



SILENT HOMILIES

The Hermit Who Had No Desert

*St Benedict Joseph Labre
and the city that became a cell*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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Before You Begin



Most of us think of a hermit as a man who leaves the world. He finds a cave or a hut, and the noise of other people fades. St Benedict Joseph Labre did the opposite. The monasteries would not have him. So he took the desert that was left: the streets of a city. He lived there as if the stones were a cell and the churches were his only house.

This is the story of a shopkeeper's eldest son from a village in northern France, who walked until Rome knew his face and did not yet know his name. It is not a book that tells you to sleep in ruins. The Church canonised this man. She did not ask the rest of us to copy every detail of his life.

Read it if you have ever felt too ordinary for a monastery. Read it if you pass a person sitting on a step and look away.

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Chapter 1

A Shopkeeper's Eldest Son



Benoît-Joseph Labre was born on 26 March 1748 in Amettes, in Artois, now the Pas-de-Calais. The house was not poor. His father, Jean-Baptiste, kept a small shop and a little land. His mother, Anne-Barbe Grandsire, managed a mercery. There would be fifteen children. He was the first.

In a Catholic village of that century the eldest son of a respectable family was often hoped for the Church. When he was twelve he was sent to his uncle, Father François-Joseph Labre, parish priest of Erin. An uncle with a rectory could give Latin, a table and the slow training of a possible vocation. The boy took to Scripture and the lives of the saints with a hunger that left some of the more practical lessons behind.

It is worth stopping on that ordinary beginning. Later portraits make him look as if he was born already strange. He was not. He came from a shop, a family table and a parish. Grace did not need an exotic childhood in order to begin.

If we make saints strange from birth, their holiness becomes easier to keep at a distance. Benedict Joseph will not allow that. He started where most of us start: in a house that smelled of ordinary work.

Reflection

We like saints to begin already unusual. It saves us from wondering what grace might do with a shop and a parish school.

Benedict Joseph's first formation was Catholic in the ordinary way: Mass, an uncle-priest, the lives of the saints read at a table. The later rags did not cancel that beginning. They grew out of it.

Grace does not always announce itself by taking a child out of ordinary life. Sometimes it takes ordinary life seriously enough to ask more of it than the family expected.

If God can start with Amettes, He can start with the street you already know.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who began this saint in a shopkeeper's house, do not let us pretend that holiness needs a rare childhood. Amen.

Chapter 2

The Doors That Would Not Open



He wanted a monastery. That is the first thing to say, because later readers sometimes imagine he chose the street as a romantic idea. He did not. He asked to be received. More than once.

The Carthusians tried him. So did the Cistercians at La Trappe, and later Sept-Fons. The reports that survive speak of fragile health, of a temperament that could not settle into the common life, of a piety that was intense and not easily fitted to a timetable. The communities said no. It is possible they were right about the life they had to offer. It is also possible that God was steering him by those refusals.

A closed monastery door is not automatically persecution. Discernment works both ways. A community has to ask whether this man can live this rule without being destroyed, and without destroying the house. Their no can be an act of charity. It can also, without their knowing it, be part of another vocation.

Benedict Joseph did not treat the refusals as a licence to invent his own religion. He remained a Catholic. He later became a Franciscan tertiary: a member of the Third Order, living the spirit of St Francis in the world. The habit he wanted was not given. He received the poverty instead.

Reflection

Here is a difficult Catholic truth. God's will is not always the first version of it that we imagined.

A vocation is a call. It is not a personal design we force through every door. Sometimes the wrong door stays shut so that the real road can be seen. That does not make the people who closed the door villains. They had a house to protect and a rule to keep.

Providence can work through somebody else's refusal. That is hard to hear when you are the one standing outside. It is also how the Church has received more than one saint.

The question after a closed door is not only, Were they wrong? It is also, What is still asked of me in the Church I have not left?

A Short Prayer

Lord, when the door we wanted stays shut, keep us inside Your Church and show us the next faithful step. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Road Became the Habit



After the last refusal he walked. That is not a metaphor. He became a pilgrim in the old Catholic sense: a man on the road toward places where the Church already prayed.

The list is long enough to tire a modern traveller: Loreto, Assisi, Bari, Einsiedeln, Compostela, Paray-le-Monial, and more besides. He went on foot. He slept where he was allowed to sleep. He ate what was given. Early lives, beginning with his confessor Giuseppe Marconi, describe a poverty that was chosen and severe.

