

saints. Christ came for sinners. The Church is packed with sinners and sinners only need apply. But by God's grace, their spasms of goodnesses are more shining than their weaknesses are dark.

Christ came, not for the just but for the sinners, not for the healthy, but for the sick. 'Come to me all you that labour and are heavily burdened'. This is true; Christians are very wicked, very sick, but they recognise it. That is the essential point; they say so, to God—if not always to their fellow-men, for in that they are sick too. They will not be able to save themselves, they will remain sickly. But they are holy for they are humble, they are sorry, they receive grace and their sickly actions are lit through and through with the light which is Christ. Let him that has eyes to see look and understand.

BENOITE RENCUREL OF LE LAUS

BY

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SEPTEMBER 29th of this year marks the third centenary of the birth of a notable mystic, Benoite Rencurel, a Dominican tertiary whose memory is still fresh in the French Alpine valleys where she lived until 1718. Her immense influence in counteracting the local, withering effects of Waldensianism and Jansenism may still be felt by those who visit the sanctuaries which she there founded and which give title to the devotion to Notre-Dame de Laus.

About seven miles from Gap, in the Departement of Hautes Alpes, and across the range of low mountains which lie between the little cathedral city and the Durance Valley, is the charming and picturesque little valley of the Laus, wherein nestles a group of hamlets of which St-Etienne d'Avançon and St-Etienne du Laus are chief.

Benoite Rencurel was born at Avançon on the Feast of St Michael, 1647. Her father was a poor labourer who found it hard to provide for his large family. Accordingly, as soon as she was eleven, Benoite was hired out to watch sheep for a nearby farmer and although he was rough and rather a hard master, she remained in his service for several years.

The best pasturage lay on the slopes of the neighbouring Mount St Maurice, and one day in May, 1664, Benoite led her sheep to graze on the summit. While she was watching the flock from the shade of a ruined chapel, an old man appeared to her and made known to her

that he was St Maurice, the patron of the chapel and mountain. First of all he revealed to the shepherdess a spring of water, that she might quench her thirst, and then he told her that if she took the sheep to a certain spot in the valley there she would be rewarded in answer to many prayers, with a vision of our Lady.

To that place, therefore, Benoite went the following morning and, towards sunset she saw standing on a rock, known as *Les Fours*, a lady and child of singular beauty. For two months these apparitions continued but without any attempt at conversation. But at last some rumour of the apparitions was noised abroad and the magistrate of the district, a good Catholic named M. Grimaud, advised Benoite to ask, after Confession and Holy Communion, what was the name of her silent visitor.

This the girl did, to receive the reply: 'I am Mary, the Mother of Jesus', and the request, 'It is my Son's wish that I should be honoured in this parish, though not in this place. You will request the priest to come hither in procession with all the people of the parish'.

Benoite hastened to tell the priest who gave her credence. On 29th August a solemn procession was made to *Les Fours*, which is today marked by a chapel and a group of bronze figures.

After this Benoite was told that our Lady would next appear elsewhere, on a spur of hills nearer to Laus. It was not until September 29th 1664 that this apparition occurred and then she was instructed that the next appearance would take place in the little chapel of Laus itself. This chapel had been built only twenty-five years before, yet it was already fallen into ruin by neglect, so indifferent to the Faith had people in that region become through Calvinistic infiltration.¹

Here our Lady made known to Benoite that this ruined chapel was her chosen sanctuary; that ere long it would be enshrined in a larger church, richly adorned and served by many priests; that many sinners would be converted there and that the work would be paid for by the pence of the poor.

The news of this apparition spread rapidly. In ever increasing numbers the villagers began to resort to the chapel which soon became too small for their numbers. Extra priests were engaged to hear confessions and as hundreds presented themselves daily for the Sacraments, an altar had to be erected out of doors. Whole parishes came hither in procession, more than a score of such arriving on any one given day, and many after a full day's journey. Many were the graces granted in response to the prayers of these pilgrims and miraculous cures began to be reported.

¹ Guillaume Farel, the reformer of French Switzerland was born at Gap.

In September 1665 the ecclesiastical authorities decided to investigate and the Archbishop of Embrun appointed a commission which included M. Lambert, his Vicar General, M. Gaillard, the Grand-Vicar of Gap, and twenty-one other ecclesiastics.

It was while the Vicar General was saying Mass on the last day of the enquiry that the first recorded miracle took place. A woman named Catherine Vial, who had for many years been crippled and whose limbs were entirely withered, was cured instantly at the very door of the chapel. The Grand-Vicar of Gap himself saw her rise from her stretcher and walk unaided. A fresh commission enquired into the case. Among the many witnesses were the two doctors who had attended the woman over a period of years. Both of them were Calvinists but now they abjured their heresy as the outcome of what they had seen. A month later a solemn *Te Deum* was sung and Catherine Vial led the whole parish of St Julien to the chapel on pilgrimage.

