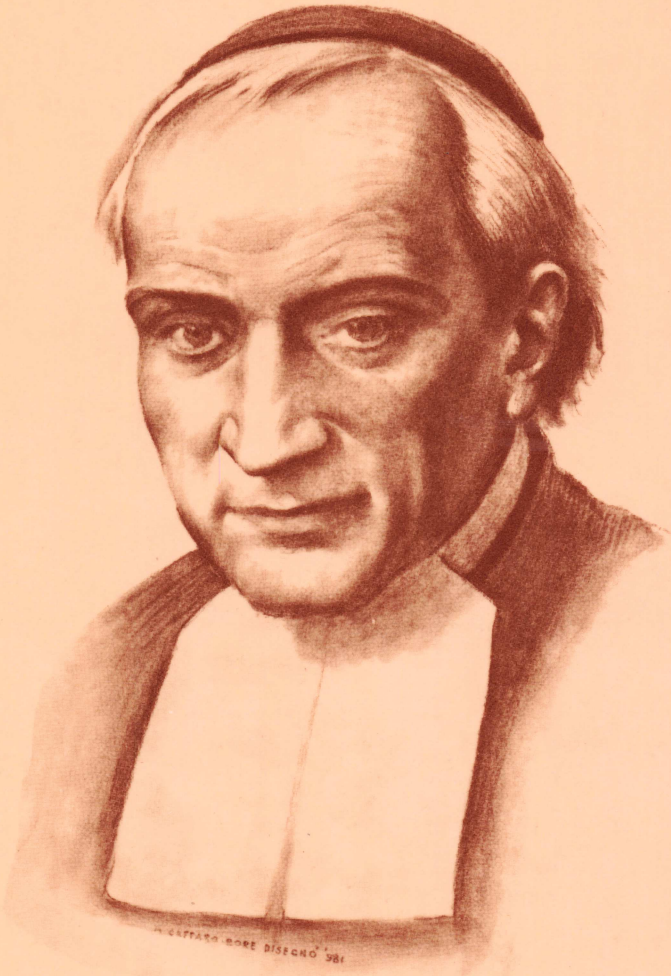
BROTHER BENILDE ROMANÇON, FSC

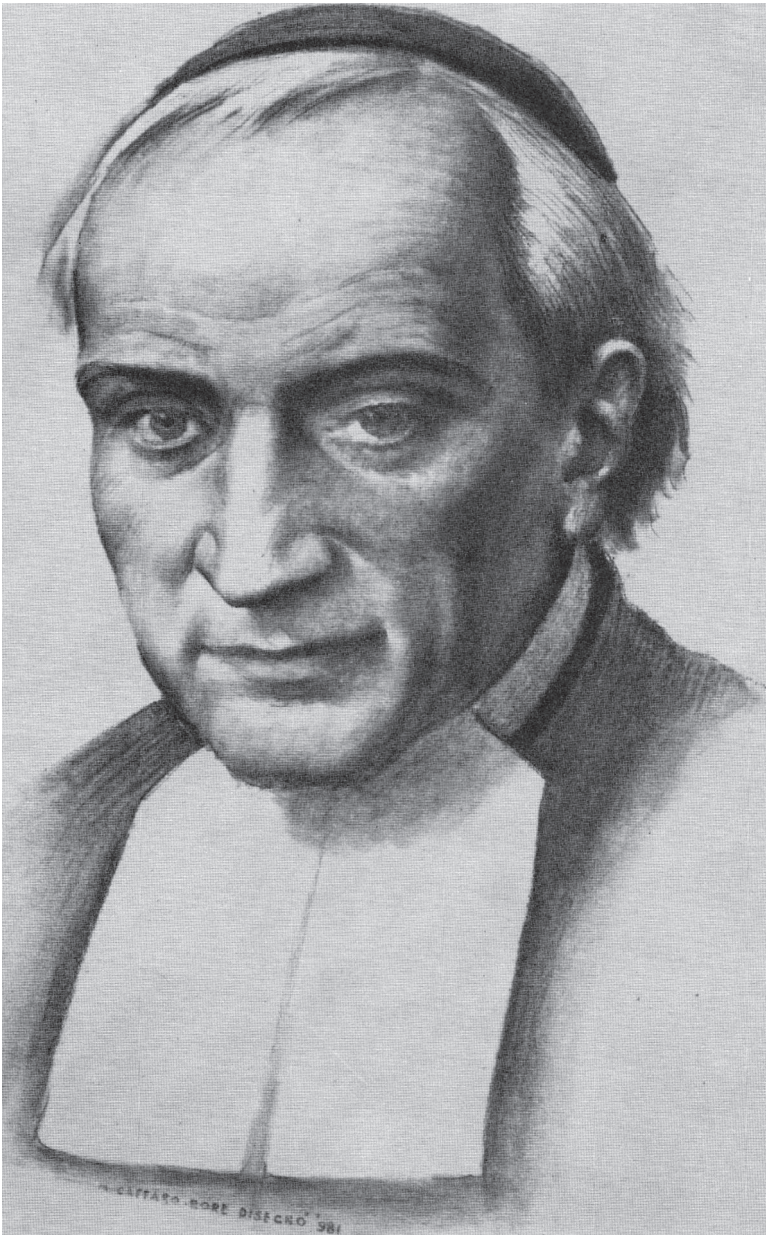
THE TEACHER SAINT



by

Luke Salm, FSC

Brother Benilde Romançon, FSC



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Christian Brothers Publications
Romeoville, Illinois

BROTHER LUKE SALM, a Doctor of Theology, is Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College in New York City and a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. An elected delegate to the 39th, 40th, and 41st General Chapters of the De La Salle Brothers, Brother Luke is currently engaged in making available to a wider public recent scholarly research on the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the early history of the Brothers' Institute. Already published are his *Beginnings: De La Salle and His Brothers* (1980), *Encounters: De La Salle at Parmenie* (1983), and *De La Salle: The Formative Years* (1988). Brother Luke has also authored biographies of Brothers Miguel, Scubilion, and Arnold.

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Foreword

There are many reasons that an English-language biography of Saint Benilde should appear at this time. October 1987 marks the twentieth anniversary of the canonization of this Brother of the Christian Schools, the first after John Baptist de La Salle, the founder, to be formally declared a saint. The only previous biography in English was published thirty years ago and has been out of print for a long time.

