, he invited the Bishop to accept the function of councillor. He willingly acceded to this, unsought for distinction, and he scrupulously carried out his responsibilities by regularly attending all the deliberations of the Council.

The zeal of Bishop Laval for the material progress of the colony, together with the political role assumed on the King's insistance, naturally brought him into close and constant contact with the civil administrators. In these contacts he always manifested a profound respect for those representatives of authority because he saw in them God's deputies. The numberless letters to the Court of France prove his complete submission to the King and his representatives. He never refused cooperating with the governors in entreprises initiated to better the welfare of the colony. On the other hand, he frequently made use of his considerable influence over the people to second the decisions of the Council in disciplinary matters or to arouse the patriotism of his diocesans in times of war or other trying circumstances.

From what has been said, one could expect that perfect harmony ought to have existed between the representatives of ecclesiastical authority and those of civil power. Alas! how many conflicts, what a number of difficulties cropped up during the thirty years of the Bishop's duties as councillor!

So long as the governor and intendants restricted

the exercise of their authority to the material administration of the colony, perfect harmony existed between them and the Bishop. But the Bishop never allowed them to override their commission, nor to encroach in Church affairs without strongly protesting and reminding them of their responsibilities. Sometimes animated discussions arose between the Bishop, anxious to safeguard morality, to maintain the rights of the Chuch, to forward the spiritual interests of colony, and the governors imbued with the ideas of gallicanism and dreaming to play in Canada the dominating role held by Louis XIV in France.

The governor even brought accusations to the Court against the Bishop, the Jesuits and the clergy, who were depicted as ambitious people seeking with equal zeal wordly wealth and the conversion of souls ; they were also accused of wanting " to add to their spiritual authority an absolute power over temporal matters ". Fortunately the Court, better informed about the role played by the Bishop and clergy in Canada, soon discovered the falsehood of these calumnies and acknoledged the complete unselfishness of the Canadian missionnaries.

Some of the disagreements, developed into open persecutions against the Bishop. Thus Governor de Mesy, a friend indebted to Bishop Laval for his promotion to Canada, became, due to controversies in the Council, the worst enemy of the prelate. In his peevishness he behaved very ill towards him, and in the course of a conversation brutally threw at the feet of the Bishop the key of the Seminary which he was entitled to possess as governor. Moreover, to the roll of the drums he had several libellous bills posted against him. Without surrendering any of his rights the Bishop bore the persecutions of the governor with

an angelic patience. Each day he said Mass for him. When M. de Mésy fell seriously ill and was taken to the Hôtel-Dieu, in February, 1665, he called the Bishop he had badly treated and publicly insulted, to his bed side. He then admitted his wrongs, opened his heart to the Bishop, who overlooking the past prepared him for death and received his last breath.

Thus do saints take their revenge for wrongs done to them.

XI

The Bishop of Quebec

When in 1659 the Prelate arrived in Canada he was not yet Bishop of Quebec. Because of the more or less uncertain conditions of the small Canadian settlement, Rome thought it unadvisable to erect a diocese then, and had sent to the far distant missions of America a bishop with the title of Apostolic Vicar.

But Bishop Laval soon realized that this title of Apostolic Vicar, in fact rarely given at that period,

did not constitute in the eyes of the civil administrators a sufficiently established authority. He wrote to Louis XIV on this score and the latter allowed him to plead with the Pope in view of obtaining the erection of a diocese in Canada.

After long and difficult negociations, Pope Clement X erected the diocese of Quebec, on October 1, 1674, and appointed Bishop Laval the first titular. The prelate was in France at that moment. He left for Canada in the summer of 1675, and in September of the same year he returned to Quebec where he resumed with the same zeal his apostolic activities.

However his health was already impaired. He was not yet an old man at 61, but for several years his health had been declining after a hernia contracted during one of his early pastoral visits. In 1681, he felt so ill that his death was expected at any moment. He was convinced in his great humility that any other than himself could accomplish far more in the function he held. In November, 1684, he left for France.

As soon as he arrived in Paris he presented his resignation to the King, who according to a gallican custom, was to send it to the Pope. The King refused to act, because of his high admiration for the virtues of the Bishop of Quebec, and his appreciation for the gigantic task accomplished in Canada. But Bishop Laval's strong insistence overcame the opposition ; so the King, on the advice of the out-going Bishop, chose Abbé Jean-Baptiste Chevrière de Saint-Vallier as his future successor.

Pending Rome's confirmation of the King's choice, Bishop Laval named the abbé de Saint-Vallier his vicar-general and sent him to Canada to assume his ministerial duties.

