

shepherd, no good when we forget that we have been sent by the shepherd. We think we are our own, we try to do our work independently, and the result is nothingness, a mess. As our Lord said to his apostles just before his crucifixion, 'Without me you can do nothing'.



ST BENEDICT JOSEPH LABRE

P.C.C.

ON Wednesday in Holy Week 1783, an emaciated, tattered ragbag of a young beggar-man collapsed on the steps of Sta Maria dei Monti where he had attended mass. At eight o'clock that night he was dead and with the morning light a scrabble of urchins went shouting in the gutters of Rome, '*E morte il santo!*'. The fiercely enthusiastic scenes and circumstances surrounding his death seemed prescient of an early official recognition of his sanctity. No doubt the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars delayed this and he was beatified in May 1860 and canonized in December 1883.

It is more than unfortunate that his name has become synonymous with eccentricity, exaggeration and squalor. Perhaps this most humble of men, for whom none had greater contempt than he had for himself, would prefer it that way. He is in the splendour of the saints. His name is inscribed on the heavens in letters of golden fire, yet it still, alas for our unenlightened souls, so often brings a smirk to our lips. Benedict Joseph Labre: a saint, undoubtedly, but does one need to go to such lengths or to descend to such depths?

We have to admit that the lice, the rags and the general absence of hygiene do not coincide with our ideas of holiness. And there we stick, with perhaps a puzzled shrug or devout thanks that God has not decreed that the strait and narrow way should be louse-ridden for all of us. Benedict Joseph would be the first to agree. He never sought disciples or strove to impress anyone with a message or a way of life. He had no theories about life:

he lived it, in the way he believed to be his vocation, and subsequent events proved that he did not mistake the call.

He was the eldest of fifteen children, born in 1748, in the village of Amettes about five leagues from Béthune. His early piety was a joy to his parents who saw in him a future priest. With this in view he was sent to live with his uncle, the parish priest of Erin near St Pol, and after this devout man's death of cholera, to the Abbé of Conteville.

Though Benedict Joseph did his utmost to conform to the pious wishes of his parents, a conviction that his vocation did not lie in the way they had in mind took hold of him. He lost interest in the necessary studies of Latin and secular subjects and confessed, 'All I want is to go away to a desert'. At the same time he was deeply influenced by the writings of Fr Le Jeune, a rigorous ascetic and preacher of penance. The boy was gripped by the fear of evil and everlasting punishment, not only for himself but for the rest of humanity, and longed to offer himself in expiation in union with Christ crucified.

After much parental opposition which seems to have taken the form of a stolid refusal to recognize his desires, so much more damping than stormy expostulations and prohibitions, he left for La Grande Trappe in midwinter 1767. He walked the sixty miles only to be told that he was too young and delicate to be admitted. Similar disappointments awaited him at the Carthusian and other Cistercian monasteries. Three times he was allowed to try his vocation, but community life and constraint broke his health and plunged his spirits in such gloom that the superiors feared for his mental balance. There was nothing they could do but kindly and firmly show him the door.

Crossing the Alps into Italy he wrote a tenderly filial letter to his parents asking their forgiveness for all the anxiety he had caused them. It must have been at this time that he was enlightened as to the nature of his vocation. He must follow the example of the Lord, who 'had not where to lay his head', in the spirit and to the letter.

Benedict Joseph became a tramp. He seldom begged. He took what was given to him in charity, often passing it on to someone whom he considered to be in greater need. For this he was one day soundly walloped by a man who had given him a small coin and imagined this ragged fellow was contemptuous of his charity.

The account of his pilgrimages, all on foot, clad only in rags and broken boots, is staggering, especially to this age that likes its travelling to be lush, plush and rapid.

Compostella, Saragossa, Montserrat, Loreto, Einsiedeln; the names rise up like mountain peaks on a shining horizon. After his fifth visit to Einsiedeln—and one wonders what he made of that rococo glory of ivory and gold with its *floraison* of robust cherubs and brilliant frescoes—he remained in Rome, except for his yearly tramp to Loreto. He spent his days in the churches of the city and his nights in the ruins of the Colosseum, the haunt of vagrants, derelicts, thieves and trulls. Many who would nowadays be called spivs and spongers, the work-shy, the criminals on the run, took the pilgrim's staff and wallet and whined for alms and mumbled prayers in the midst of their vice and misery.

Benedict Joseph became one with them, except that he rejoiced in his physical degradation because of the contempt it brought him. Many a time he was clapped in gaol. He was taken for a swindler, a hypocrite and a heretic. Because of his acute sense of unworthiness to receive the holy eucharist, and the fact that he did so at the earliest masses to escape notice, he was suspected of Jansenism. He would never open his soul except under obedience to a confessor and preferred to be labelled Huguenot rather than disclose before others how many times he had been to communion.

By slow degrees his soul was freed from fear and scruples. Sorrow over a world in the throes of evil gave place to joy at a world redeemed in the blood of Christ; restored in the unutterable love of God. The glory of the Trinity overwhelmed him and he was, as he owned, taken out of himself in prayer. And anything and everything was a source of prayer, from a flower unfolding in innocence to a crusted old sinner folding up in his iniquity.

The gift of consolation and encouragement was his in abundance. 'He always came like an angel of peace', said all those who bore witness to his life. There is a touching story of his meeting with the confirmed invalid, Vicenza Fiordi, who was at the time in the slough of spiritual desolation; thrown on the naked rocks of her agony from which the tide of the love of God had, as it seemed, fled for ever. The pilgrim convinced her anew of her expiatory work and her special mission in the mystical body. Though he was only a young man his counsels had the authority

and paternal sympathy of an experienced spiritual director, and Vicenza was encouraged to go on with her work of suffering though consolation should be absent always.

God gave him, too, the terrifying gift of seeing the consciences of others. Many were the startled people who made the best confessions of their lives after being gently accosted by a beggar on the church steps. But more than all this, he was a victim of expiation. He realized that suffering and poverty were redemptive. He offered himself in place of those whose work kept them in the ordinary activities of the world. He knew himself to be useless for anything but suffering. All aptitude for anything but the wood of the cross and the nails that held him to it had left him. Gathering up the misery and pain and sin of the world, he took it upon himself to the pattern of the one who 'made himself sin for us'.

To the eighteenth century such a life would be the subject of drawing-room flippancies. Cynical rationalism was the vogue. Yet if this strange young man, devoured by the flame of his love for God and his fellow men, was a challenge to the eighteenth century, to the twentieth that must have scent even in its scouring powders he is a 'straight left to the jaw'.

When we have shaken the resultant stars out of our eyes, we may well wonder whether in our cult of comfortable, hygienic, labour-saving, analgesic and perfumed living, we are not cleansing the outside of the cup only. And instead of giving a well-bred shudder at Benedict Joseph's vermin, we might enlist his help in purifying this age of the parasites of materialism and the hedonist philosophy that has very little time for the universal brotherhood of man and sadly less for the fatherhood of God.