Why has this gap been left so long without being filled? Part of the reason has to do with the religious climate at the time of Brother Benilde's canonization in 1967. In the wake of Vatican II, solemn ceremonies of beatification and canonization were thought to be a thing of the past. The only previous instance in the pontificate of Pope Paul VI was the canonization of the Uganda martyrs in 1964. When the canonization of Brother Benilde was first announced, many of the new generation of Brothers considered it an anachronism, even a waste of money, a meaningless gesture that had little to do with their immediate concerns.

At the same time, the Institute itself was preoccupied with its own process of *aggiornamento,* of adaptation and renewal, manifest in the vigor and the creativity of the 39th General Chapter. The canonization ceremony in honor of Saint Benilde came at the moment the General Chapter was preparing the final text of the *Declaration on the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today,* a new *Book of Government,* and the final draft of the revised *Rule and Constitutions.*

In English-speaking countries, there was a flurry of interest about the canonization for a while. There was discussion, dating back to the beatification, about the use of the Latin form of Benilde's name, Benildus, preferred by or imposed on the English and Irish Brothers. In the United States and other countries, the vogue continued of taking the name Benilde at the reception of the religious habit. But apart from such

instances, the life story and the personality of the new Brother-saint were overshadowed by the dramatic decisions and documents that emerged from the 39th General Chapter.

Nothing happened in the following twenty years to change this situation very much. Now that Saint Benilde had "made it" all the way to canonization, there was no longer the suspense or the excitement associated with the various stages of the canonical process. He was just another saint, perhaps routinely invoked now and then, vaguely recalled from the anecdotes and pieties that were featured in the condensed and uncritical biographies. It would be interesting to know, for example, how many Brothers' communities throughout the world remember to celebrate the liturgical feast of Saint Benilde.

The pontificate of Pope John Paul II has been characterized by a return to many features of pre-conciliar Catholicism, among them the relatively frequent ceremonies of beatification and canonization. The causes of the Brothers who died with a reputation for sanctity have benefited considerably from this shift in Vatican policy.

To meet the new interest generated by these developments, the Christian Brothers Conference published a biography of Brother Miguel to celebrate his canonization in 1984 and, more recently, biographies of Brothers Arnold and Scubilion in view of their impending beatification. It seems appropriate now to add to the series a biography of Saint Benilde by the same author and in the same format.

The year 1987 also marks the official approval by the Church of the definitive text of the revised Rule of the Institute of the Brothers. Brother Benilde was a "man of the Rule." A closer study of how he found the inspiration for his life in the primitive Rule might motivate Brothers and their associates to find in the newly approved Rule the inspiration for their own lives in the same mission of Christian education.

The source materials used in the preparation of this biography, though mostly secondary, are abundant and rich. None of them are in English except for the work of A. J. Liddy, and that is out of print, as are most of the other sources. For that reason, as is customary in this series, footnotes have been eliminated

altogether. It is important, however, to acknowledge these sources and to indicate briefly the use that has been made of them.

The first biography of Brother Benilde was written by Father Frédéric Besse and published in Paris in 1886. He was a former Brother who had lived in community with Brother Benilde. Unfortunately, this work of some 155 pages was not available as this present biography was being written. However, the oral testimony of Father Besse is extensively cited in the *Positio* referred to below. The standard biography by Georges Rigault also provides generous quotations from the Besse biography.

The most valuable source for the present work, as will be seen from the extensive excerpts, has been the *Positio super virtutibus,* a large quarto volume published by the Congregation of Rites in 1918 for use by the cardinals and other officials dealing with the cause of Brother Benilde. Excerpts from the testimony of witnesses who knew Brother Benilde are transcribed verbatim, often with their replies to questions posed in cross-examination. The narrative of this book has in large measure been woven together out of the testimonies provided in the *Positio.*

The biography that has become standard was written by Georges Rigault, the author of the official nine-volume history of the Institute. His work, published in Paris in 1947 in preparation for Benilde's beatification the following year, is entitled *Un Instituteur sur les autels—Le bienhereux Bénilde—Frère des Ecoles chrétiennes.* Helpful as a guide to organization and for interpretative detail, Rigault's work proved to be especially valuable by reason of his extensive citations from documents in the archives of the Generalate. This material proved to be helpful in establishing chronology and in correcting contradictions or inaccuracies in the oral testimony.

Brother Paul Joseph, who made a career of writing biographies of saintly Brothers, gathered several hundred pages of material about Brother Benilde before ill health forced him to abandon the project. The materials he collected formed the basis of an Institute publication in 1926 entitled *Le Vénérable*

Frère Bénilde de L'Institut des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes. As Rigault says, since Brother Paul Joseph's principal purpose was to edify, his biography lacks a modern critical perspective. Its 220 pages do highlight, however, some interesting anecdotes that are not found elsewhere.

Chalk Dust Hero is the title of the 123-page biography in English by an author identified on the title page as A. J. Liddy. Actually, he was Brother Alfred Josephus Liddy, FSC, a well-known Brother of the Irish province and a professor in the Belfast scholasticate for many years. The little volume was published by Macmillan in London in 1956, two years after the author's death from a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. The biography follows Rigault's version rather closely in content and organization, but the style is very different. Liddy's stories are embellished with imaginative detail and dialogue that make for easy reading. The emphasis, however, is on a kind of religiosity that has all but disappeared from Catholic life, even among the younger readers for whom the book seems to have been intended.

Canon Charles Alméras, writing from Mende in southern France, published a 220-page biography in Paris in 1967. It is entitled *L'humble Frère Bénilde* and carries the inscription on the cover *Hommage aux membres du Chapître Général.* This work, which contains a preface by Brother Charles Henry, is the source for the extensive accounts of the miracles accepted for the beatification and canonization. Otherwise it is mostly an update and adaptation of the material in Rigault.

A 350-page biography in Italian, also published for the canonization in 1967, is the work of Brother Goffredo Savore. It is entitled *Il Santo Fratel Benildo Delle Scuole Cristiane.* The final chapter, entitled *Verso la Gloria,* was contributed by Brother Leone di Maria, the Vice-Postulator of the cause, and constitutes a detailed and authoritative account of the entire canonical process leading to Benilde's canonization.

In addition to these sources, the articles in the *Bulletin de l'Institut* proved helpful, especially Number 111 (for the letters of Brother Benilde), Number 114 (devoted to the beatification), and Number 192 (devoted to the canonization). Many of the

illustrations for this present work have been taken from the canonization issue of the *Bulletin*.