XII

Back to Canada

If Bishop Laval left the administration of his diocese to another, he had no intention of retiring in France. He was far too fond of his flock, he had identified himself too intimately with the colony, not to dream of ending his days in Quebec, at the Seminary, in the midst of his spiritual children. Furthermore, the people and clergy in Canada ardently desired to have their Prelate with them. It had even been understood, when Msgr. de Saint-Vallier left for Canada in 1685, that the Bishop was to return the following spring ; but at Msgr. de Saint-Vallier's request, he postponed his departure. In the spring of 1687, as Bishop Laval was completing preparations for the trip, the King, for reasons not yet revealed by history refused him permission to leave.

This refusal of the King was probably the greatest trial that ever wrung the heart of the Bishop. His entire submission to the will of God, his thirst for immolation and sacrifice enabled him to lovingly accept this cross.

The 9th of June, 1687, he informed the priests of the Seminary of Quebec of the Royal decision in a letter wherein the great soul of the Bishop is revealed in all its christian nobility and heroic submission to the will of God : " Let us adore the ways of God in His

dealings with us and our entreprises, my most beloved friends", did he write. "I firmly hoped He would grant me the consolation of being with you in the flesh as I am in my heart and mind. But His loving Providence has decided otherwise. I had no sooner been notified of my fate when Our Lord granted me a grace prompting me to go before the Most-Blessed sacrament and offer Him the sacrifice of all my desire and what is dearest to me in the world. I began by making an "amende honorable" (an apology) to the justice of God, who in His mercy, wanted me to realize that Providence kept me from returning to a land where I had so grieviously sinned as a just chastisment for my offences. But since Our Lord in His benevolence never rejects a humbly contrite heart, He revealed to me that the greatest boon He could bestow upom me was to allow me to take part in the sufferings He endured during His life and in His death out of love for us ; in thanksgiving for such a favour, with a heart full of joy and consolation, I recited the *Te Deum*. It is a wound and a sore difficult to heal and which apparently will last till I die".

However Our Lord was sufficiently satisfied with the generous acceptance of the cross He laid before His humble servant. Soon, indeed, events completely changed. The King allowed the old Bishop to go and die in his Diocese ; so in the spring of 1688, a few months after the consecration of his successor in Paris, Bishop Laval left for Canada. On the 4th of the following June Msgr. l'Ancien (as he was called in Quebec after his resignation as Bishop) landed in the capital of New France in the midst of general rejoicings and gun salutes from the fort.

XIII

"Monseigneur l'Ancien"

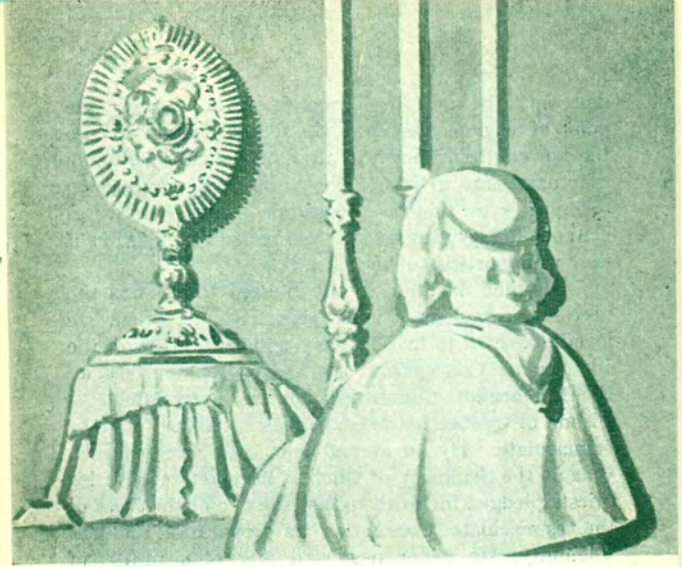
After resigning, Bishop Laval retired at the Seminary of Quebec where he lived most humbly and submissive to its superiors as the least of the priests. There, for twenty years more the servant of God , by prayer and mortification, continued to purify his soul already arrived at the highest degrees of contemplation.

His rule of life left no margin which could lay it open to whims or sensuality. Just as at the beginning of his episcopate, Bishop Laval rose at two o'clock every morning even on the coldest winter days. The superior of the Seminary had much ado to obtain that the Bishop postpone rising till three o'clock for the last five years of his life. He clothed himself without help, dressed his sore legs, and at four o'clock, after his morning prayers, he would go to the cathedral, a lantern in his hand. It was he who unlocked the doors, put holy-water in the founts, lit the candles on the altar and rang the bell for the first mass. At four-thirty, he would celebrate mass for the labourers who, before starting to work, came to offer to God the first hours of their laborious days. After mass, he would retire to the sacristy where he prolonged his thanksgiving till seven o'clock, having but the small heater used during mass to keep warm in winter.