Christ said the Son of Man had nowhere to lay His head. That sentence belongs first to Jesus. A saint may imitate it. He does not replace it. Benedict Joseph lived close to that line without making himself the centre of it.

Voluntary poverty is not the same thing as being made poor against your will. Many people sleep outside today because they have no other choice. The Church must not use this saint to decorate that fact. His holiness was in faith, prayer, charity and surrender. Homelessness itself is not a sacrament.

Reflection

The Church has recognised forms of holiness that no careers adviser would have proposed. That should not make us romantic about eccentricity.

Benedict Joseph's road was a vocation only because it was obedience inside the Church: pilgrimage, the sacraments, the Third Order, confession. Take those away and you are left with a man who is only hungry.

Philippians says Christ emptied Himself. The saint's poverty was an attempt to follow that movement, not a hobby in dirt. We honour the freedom that let him travel light. We do not honour the lice.

If your own vocation looks nothing like the plan you first imagined, you are not the first Catholic in that position.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, who had nowhere to lay Your head, teach us the difference between chosen poverty and other people's suffering. Amen.

Chapter 4

Why He Kept Walking to the Same Places



Why walk to Loreto or Assisi if God is everywhere? Catholics have been asked that for a long time. The short answer is the Incarnation. God is everywhere. He also chose a particular womb, a particular town, a particular cross.

Pilgrimage is one way the body keeps up with that fact. Bethlehem matters. Calvary matters. A shrine can matter because the Church has prayed there, and because our feet need something to do with our faith. Benedict Joseph went back to Loreto year after year once he had settled in Rome. Tradition holds that the Holy House is there. Historians argue about the building. Pilgrims went anyway, because they were going to Our Lady, not to a museum label.

Assisi gave him Francis. Bari gave him Nicholas. Einsiedeln gave him a Benedictine shrine in the mountains. Compostela gave him the old western road. The point was not collecting stamps. The point was to keep arriving where the Church already knelt.

A man who cannot sit still in a monastery can still be taught by a road if the road ends at an altar.

Reflection

God is not trapped in holy places. That is why we can pray on a bus. But Christianity is not embarrassed by geography either. The Word became flesh in one place.

That is why Catholics still walk to shrines. We are not trying to find a God who would otherwise be absent. We are letting our bodies catch up with what we believe.

Emmaus is a road story. The disciples do not recognise Him until the breaking of bread. Benedict Joseph's roads were long versions of that instinct: keep walking toward the place where He is given.

If your own faith has become only ideas, a church you can actually enter may be the next honest step.

A Short Prayer

Lord of Bethlehem and of every parish church, teach our feet what our mouths already say. Amen.

Chapter 5

The City That Became a Cell



The last years were mostly Rome. He left it once a year for Loreto. The rest of the time the city had to do the work a cloister would have done.

Later accounts say he slept among the ruins of the Colosseum. That tradition is old and widely repeated. We should say it as tradition, not as a surveyed floor-plan. Catholic memory also linked the Colosseum with martyrs. Modern historians are more cautious about particular martyrdoms there. Both sentences can be true at once: the place gathered Christian memory, and the beggar used whatever shelter the ruins gave.

What makes a desert? Sand is not required. The Desert Fathers went out to have fewer things between themselves and God. One saying, kept under the name of Abba Moses, is blunt: sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything. A city can do that if a man refuses the city's comforts. A monastery can fail to do it if a man fills the cell with himself.

Benedict Joseph treated churches as if they were caves with doors, and streets as corridors between hours of prayer. That is how a contemplative life can exist without a grille.

Reflection

Solitude is not the same as being alone. A person can be lonely in a crowded house. A person can be recollected on a noisy street.

The contemplative life is first a direction of the heart. The monastery is a help, not a magic box. When the help is refused, God is not out of options.

Hebrews speaks of saints who lived as strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Benedict Joseph took that line almost literally. Most of us will take it more quietly: as people who do not let the city own the last word about what a life is for.

The question is not, Have I found enough silence? It is, Have I given God a place that is not immediately useful?

A Short Prayer

God of the desert and of the street, make a small cell in the life we actually have. Amen.