The translations of source materials into English, except where otherwise noted, are the author's own. Proper names have been retained in their French form except for Saint John Baptist de La Salle and Brother Benilde (in French, Bénilde). Ecclesiastical titles are given in their English equivalents: Brother, Father, and Bishop for Frère, Abbé, and Monseigneur respectively.

It is a pleasure, at the conclusion of these "fore" words, to express in cold print the author's thanks to those who contributed to the preparation and publication of this work: to Brother Brendan Hayden and the staff at Christian Brothers Publications in Romeoville, Illinois, especially to the Board of Directors for suggesting this project in the first place; to Brother Damian Steger and the staff at Saint Mary's Press; to Brother Leone Morelli, Postulator General, and Brother Edwin Bannon, Archivist, both based in the Brothers' Generalate in Rome, for supplying gratis an abundance of source materials; to Brother Frederick Altenburg of the New York District Archives for his help and cooperation; to the Brothers of the Christian Brothers Center at Manhattan College for their patience during the long hours during which the community facilities—word processor, printer, and duplicator—were tied up as this project was underway.

A very special word of thanks is due to Brother Robert Comte of the Brothers' community in Saint-Etienne in France. In the spring of 1982 he was a most gracious and knowledgeable guide for this pilgrim tracing the path of De La Salle and his Brothers in the regions of the Loire, the Auvergne, and the Gévaudan. It is hoped that the sense of time and place that this author derived from that unforgettable journey over the tortuous route from Le Puy to Saugues will come through in some measure to the reader of the narrative that follows.

The recent movie *Thérèse* has served to bring renewed attention to the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, with whom Saint Benilde was often compared. After seeing the movie several times, one Brother was led to remark that the secret of Saint

Thérèse's sanctity was her ability to deal with the pathology within herself and in those around her. The same might very well be said of Brother Benilde. Come to think of it, this book might also make a good movie. Meanwhile, the pathology within us and around us remains, but if the life of Brother Benilde means anything, out of that comes the sanctity.

Luke Salm, FSC
Manhattan College
Trinity Sunday, June 14, 1987

1
Seeds of Sanctity

"Can anything good come from Auvergne?" This good-natured query put to Brother Benilde would one day evoke a hearty laugh, expressing both recognition and a certain amount of legitimate pride. The fact is that Pierre Romançon, the future Brother Benilde, was born in Thuret, a small town in the department of Puy-de-Dôme, midway between Clermont-Ferrand and Vichy in the Auvergne region of France. The birth certificate gives the date as the 25th of Prairial in the year XIII, that is, June 14, 1805.

For most English-speaking readers, these bare facts will require a brief review of French geography and history in order to locate the event—the birth of a canonized saint—in its proper context.

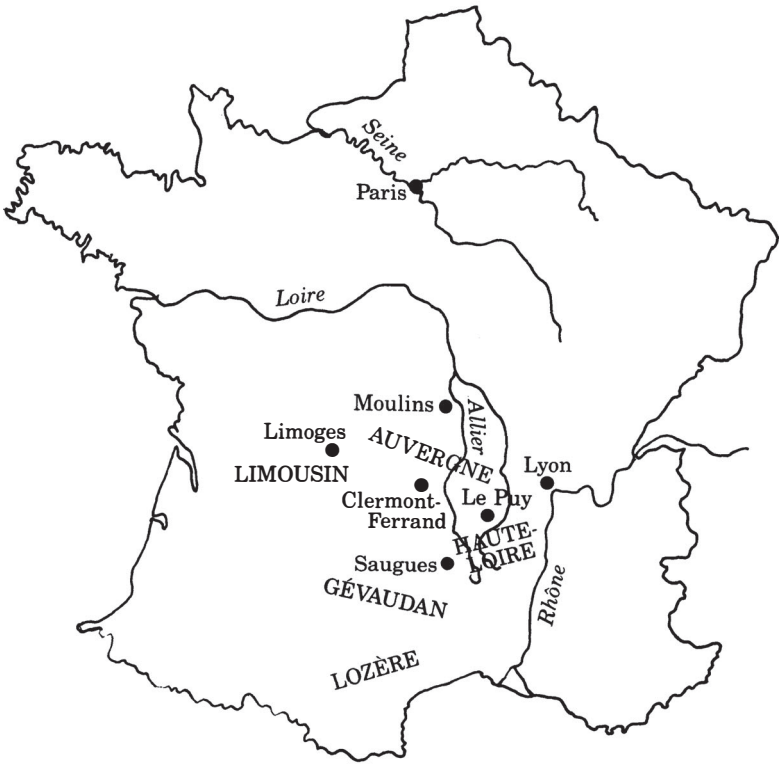
Thuret in the Auvergne

Thuret is located in what is known as the Grande Limagne or "Great Plain," one of the many stretches of fertile land that were formed long ago out of the craters of collapsed volcanoes between the surrounding peaks (or "puys") of the central massif in the heart of France. The plain is drained by the river Allier, which cuts through the *limagne* in a deep gorge as it flows north to join the Loire.

The rich black alluvial soil of the plain is ideal for wheat and grain. The volcanic hillsides to the south and the west are covered with orchards and vineyards. The *limagne* forms a great vee between the peaks of the Puy-de-Dôme (4872') and Mont-Dore (6188') to the west and the Forez mountains to the east. The department takes its name from the Puy-de-Dôme. Clermont-Ferrand is its capital, which in the course of time has supplanted the more ancient Riom. Aigueperse is the administrative center of the canton in which Thuret is located.

Thuret has long boasted an ancient priory founded in medieval times by the Benedictines from the Abbey of Saint Alyre in Clermont. There is a story from the fourteenth century that tells how a young monk named Pierre Roger was returning to his abbey from Paris, where he had just earned his doctorate in theology from the Sorbonne. En route he was set upon by a band of robbers in the forest of Radan, not far from Thuret. Some good samaritans, finding him half dead, carried him to the Thuret priory, where he was nursed back to health.

Before resuming his journey, the monk Roger asked the prior what he could offer in return for the kindness he had received. Aldebrand, the prior of Thuret, replied jokingly, "Never mind that for now. Wait until you become pope."