Once back at the Seminary, the old Bishop divided

his day between the administration duties of the community which at his request the authorities had confided to him, the exercises of piety and mortification which his great devotion prompted and the numberless acts of charity his love for the poor suggested.

And frequently very late in the evening after finishing all his prayers, divine office, rosary, meditation and spiritual lectures, it was then only that he would go to his bed-room for a little rest.



XIV

Spiritual Life of Bishop Laval

Devotion to the Eucharist always was the central focus point of Bishop Laval's spiritual life. Each day he would spend long hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. He said Mass with great fervour and with a constancy that neither illness nor the severe coldness of the unheated church could ever shake. He loved everything surrounding the Tabernacle : the ceremonies of Roman liturgy he had imposed upon his

diocese, "the austere harmony of the psalms, the pomp of religious feast days, the silent spirals of incense the flowers decorating the altar, the small vacillating sanctuary lamp, in a word everything, wheter imposing solemnities or minute accessories, which constitutes Catholic liturgy, and which the Prelate venerated as if they were particles of the Host",.

His filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin was the necessary complement to his Eucharistic devotion. He loved above all to invoke Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception. He had chosen the feast of the Immaculate Conception for his consecration. As Bishop of Quebec he dedicated his cathedral to Mary Immaculate. By an annual vow, still renewed each year at the Seminary of Quebec, he together with his priests pledged his word to fast the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception as preparation for this solemnity. He never neglected any opportunity of instilling a constantly more profound devotion to the Mother of God in the mind of his diocesans.

In addition, Bishop Laval was always very devoted to the Holy Family. Long before, as member of the Aa at the College of LaFlèche or in Paris, the young student had learned to venerate especially Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, as well as the guardian angels, patrons of this association. He was pleased to note that this devotion was already wide-spread in Canada on his arrival in 1659. He did his utmost to strengthen it in the hearts of his flock. With this in view he had an image of the Holy Family engraved and distributed to the French settlers and the Indians throughout the colony. In 1663, he dedicated his Seminary of Quebec to the Holy Family. Two years later he canonically established in Quebec the Confraternity of the Holy Family. After

which he instituted the feast of the Holy Family in his diocese, with a mass and breviary especially composed in honor of the feast. This zealous ardour to promote the cult of the Holy Family earned him to be acknowledged by Pope Leo XIII as one of the main initiators of this devotion in the world.

This ardently pious life of Bishop Laval was powerfully seconded by a most rigourous asceticism and an astonishing mortification recalling the austerities of the primitive Church. To conquer in himself the old Adam and to subdue the all too human movements of nature, the venerable Servant of God shirked no form of penance.

The main mortifications to which the Bishop submitted were those sent by Divine Providence in long periods of illness and in the most crucifying trials with which his whole life was woven. These trials he accepted with a generosity wholly actuated by his love for God. He even had a very special veneration for these sufferings willed by God. He was seen several times kissing the bandages covering the sores of his legs, which did he remark, he considered as the instruments Our Lord employed to make him suffer.

But these mortifications did not satisfy him completely. "Each Day", Brother Houssard, the intimate confident of his last twenty years, relates, "he imagined ways of increasing his pains and sufferings". Until the end of his life he wore nearly every day a hair-shirt despite his infirmities. He would frequently inflict upon himself bloody scourgings. He generally slept on bare boards. His food, when not fasting on bread and water, was extremely simple. Even then he would try all kinds of means to make his food as tasteless as possible. Sometimes with uncommon mortification, he would oblige himself to eat tainted

meat or other disgusting food. His servant relates that he saw him often kneeling before his small table and eating the most loathsome dishes. It was thus that the soul of Bishop Laval, constantly turned towards God by an ardent fervour, fortified by mighty mortifications, reached the highest spheres of contemplation. He left no writings, no notes revealing the intimate state of his soul. But we can accept as an authoritative testimony the words of the great mystic, Mary of the Incarnation, who declared that the first Bishop of Quebec had reached a sublime degree of mental prayer.

XV

Death

Worn out by a long life of constant labour of never ending prayer, and severe mortifications, Bishop Laval was destined to die a victim of his piety and love for liturgy.