Chapter 6

He Believed with His Hours



Romans called him the saint of the Forty Hours. The Forty Hours, the Quarant'Ore, is an old Catholic devotion. The Blessed Sacrament is exposed and the faithful keep watch, often for about forty hours. Later preaching linked those hours with Christ's Passion. The simple act is the same: stay with Him.

Benedict Joseph went where the Sacrament was exposed. He stayed. That is the whole method. He did not write a treatise on the Real Presence. He spent time as if the Presence were real.

We often say, I believe in the Eucharist. His answer, if we may put it that way, was to remain. Not every hour of every day. Not as a performance. But long enough for belief to become hours.

Love is measured partly in time. A child knows that. A dying person knows that. A tabernacle teaches it to anyone willing to sit still.

Reflection

This may be the simplest Eucharistic lesson in the book. If Christ is there, time is not wasted.

Adoration is not a hobby. It is the body keeping company with what the Mass has already said. We have said, This is My Body. Then we stay.

You do not need his endurance. You may need his instinct. Ten minutes that you would otherwise have given to restlessness are already a beginning.

Belief that never costs any time is still allowed to call itself belief. It will just remain thin.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, present in the Sacrament, teach us to believe with a little of our time. Amen.

Chapter 7

The Saint a Parish Might Ask to Move On



He was dirty. The early lives do not hide it. People stepped aside. Some mocked him. Some suspected him. A man who smells, who does not keep the social rules, who sits too long, is hard to fit into a tidy parish.

We love statues of poor saints. The living version is less convenient. Charity and prudent safeguarding can live together. A parish may have to protect children, the sick and the frightened. That is not hypocrisy. But cleanliness must not quietly become a condition for belonging.

James warns a church that gives the well-dressed man the good seat and tells the poor man to stand. Luke gives the poor man at the gate a name, Lazarus, and leaves the rich man nameless. Rome knew this beggar's face before it knew what to call him.

The Church later put him in marble. While he was alive he was a pastoral problem. Both facts belong in the same book.

Reflection

This chapter should make us uneasy. That is allowed.

The question is concrete. Who is allowed to look unpresentable near me? Who may stay too long in the back pew? We can answer with rules, and some rules are needed. We should also answer with the Gospel.

Matthew 25 does not say the hungry man will be easy to like. It says he is a place where Christ has chosen to hide.

Benedict Joseph is not a test you fail if you lock a church at night. He is a warning against a holiness that only loves the poor once they are dead.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, who hid Yourself in the awkward and the poor, keep our parishes
from loving only the statues. Amen.*

Chapter 8

The Man Who Brought Him Inside



On 16 April 1783, during Holy Week, he collapsed on the steps of Santa Maria ai Monti. He did not want to be moved. He was taken anyway to a nearby house at Via dei Serpenti 2, behind the church. Later memory calls it the house of a butcher. He died there of exhaustion and hunger. He was thirty-five.

We do not need a novel about the butcher. The fact is enough. Somebody noticed. Somebody would not leave a dying man on a step. The Church later built a small chapel in that house. The important act happened before the chapel.

Not everyone is called to become the saint on the pavement. Almost anyone can become the person who does not walk past.

Hebrews says, Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. Sometimes the stranger is not at your dinner table. He is on your church steps.

Reflection

Do not make Benedict Joseph the only hero of his death.

Holiness sometimes looks like a long life of hidden prayer. Sometimes it looks like one ordinary decision: bring him in. The butcher did not have to understand the man's vocation. He had to see a body that needed a room.

Most of us will never be asked for the first kind of holiness. We are asked for the second more often than we admit.

If this book does anything useful, let it make one reader slower to pass a person on a step.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give us eyes for the person on the step, and courage enough to bring them in. Amen.

Chapter 9

The Name the Poor Already Knew



He was buried in Santa Maria ai Monti. The neighbourhood already thought it knew who he was. His confessor, Fr Giuseppe Marconi, wrote the life. Within three months, Marconi recorded a large number of reported cures. An American visitor in Rome, John Thayer, later a priest, was among those moved by what he heard.

Pius IX beatified him in 1860. Leo XIII canonised him on 8 December 1881. The feast is 16 April, the day he died.

Why did Rome believe so quickly? Partly because a man that poor who prayed that long forces a decision. Partly because the Forty Hours had already joined his face to the Sacrament. Partly because the poor have their own intelligence about who is one of them and who is only visiting. He was not visiting.