Map of France showing the important towns of the Central Massif

In 1342, Pierre Roger, reigning at Avignon as Pope Clement VI, remembered his benefactor at Thuret and named Aldebrand the Archbishop of Toulouse. Historians will know that not all the stories about Clement VI at Avignon are as edifying as this one.

In time Thuret also became the seat of a barony. The castle grew to be a formidable affair with three tall towers and two circular courtyards, each surrounded by a protective wall. Revolutionary authorities in 1793 ordered that it be destroyed. The last to hold the title, the Baron de Lavigney, must have come to some kind of understanding with the revolutionaries because they allowed him to sell the furnishings before they tore down the castle. Apparently he was something of an eccentric. The story has it that he stood idly by, playing his violin, while the walls of his castle came tumbling down.

All that remains today of Thuret's medieval splendor is one ruined tower of the castle and the distinctive twelfth-century church that had once been part of the Benedictine priory. The church has undergone many modifications over the centuries. It is still admired for its attractive blend of Roman and Gothic styles. The stone carvings, too, represent a blend of religious and regal symbols, the Benedictine Chi-Rho alternating with the royal fleur-de-lys. It was in this church that the future Brother Benilde was baptized.

Thuret During the Revolution

The date on the birth certificate of Pierre Romançon is given according to the system of dating imposed thirteen years earlier by the Revolution. Although by 1805 this usage had been officially suppressed, it apparently still lingered in the provinces. The reference to the 25th Prairial of the year XIII does, however, give an important clue that the Revolution was a recent and vivid memory for the people of Thuret at the time our saint came into the world.

Apart from the demolition of the ancient castle, the most visible impact of the Revolution in the Auvergne was the presence of the national guard formed mostly from local youths, either pressed into service or recruited as volunteers eager for adventure. The local republican official was a downgraded no-

The church at Thuret where Brother Benilde was baptized

bleman named Chateauneuf-Randon, who took his orders from the notorious Couthon, one of the more rabid members of the national assembly and a native of Puy-de-Dôme.

Couthon's reputation as a violent revolutionary was earned more in the capital than in his native province. Mention has already been made of the permission given to the Baron de Lavigney to sell his possessions. The Baron was imprisoned in the Ursuline convent, but he was soon released so that he could go home to supervise the harvest on his estates. Afterwards he was allowed to live under guard in another of his castles at Juillot. During the Reign of Terror there was only one public execution at Thuret. Most of the other landowners somehow managed to survive and eventually were able to return.

The stance of the people of Thuret toward all of the revolutionary furor seems to have been that of passive resistance. On one occasion, Chateauneuf-Randon decided that the bell tower of the church was an affront to the revolutionary principle of equality and so ordered it to be torn down. The national guard made a token assault on the tower by knocking down the arms of the cross, which broke through the roof and damaged the steeple. The rest of the structure was left intact. Having done their duty, the guardsmen marched calmly away. Meanwhile, no one seemed to notice or care that the devout parishioners had carried to a safe hiding place the statue of the Virgin and the bust of Saint Limin, the patron of the parish.

In August of 1790, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was passed, requiring all priests (and eventually religious brothers) to swear an oath supporting the revolutionary principles and the independence of the church from Rome. Although Pope Pius VI waited several months before issuing his instruction forbidding the French clergy to take the oath, most of the clergy were not so hesitant. From the beginning an impressive number of the parish priests, at the peril of their lives, refused to take the oath.

This situation effectively created two classes of Catholic clergy in France, the constitutionally "sworn" and the outlawed "unsworn." Among the latter were Father Bernard, the pastor of the parish at Thuret, and his vicar, Father Meydieu.

As a result of their refusal to take the oath, they were forced to go underground.

In June 1791, Father Lefort, one of the sworn, arrived in Thuret to take over the parish as the new constitutional pastor. Father Bernard and Father Meydieu had to live in a private house for more than a year, but they were able, albeit unofficially, to celebrate Mass daily at a side altar of the church.

The popular sentiment among the parishioners was strong opposition to the "traitor" priest who had been imposed upon them. The women in particular would have nothing to do with him. They composed sarcastic songs about his lack of character and stayed away from the few religious services that he provided. In retaliation, the town troublemakers harassed the partisans of the unsworn priests by throwing rocks at their windows and stuffing up their wells.

When the Revolution took a more violent turn in 1792, the Decree of Banishment issued in August of that year forced Fathers Bernard and Meydieu to flee to Switzerland. The official services conducted in the parish church by Father Lefort continued to be deserted. Mass was celebrated by hunted unsworn priests in remote barns or other out-of-the-way places where the faithful could gather without attracting attention.

After the death of Couthon and the execution of Robespierre in 1794, a new form of the civil oath was introduced that some theologians thought could be taken in good conscience by priests who cared to do so. One of these came to Thuret in the person of Father Bordage, who had taken advantage of the compromise formula, a vague affirmation of the principles of liberty and equality. He was thus able to officiate openly and provide a legitimate alternative to Father Lefort.

This solution was not entirely satisfactory, however. It is easy to imagine the joy of the parishioners at Thuret when, under the Directory, Father Bernard felt that it was safe to return. Unfortunately this period of calm was not to last very long. The coup of 1797 signaled a return to the vigorous attacks against royalty and the Church.

Forced once again to flee, Father Bernard stopped briefly at Clermont-Ferrand to say good-bye to his family. There he was recognized by the authorities, arrested, and jailed in Riom.

Brought before a military tribunal in Lyon, he was charged with conspiracy against the republic. Found guilty and condemned to death, Father Bernard was executed before a firing squad on June 28, 1798. His death had a profound effect on the people of Thuret who considered him to be a martyr because he gave his life for them.

The Parish in Thuret After the Revolution

With the accession to power of Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul in 1800 and the concordat between Napoleon and Pope Pius VI in 1801, the Catholic religion began to resume its accustomed role in private and, to some extent, in public life. This became a reality in the Auvergne in 1802 when Charles Henri-Duvalk de Dampierre, imprisoned during the Revolution for refusing to take the civil oath, was appointed Bishop of Clermont-Ferrand.

There was hope among the people of Thuret that Father Bordage might be officially appointed as their pastor. Indeed much pressure, both official and unofficial, was put upon the new bishop for this purpose. It was felt that, protected by the compromise oath, he had rendered a great service to the parish during some of the worst days of the Revolution.