In the spring of 1708, despite his infirmities and terribly sore legs, he insisted on attending all the ceremonies of Holy Week at the cathedral. After the office of "Ténebrai" of Wednesday, his servant, finding him much weaker, brought pressure on the superior of the Seminary to make the Bishop give up the pious intention of going to the cathedral for the remaining ceremonies of Holy Week. But hearkening only to his zeal for the house of God the Bishop heroically concealed his frightful sufferings so as not to be deprived of the joy of uniting his sufferings to those of Our Lord so vividly commemorated during this week.

On Good Friday the weather was extremely cold. Since the cathedral was not heated, the pious Prelate caught a chilblain of the heel which rapidly developed into a fatal sore and confined him to bed.

The pain became so intense that the Bishop felt his end near. With a holy resignation and an intense desire to be united to the God he had so zealously served all his life, he prepared himself for a good death. On the first of May he spontaneously offered himself to God as a victim of atonement for all the sins committed by his spiritual sons of the Seminary and to obtain from Heaven that this saintly community may always

Lying statue of Msgr. de Laval in the Seminary Chapel

XVII

After years

The very evening of Bishop Laval's burial, the archivist of the Ursulines of Quebec wrote in the annals of the community : " There is no doubt but that in the future Our Lord will make manifest the treasures of grace He has bestowed in the soul of this holy bishop, more especially because the latter had concealed his most beautiful actions out of love for solitude and an abject hidden life ".

Already as the Ursuline sister was writing down these words, the good God had begun to glorify on earth His humble servant. Several spiritual and material favours had been obtained through the intercession of the servant of God while he was still exposed to the veneration of the faithful. Sister Juchereau of Saint Ignatius wrote : " The sick would approach with confidence, and he was invoked thenceforth as a saint ". A record of the marvels at the grave of Bishop Laval was compiled, but unfortunately it has not been preserved.

A great number of cures have been authenticated ever since through the intercession of the venerable servant of God, and this especially so on the occasion of the removal of his remains in 1878.

The body of Bishop Laval now has been given a definite resting place. In 1950, his spiritual sons of the Seminary built a memorial chapel, adjoining the

community chapel, in grateful remembrance of their founder. A grave was dug under a granite slab of this funeral chapel of ornamented marble and gilded mosaics.

Above the grave a recumbent statue of Carrara marble represents bishop Laval vested in pontifical robes sleeping his last sleep in expectation of the glorious resurrection.

Throngs of faithful ceaselessly flock to this grave, and so the pious Bishop continues to bestow his blessings on all those who place their confidence in his intercession. The sick are restored to health, the weak feel their courage strengthened, the young receive enlightment to discover their vocation, and the poor alcoholic victims are led to conversion.

XVIII

Our hopes

The Church of Quebec, deeply moved by the popular confidence which led so many souls to Bishop Laval, and much impressed also by the miracles attributed to his intercession, began, in 1878, the proceedings required in view of obtaining from the Sovereign Pontiff the honours of beatification and canonization for the founder of the Canadian Church.

On October 9, 1878, His Grace E.A. Taschereau, archbishop of Quebec, opened the customary trial of inquiry into the life, virtues, and the miracles attributed to Bishop Laval. Then, on August 23, 1890, the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites signed the decree of introduction of the cause, which decree bestowed the title of Venerable on Bishop Laval.

Finally, on February, 28, 1960, Pope John XXIII, on receiving the favourable opinion of the Cardinals, the Prelates, and the theologian Consultors of the Congregation of Rites proclaimed the heroïcalness of the virtues practiced by the Venerable François de Laval.

We do hope that God will soon grant to Canada the joy of publicly honouring the one who is the real father of the Catholic Church in North America. To this end our confidence and ceaseless prayers could

greatly contribute, and especially so if they obtained favours of a miraculous nature through the intercession of the Venerable Servant of God.

May our confident prayers hasten the happy moment when the Pope successor of Saint Peter, will publicly invoke François de Laval in the Vatican Basilica, this masterpiece of Bernini, where the figure of the first Bishop of Quebec will appear radiantly, while the bells peal to the eternal city of Rome and to the whole world the glorious news of his beatification.

CONTENTS

MAXIMS
OF
MGR. DE LAVAL

— — —

"We should let ourselves be guided by the Providence of God."

"I am in expectation of the blessed moment of donating my life to God for the salvation of souls that have been for so many years the object of His love."

"May Jesus Christ be for ever the unique life of our souls."

"May Jesus crucified be our strength."

"We ought to place all our confidence and our strength in Our Lord, in His Holy Mother and in the entire Holy Family."

"Were I assured to die at sea, I would go aboard, in order not to be deprived of the comfort of dying infulfilling Our Lord's pleasure."