Luke named Lazarus and left the rich man without a name. The Church finally wrote Benedict Joseph into the calendar. The poor had been using a shorter title already. They called him the saint.

Reflection

Recognition is a Christian problem. Who does God know whom we have stopped seeing?

Canonisation does not create holiness. It recognises it and offers it to the rest of us. God made the saint. The Church pointed and said, Look.

The poor often see first. That is not sentiment. It is how the Gospel is written. The man at the gate has a name. The man at the feast, for a while, does not.

If we only learn the names of saints once they are under marble, we should not be surprised that we miss them on the steps.

A Short Prayer

God of Lazarus and of every forgotten name, teach us to see before the marble arrives. Amen.

Chapter 10

You Do Not Have to Copy Him



Most readers of this book will not be called to sleep among ruins. That is as it should be. The Church does not collect strange lives in order to make copies. She collects them to keep certain questions alive.

We do not honour this saint by imitating the lice. We ask what he loved. We ask what he was free from. We ask what he believed strongly enough to give time to.

Canonisation is not photocopying. The Church says: Christ was truly followed here. She does not say: buy the same rags. A mother in a small kitchen, a man on a night shift, a priest in a hospital corridor can learn from Benedict Joseph without leaving their post.

Where is my cell? If I have a house, is there any poverty in it that is chosen? Who is allowed to look unpresentable near me? And will I stay ten minutes longer before the Blessed Sacrament than efficiency would advise?

Reflection

You do not have to copy a saint to learn from him. That sentence could save a lot of anxious piety.

The details of an extraordinary life are not a rulebook. They are a witness. Witnesses point. They do not hand you their coat and expect it to fit.

What Benedict Joseph loved was Christ in the Sacrament and Christ in the poor. What he was free from was the need to look respectable. Those two things can travel into a very ordinary Tuesday.

The Church canonised him so that those questions would not die with him.

A Short Prayer

St Benedict Joseph, pilgrim without a cell, obtain for us a little of your freedom and none of our excuses. Amen.

A Last Word



He asked for a cell and received a city. He asked for a habit and received rags. He asked to disappear and Rome learned his face.

You do not need his road. You may need his questions. Stay a little. Notice who is on the step. Let the tabernacle have some of your time.

St Benedict Joseph Labre, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading



Scripture: Matthew 5; Matthew 6; Matthew 8:20 / Luke 9:58; Matthew 19; Matthew 25; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 21:1-4; Luke 24:13-35; Philippians 2:5-8; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Hebrews 11:13-16; Hebrews 13:2; James 2:1-7.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 915 and 944 (evangelical counsels); 1378-1381 (worship of the Eucharist); 2443-2449 (love of the poor); 828 and 1190 (canonisation as the Church's recognition of holiness).

Giuseppe Loreto Marconi, *The Life of the Venerable Benedict Joseph Labre* (Italian original; English versions from 1785/1786). The principal early witness. He was the saint's confessor in Rome.

Catholic Encyclopedia, St Benedict Joseph Labre. Official dates: born Amettes, 26 March 1748; died Rome, 16 April 1783; beatified by Pius IX, 20 May 1860; canonised by Leo XIII, 8 December 1881. Shrine: Santa Maria ai Monti. Death house remembered at Via dei Serpenti 2.

Later lives and shrine material for the pilgrimages, the Forty Hours, the tradition of shelter in the Colosseum ruins, and the Franciscan Third Order. Where those details rest on early biography rather than a modern survey, they are told as such. Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Moses 6 (sit in your cell).

Enough for the next stretch of road



A pilgrim travels with very little. Even so, he needs enough to take the next stretch of road. These Little Treasures are free to read. Free to the reader does not mean they cost nothing to make.

Behind a short booklet there is research, checking, the work of setting aside attractive stories that cannot be verified, writing, rewriting, and the time it takes to make a difficult Catholic truth simple. A short book can take a long time to become short.

If this one has given you something worth keeping, and if you would like another to continue its journey, I would be truly grateful for a gift through the Silent Homilies website. Your help gives me something practical: time and resources to research, write and prepare the next Little Treasure. It is not payment for these pages. They are already yours.

If you cannot give financially, nothing is owed. Read it. Share it. Give it to someone who has walked past a person on a step. That too helps the work continue.

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