Bishop de Dampierre, however, preferred to appoint an unsworn priest to the parish. This turned out to be Father Perret, who had once been pastor at Chatelperron. Bordage was sent back to his native Chaptuzat. Meanwhile Father Lefort, the constitutional priest, disappeared quietly from the scene.

In 1804, Father Perret was succeeded at Thuret by Father Lacroze, an unsworn priest who had recently returned from exile in Italy. The new pastor set about energetically restoring the church and the rectory. He was aided in great part by the civil authorities and even more so by the contributed services of the devoted parishioners.

After only three years, ill health forced Father Lacroze to resign his post, and he died shortly thereafter in 1807. Without knowing it, perhaps the most historically significant act of his ministry as the pastor at Thuret took place in 1805 when he conferred the Sacrament of Baptism on the child who was to become Brother Benilde.

The Romançon Family

The advent of the Napoleonic era thus made it possible for the Church to reorganize and for the people of God to resume openly and without fear the practice of their traditional Catholicism. There was, however, one restrictive practice that was not only retained but intensified under Napoleon. That was military conscription. The surest guarantee of exemption was to be married and to have a family, and females of marriageable age were not easily found.

These circumstances may have been, to some extent at least, the motive that led Jean Romançon in the year 1800 to espouse Anne Chauty, a young widow from Thuret. Jean had been born in 1774 in Sardon, one of the subdivisions of the Thuret parish where he owned a bit of property. Anne had a daughter, Marie Baudieu, from a previous marriage.

As part of the financial arrangements, Jean Romançon sold his property and used the proceeds to disencumber his stepdaughter from her deceased father's estate and to provide the dowry she needed to enter the convent. The wife, on her part, contributed her house and property to the common settlement. The marriage contract, which was drawn up in Riom, describes the house as a two-story building with an adjoining stable and barn surrounded by about thirty acres of land. In all, it was evaluated at eighteen thousand francs. The farmhouse, in which Brother Benilde would one day be born, still exists today as a museum.

The family was fairly well off but far from wealthy, rather typical of the Auvergne peasants at that time. The farm's principal crops were wheat, oats, and barley. Walnut trees and grape vines provided the family with oil and wine. As for livestock, they had one horse, a cow or two, some sheep, pigs, and poultry. As with most households in the countryside, the family was pretty much self-supporting.

Both the father and the mother were devout Catholics. The father was illiterate, but the mother could read and write. She had a sensitive nature that was no doubt enhanced by her rather delicate health. Her religious sense was especially refined, enough above the ordinary that it was often remarked upon by her neighbors.

Pierre Romançon

The union between Jean and Anne Romançon eventually produced five children. The two youngest died very young. The oldest boy was called Annet; the only surviving girl was Anne. The second son was named Pierre, and it is he who will become the focus of this story.

The civil record reads as follows:

> On the 25th Prairial, year XIII, a record of the birth of Pierre Robançon, born on this day at 9:00 A.M., son of Jean and Anne Chauty, who are husband and wife. The sex of the child is seen to be that of a boy. First witness: Pierre Moreton, Junior, farmer and resident of this part of Thuret, age 41 years; second witness: Jean Redon, sacristan and farmer, also resident of these same parts, age 66 years. At the request of Jean Robançon, father of the child, farmer and resident of these same parts, age 31 years, we have drawn up the present certificate. These men have declared that they do not know how to sign their names, with the exception of the aforesaid Moreton who has signed together with us on this same day and year.
>
> [Signed] Rougier, Mayor

The corresponding parish record is signed by Father Lacroze, indicating that the baptism took place in the parish church on the same day. The variant spellings of the proper names is itself interesting, indicative of a dependence on oral rather than written records. The father's name is spelled Robanson, the mother's as Anne Chotit. The godfather signed his name Pierre Morthon, but Father Lacroze transcribed it as Moreton. The godmother was Anne Moltère, who was illiterate and unable to sign.

However the name was to be spelled, no one at the time had any way of knowing that the baptism of the second child of the Romançon (or Robanson) marriage was only the first step in a long process of sanctification. The seeds had been sown that would blossom forth in a religious vocation, the practice of heroic virtue, a holy death, a series of miraculous cures, and eventually in canonized sainthood.

Childhood

The known facts about the childhood of Pierre Romançon are not very complicated or unusual. In one sense neither was he. He grew up much like other farm boys his age in the France of that time: regular church attendance, duties at home and on the farm, a bit of elementary schooling.

The Romançon home at Thuret

In other respects Pierre Romançon was different. He was small for his age and consequently somewhat shy. He was not very helpful with the rougher tasks on the farm, and this provoked the taunts and sometimes the blows of his older brother, Annet. Pierre was more attracted to study, reading, and devotional practices than farm boys were supposed to be.

Elementary Schooling

Pierre was somewhat older than his classmates when he was first enrolled in the classes of M. Delais, the local schoolmaster, and so was frequently the butt of his classmates' cruel

jokes. He seemed not to mind. Unable or unwillingly to join in their childish games, he rapidly outstripped them in scholarship.

Pierre won an ascendancy over his fellow students and a bit of their respect by helping them with their studies during after-school sessions out in the fields. He especially enjoyed helping them to memorize the prayers or to master the more difficult parts of the catechism. Left to himself, with the not very demanding task of looking after the family flocks, he had time to read, to daydream, and to contemplate the glory of God in the scenic glory of the Grande Limagne.

When Pierre was about six years old, the Auvergne was overrun by Prussian troops that came on the heels of the defeat of Napoleon. The impressionable lad was shocked by the atrocities perpetrated by the Prussians, with the looting and other barbarisms associated with martial law and occupying armies before and since.

On one occasion Pierre saw one of his cousins, a cripple, thrown into prison for avoiding the draft, even though the handicapped were legally exempt. It took all of the mayor's persuasive powers to get the helpless young man released. This incident had a strong impact on the Romançon family, especially on Pierre, who ever after retained an intense distaste for anything to do with the military. This aversion was only intensified some years later when his older brother, Annet, died in an army camp at Montpellier.

First Encounter with the Brothers

Pierre made his First Communion in 1817 at the age of twelve, as was customary at the time. Shortly thereafter, probably in 1818, on a trip with his parents to the market in Clermont-Ferrand, he saw for the first time the black robe, white rabat, and flowing mantle with pendant sleeves that was the habit of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Pierre was impressed by the decorum and devotion of the Brothers as they made their way through the streets saying the Rosary. He often said in later years that it was then that he first conceived the idea that he might someday become one of them.