It has ever been the case that visionaries of our Lady have been subjected to severe testings. People of rank and influence have tried to discredit such by every means at their disposal. So it was with Benoîte Rencurel. In spite of much hostility towards her, affairs at Laus continued to thrive. Within two or three years a splendid pilgrimage church was built, just as predicted, enshrining as its sanctuary the little chapel of our Lady's choosing. The walls were built with stone carried up by the pilgrims and with labour paid for literally by the pence of the poor. Although never more than a few louis were forthcoming at any one time, the whole church cost £15,000, and was finished within four years. A large house was built as a residence for several priests and beside it was erected a fine hospice for pilgrims.

But Benoîte Rencurel's reputation for sanctity did not depend solely on the report of our Lady's apparitions, nor yet on the part she played in building this church. Her devotion to our Lord and his Mother was evinced by many tokens of humility, charity and forgiveness of injuries done to her, as well as self-effacement. She devoted herself to prayer and a life of austerity for the conversion of sinners. She took up her dwelling in a dreary room more like a prison-cell than a home, near to her beloved sanctuary. She spent the greater part of each night in prayer and watching, sleeping the rest on the ground. Thrice a week she went barefooted to *Les Fours*, to pray for the conversion of sinners. The rest of the time she devoted to the service of pilgrims.

During all this period her visions of our Lady and of other saints, including St Michael, continued. In all, it was recorded that before her death she enjoyed some six hundred apparitions of the Mother of

Reconciliation. The Chapel of Notre-Dame d'Erable marks the place where she had to defeat many assaults of the devil. The Chapel of the Angel shows where she was carried to a dangerous pinnacle of the mountainside and where her good angel ministered to her. To these and other similar shrines must be added one more. At a certain spot on the hillside, now marked by an octagonal chapel, there had been set up a large wayside cross for the edification of pilgrims. One day Benoîte was led to this cross to observe our Lord hanging thereon. Such were the thoughts that this spectacle engraved upon her heart that every Friday she spent many hours in rapture, prostrate before his cross, which is now enshrined in the octagon, sharing his agony with our Lord and the sorrows of his Passion. From that date onwards she prolonged her fasts for many days and observed a continual abstinence, living for the rest of her life only on bread and water and sometimes a little fruit.

Encouraged by her example the devotion to Notre-Dame de Laus constantly assumed larger proportions. At Benoîte's suggestion, a system of retreats, lasting for several days, was adopted, eight retreats each year conducted according to rules which she laid down with the approval of the clergy. These retreats, which still continue, had a deep effect upon the neighbouring villages and enabled them to overcome the appalling difficulties of the ensuing century.

In 1692 the Duke of Savoy invaded the Dauphiny, destroyed Gap, besieged Embrun and laid waste Laus. Benoîte, with her fellow villagers, took refuge in the sanctuary of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, which dominates the sea-port of Marseilles. When at last she returned to Laus, all the mystic would say was that they had more than when they had started. Then she set to work to bring order out of chaos. Within a few weeks the shrine of our Lady of Laus was restored to its former glory.

Hardly had this been accomplished when the chaplains' places were filled by newcomers of Jansenistic principles, who made every effort to suppress the pilgrimage. They tore down the oratories and locked Benoîte up in her cell, allowing her to hear Mass but once a week and refusing her the sacraments altogether. Benoîte submitted to the persecution with docility and resignation, praying only for those who ill-treated her. It was not until 1712 that deliverance came. Then a new Archbishop of Embrun removed the priests and entrusted the sanctuary to a congregation of missionaries of Notre-Dame de Sainte-Garde, who still serve the shrine. In the remaining six years Benoîte lived to see the fulfilment of her prayers and longings. The oratories were rebuilt, great hospices were added, and the pilgrimage became more popular than ever.

She died on the Feast of Holy Innocents, 1718, at the age of seventy-one. Fifty-six years had she spent in founding and fostering the sanctuary which she believed the Mother of God had chosen her to do. Her body lies in a vault in front of the high altar of the church she built which was in fact the altar at the original little chapel that our Lady selected. Her grave bears this inscription:

*Tombeau de la Soeur Benoite,
Morte en odeur de sainteté
Le 28 décembre 1718.*

The title 'sister' was bestowed on her in virtue of the fact that she was for many years a Dominican tertiary.

Sister Benoite was declared Venerable by Pope Pius IX, in 1871, the Pope who had already crowned the statue of our Lady of Laus, May 23rd 1855.

The most important life of Benoite Rencurel is that by Père Gaillard, published within her life-time; *Histoire du Laus et de la Soeur Benoite Rencurel*. The most satisfactory modern lives, with claim to authenticity, are those by Félix Vernet, Professor at Lyons and at the Grand Séminaire of Valence: *La Vénérable Benoite Rencurel*; and a shorter abridgement of the same, with some additional matter concerning the tertiary's cause for beatification: *Vie abrégée de la Vénérable Benoite Rencurel*. Both books were published by the Librairie Lecoffre, in Paris, in 1931 and 1935 respectively. The latter is a handy volume, well illustrated.

The author visited Laus last year. He found the pilgrim hospices open, in April, and was warmly greeted and very well served. Laus is undoubtedly one of the most charming of the many shrines of our Lady in France of which so little is heard in this country. It is an easy journey from Grenoble and a typical country bus runs from the centre of Gap to the door of the basilica. Pilgrims are advised to stay the full three days allowed. There is much to see and do, and so fascinating is the environment of the sanctuary that every minute will be found precious.