In retrospect this encounter could be considered providential. The fact is that there were no Brothers living in Clermont at the time. Negotiations were indeed underway to open a Christian school in that city. It is known that a delegation of three Brothers was sent from the Generalate at Lyon to Clermont ahead of time to make the final arrangements. The Brothers that so impressed the young Pierre might have been those emissaries. Or, another possibility, they could have been Brothers visiting from nearby Riom, where a school had already been opened earlier that year.

The Child Remembered by Family and Friends

Such are the essential facts about the childhood of Pierre Romançon up to the time of his first encounter with the Brothers. The tendency of other biographies about Brother Benilde, even those prepared for the beatification and canonization, has been to elaborate on this simple history or to fill in the gaps with imaginative detail and reconstructed dialogue in an attempt to demonstrate precocious sanctity or to second-guess the ways of Providence.

Another approach, which might prove more interesting and provide a bit of charm as well as authenticity, is to retell the story piecemeal, as it came from the recollections of those who either knew Brother Benilde as a child or heard from his own lips what he himself remembered of his childhood.

These testimonies were gathered in the early phases of the canonical investigation into the cause of Brother Benilde: the diocesan or "ordinary" process from 1896 – 1898 and the Roman or "apostolic" process from 1904 – 1905. Although this method has its disadvantages, including repetition and inconsistency in details, a certain sense of being there in time and place comes from reading these reminiscences, even in the English translation.

Jean Borrot was a cousin of Brother Benilde and ten years his junior. Testifying in 1897 at the age of eighty-three at the ordinary process, he offered these recollections:

> His father's name was Jean Romançon, who was my godfather; his mother was Anne Choty. He had a brother who died in the service. The family had a small piece of property

of about six or seven steres worth about 18,000 francs including the building. From his mother, who had been previously married, Brother Benilde had a stepsister who died as a nun. His father could not read but his mother knew how.

His father was a good Catholic who had never worked on Sunday without necessity and without permission. When I was little he once explained to me what paradise was—he said that in paradise the trees were made of silver.

Brother Benilde left home when he was 14. Up until then he went to school with the schoolmaster of the commune named Delais. As a boy he was intelligent and learned quickly. In that matter, they used to say at Thuret that it was unusual to see children learn as rapidly as he did under instruction.

Brought back at the age of ninety-one to testify at the apostolic process, Jean Borrot added a few more details:

Brother Benilde was born at Thuret in 1805. His father's name was Jean Romançon and his mother Anne Chotty, a strong and holy woman. The father was from Sardon, the mother from Thuret. Our two mothers were sisters. The parents of Brother Benilde were farmers and fairly well off. Brother Benilde had a sister who has since died; he also had a brother who died in military service at Montpellier. He had two other sisters who died very young within a week of each other.

Testifying in the ordinary process in 1897 when he was sixty-one years old, Marien Astier, a neighbor, gave additional information about the Romançons, who lived next door:

The young Romançon went to the classes of Jean Delais. He did not begin at the same time as the other lads his age since his parents weren't very wealthy and needed him at home. When he did arrive in school he was the object of abuse from his comrades because he did not spend time playing with them. But he did not make a big fuss over this. He applied himself all the more to his work and soon surpassed the rest of them.

The name of the family was Romançon, although in dialect some people said Robanson.

From what I heard from my father, the father of Brother Benilde was an excellent man, originally from Sardon. His inheritance had been sold and he used the money to provide a dowry for the daughter his wife had from a previous marriage. That daughter died a nun at Autun. He lived in Thuret on his wife's property. He also had several other assets which he had given to his stepdaughter, the nun.

Eight years later, Astier added more details:

Brother Benilde was born in Thuret, next door to us, I don't know exactly in what year. The house where he was born is still standing, only it has been done over. His father's name was Romançon. He came from Sardon, at one time part of the parish of Thuret, but now a commune and a parish on its own. His mother was born a Chotty.

I'm sure Brother Benilde was baptized and given the name Pierre. His mother would certainly have had him confirmed. An old aunt of mine told me that his mother used to cry whenever she could not get to Mass because she had to stay home to take care of her children when they were very young.

Brother Benilde had a sister, and also a stepsister who became a nun. The first died leaving behind several children. . . .

Brother Benilde attended school at Thuret with M. Delais, a private schoolmaster. My father told me that he began school much older than the other children and for that reason he was often ridiculed, at least in the beginning. He was so serious about his studies that he did not take part in the games of the others and soon surpassed them all. He was intelligent and had foresight.

Years later he had occasion to write to a nephew of M. Delais in which he acknowledged his debt to his old teacher who first introduced him to the world of learning. We looked for the letter but couldn't find it.

Jean Morton, a nephew, was sixty-seven years old when he gave his testimony in 1897:

His father was called Jean, his mother, Anne Chauty. Their marriage took place at Riom: I saw the certificate. I believe we have a copy of it at home. They owned property but it was not very large. They were good Catholics. I have an aunt who died a nun at Autun. I knew Brother Benilde's father; I never knew his mother, but her memory was held in high esteem.

Many times my grandfather said to me, "Bad fellow! You'll never be like your uncle! Why, as far back as I can remember he always had a book in his hand."

Brother Benilde always had a love for prayer. Once when I went to Clermont with him, he kept a rosary in his hands. Whenever he passed a church or a crucifix he bowed to it.

His father said that he was very obedient as a child and when he went to school. That did not prevent him from spending time guarding the sheep. Brother Benilde was always content with very little and he was respectful in every way.

When the Brothers were called upon to testify, many of them remembered little stories that Brother Benilde told them about his childhood. Thus Brother Natal-Marie:

I know that he came from the Auvergne because one day someone said to him, "Can anything good come from the Auvergne?" At that he laughed heartily.

Brother Nomelin-Jean:

He used to tell us that when he was a child he liked to gather together his playmates to teach them their prayers and the catechism.

Brother Gombertus:

I heard Brother Benilde tell the story of how his father was saved from a wild beast, as it were miraculously, as a result of the father's prayer. His dog, which he had left behind a good half hour's distance away, came running as he prayed and drove away the beast. Brother Benilde regarded this event as a miracle.

Brother Genotius left the Institute but came forward in 1905 to testify at the apostolic process as a layman, Jean-Baptiste Pulby by name:

> Brother Benilde told us one day during recreation, speaking to us I think about mortification, that when he was still a child the grapes one year were not very plentiful or very good. His father and mother told him that he was not to touch the grapes. He added simply that he never once violated this prohibition. Otherwise in recreation he was always unassuming and pleasant. I should add that he spoke very little to us of his family.

There was another Brother, named Namos-Joseph, who at one time lived with Brother Benilde and later left the Institute to become a priest. In 1886, as Father Frédéric Besse, he was the first to write a biography of his former Director. Later on he added his oral testimony in the various stages of the canonical process. Father Besse was sixty-six years old in 1897 when he gave this testimony in the ordinary process:

> His mother took him often to church where he prayed without really knowing what he was doing until he reached the use of reason. Later he was employed in guarding the flocks; he took with him religious books and the beauties of nature raised his soul to God. I drew these details out of him during the course of a long walk. I say "drew them out" because he did not easily speak about himself. But politeness would require him to respond to a direct question.

Father Besse gave a fuller account in 1904:

> His father was called Romançon, his mother's name escapes me. They were from Thuret, farmers, and fairly well off. They were good Catholics, the mother especially was very pious. Brother Benilde told me so, although he spoke very little of his family. . . .
>
> His mother took him often to church. He was kept busy guarding the flocks. He once mentioned to us that at Thuret he had seen the Prussians mistreat the inhabitants and even execute one of them and that this had left a vivid impression on him.

During this period he loved to bring together the other children to teach them what he had already learned, especially the catechism. He told us that his parents once brought him to Clermont, where he saw the Brothers wearing the white rabat and that they had greatly impressed him.

From that moment he showed himself especially religious. He said that ever since his First Communion he had felt the stirrings of a religious vocation.

He had received his elementary education at Thuret, I think, from a local schoolmaster. He loved to contemplate nature and thereby raise his mind to God. He told us this himself and he kept this practice all his life.

He was kept busy watching the flocks just as the young country lads are accustomed to do, without ever thinking that this task was beneath him.

The repetitions in these testimonies confirm the essential facts about the childhood of Pierre Romançon: his family, his education, and his interests; his character as sensitive, studious, and devout. It is clear that he was an ordinary country lad in one sense, yet there is more than a hint of something rather extraordinary that was yet to come.

2
The Birth of a Vocation

According to his own recollection, Pierre Romançon's chance encounter with the Brothers in the streets of Clermont-Ferrand was a case of love at first sight. But there were obstacles to be overcome before the initial attraction could find an adequate response. Some of the hesitancy came from the family, some of it from the Institute. None of it was his own.

Brother Nomelin-Jean recalled:

> He told us that he had the idea of becoming a Brother ever since he saw the Brothers for the first time at Clermont. Besides, his mother had already spoken to him about the Brothers before that. He also related to us how he was beside himself with joy once he obtained his parents' permission to enter the novitiate.

The very presence of the Brothers in Clermont in 1818 was a sign that the Institute was coming back to life in the Auvergne after its near extinction during the Revolution. The school at Aurillac had reopened as early as 1811. When the mayor of Clermont wrote to the Superior General, Brother Gerbaud, requesting Brothers to open a school in the capital of the Auvergne, he received the following reply. It is dated December 21, 1816:

> My dear Mister Mayor: We have need of many more recruits to our Institute. I beg you to interest the most reverend bishop, the civil prefect, as well as the reverend pastor to try to procure for us good young boys from the countryside, . . . lads who are hard on themselves and who have tasted the discipline that comes from innocent work in the fields in line with the humble traditions of their ancestors.

There is evidence that such a campaign for vocations was launched the following year.

As for the Romançons, the father saw with increasing clarity that his second son was not cut out to be a good farmer. The older boy, Annet, saw this even more clearly and did not hesitate to let his "kid brother" know how useless he was on the farm. The mother began to speak of the possibility that he might succeed Monsieur Delais in the village school. But Pierre wanted more than that. He could not forget the religious commitment he saw in the demeanor of the Brothers at Clermont. From then on the talk turned more and more to the Brothers.

The father was not altogether convinced. He thought that the boy was too young and too frail to commit himself to such a life. The lad, he said, needed more time to make a mature decision. Besides, Jean Romançon probably wasn't quite prepared to give up one of his only two sons so definitively.

School at Riom

A Brothers' school had been open in nearby Riom for only a few months when, as a compromise, it was decided to send Pierre there to continue his education. Riom was not very far away, so it was arranged to have the lad lodge with a good family there since the Brothers had no accommodations for boarders.

Father Besse thus testified in 1905:

> He was sent to Riom to the school of the Brothers there where he lived in town as a boarder. I don't know exactly in what class he was enrolled. In any case, he was devout and studious; he was in fact a model. . . .
>
> It was at this time that his teachers noted in him the signs of a religious vocation, as he himself told us. His vocation made itself more and more apparent from that time on and I doubt that any human motive played any part in it.
>
> I do know that he prayed a good deal that God would make his will known more clearly — he himself told us so, adding that it was always necessary to ask God for his vocation.

There is reason to believe that the Brothers at Riom found ways to encourage the seeds of vocation in this promising adolescent. It was a custom in the Institute at the time that likely candidates, and also young Brothers fresh from the novitiate, serve as monitors or teaching assistants in the classroom. This would be no new experience for the fourteen-year-old Pierre, who had already successfully tutored his schoolmates in the fields at Thuret.

Years later, many of the Brothers and others who testified in the canonical process had the impression that Brother Benilde had taught at Riom as a Brother. The official records show no such assignment. The misconception is no doubt due to the fact that he assisted, or perhaps even substituted, in the classroom at Riom during the sixteen months that he spent there prior to entering the novitiate.

Finally, at some point during the year 1819, Pierre's success and evident happiness were enough to convince his parents that his vocation was genuine. The father was consoled in part by the fact that Annet, who was almost nineteen at the time, was still with him at home to help with the farm. The mother was delighted at her success in pleading the cause of her son. Once the parents gave their permission, Pierre "was beside himself with joy," to quote once again the words of Brother Nomelin-Jean.

Rejection

Then a new and unexpected obstacle presented itself. The Brothers in charge of the recently opened novitiate at Clermont were reluctant to accept Pierre. His age was not a problem—he was only fourteen years old at the time—because in the absence of a junior novitiate, it was not uncommon to receive boys directly into the novitiate at that age. The problem was his size and appearance. He was small in stature, with a bit of a hunched back, and he looked like a mere child.

He himself told the story many times in later years, and many of the witnesses in the canonical processes repeated it, among them Brother Nomelin-Jean:

He told us that they made him wait a long time before

admitting him to the novitiate. In fact, he was very small when he first applied. Then he would become very enthusiastic as he told us the story of how he came to be admitted to the novitiate. He made a novena to some saint or other, I think it was Saint Amator, to obtain the favor of growing enough to be accepted.

Or in the words of Brother Narcisse-Marie:

There was difficulty about admitting him to the novitiate by reason of his short stature. But then he began to pray to some saint or other, I forget who it was, who had also been very small, and he grew enough to get permission to enter. Although he always remained small, he carried more weight than his size or his age would warrant.

Intercession of Saint Colette

The saint in question was not Saint Amator (he belongs to another story later on) but Saint Colette, a native of Piccardy in the fourteenth century. According to the legend, her mother had been childless for years. She promised that if God would give her a daughter, she would do all in her power to make the child a saint. The mother died shortly after Colette was born. Some years later Colette found an account of her mother's vow and so became determined to do her part by joining the Poor Clares.

Colette, however, never grew to normal height. She was often the butt of ridicule, and the nuns refused to accept her. One day she prayed before the crucifix: "O Lord, is it really your will that I should remain as small as this for the rest of my life? Don't you know how people make fun of me? that my mother's vow is unfulfilled while she lies restless buried in the dark earth? that the nuns won't take me until I grow enough?" She no sooner finished her prayer than she realized that she had grown noticeably taller. The nuns accepted her, the mother could rest in peace, and Colette became a great saint.

Whatever the truth in the legend, Pierre's novena to Saint Colette met with similar success. In the ensuing months he apparently did grow a bit, at least enough to be accepted at Clermont.

Acceptance

Not all of the factors that led to Pierre's admission to the Institute were due to supernatural or extraordinary intervention. The Brothers in charge of the novitiate had good reason to accept him. For example, in addition to his moral and spiritual maturity, he had demonstrated his ability to conduct a class, as the Brothers at Riom could testify.

Nor should it be forgotten that there was a program under way in the Auvergne for searching out vocations to the Institute. This campaign, if it can be called that, had been put into the hands of Father Derbines by the Superior General, who at that time had his headquarters in the Generalate at Lyon. The confidence of the superiors in the persuasive powers of that priest was not misplaced. According to the testimony of Jean Morton, Jean Romançon often referred to the role that Father Derbines played in overcoming his own objections to Pierre's vocation as well as those of the Brothers in Clermont.

For Pierre, the long-awaited day finally arrived. The register at Clermont-Ferrand records the essential facts:

> #17. ROMANÇON, Pierre, son of Jean and Choty, Anne. Born June 14, 1805, commune of Thuret, canton of Aigueperse, arrondissement of Riom. Entered the novitiate February 10, 1820.

Brother Genebaud, who was eighty-five years old when he testified in 1897, gave this account of the event:

> I heard it said that when Brother Benilde entered the novitiate, after all the difficulties they made about his short stature, that the Director of Novices was heard to say, "One day this good little fellow will be the glory of the Institute."

This oft-quoted remark appears for the first time in the 1886 biography by Father Besse. When questioned about it in the apostolic tribunal, however, he said that he could no longer remember the source. Georges Rigault, in his biography, is inclined to ascribe it to the literary genre known as "prediction by hindsight."

The novitiate at Clermont had been operating for little more than a year when Brother Benilde arrived there in 1820.

The novitiate, and the school to which it was attached, occupied the property known as the Bien-Assis, which had once belonged to the family of Blaise Pascal. Prior to the move to more commodious quarters in 1823, the novices were trained successively by Brother Leufroy and Brother Trophime.

Brother Benilde

After a relatively extended postulancy of four months, Pierre Romançon took the religious habit of the sons of John Baptist de La Salle on the eve of Trinity Sunday, June 22, 1820. At the same time he was given the name Brother Benilde. The original Saint Benilde, his patron, had been martyred for the faith at Cordova in Spain in the year 853 during the domination of the Moors.

When Brother Benilde received the religious habit, it was still customary in the Institute to give only one religious name to suggest a new identity, a renunciation of the past, a flight from "the world." In this respect Brother Benilde was fairly lucky, considering the odds. The Institute was rapidly running out of recognizable names. The names of the Directors of the novitiate, Leufroy and Trophime, are a case in point.

Another notable example comes from the novitiate in Paris, where, two years later, another pious young Frenchman named Jean-Bernard Rousseau would be given the name Brother Scubilion. In a companion volume in this series devoted to the life of Brother Scubilion, the subject of the religious names of the Brothers is given extended treatment.

It may be worth repeating here, nevertheless, that as vocations to the Institute multiplied in the thirties and forties of the last century, it became customary to give the Brothers two names. This increased the number of possible combinations. It also served to distinguish the veterans with one name from the neophytes, who had two.

In addition, an ingenious system was worked out whereby the names of the Brothers might not only enhance religious motivation (not one but two heavenly patrons) but contribute as well to administrative efficiency. In a period when the organizational unit called the District was just beginning to emerge

in the Institute, it was considered helpful to apportion the first of the two names according to the alphabet among the various Districts then being formed.

Thus the ancient Districts of Reims, Paris, and Caen got names beginning with *A, B,* and *C.* To the novitiate at Clermont were assigned names beginning with *G* and *H.* That is why Brothers who entered well after Benilde but who featured in his life bear names like Gombertus, Geslin, Gély, Haram, and Hugolin. When the novitiate opened in Le Puy, it was assigned the letter *N.* Hence those who lived with Brother Benilde in Saugues and who testified in the canonical processes have names like Nomelin, Narcisse, Nicanor, and even Nil (which stands for Saint Nilus and not for "nothing").

There is no direct testimony to supply specific details about the year and a half that Brother Benilde spent in the novitiate at the Bien-Assis or to indicate in what way, if any, he distinguished himself from the other novices. It may be supposed that he grew in the love and practice of prayer, that he was tested in obedience and submission to the superiors and to the Rule, and that he was introduced to the spiritual doctrine and pedagogical principles inherited from Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

The one clue we do have to the attitude of Brother Benilde as a novice comes from the testimony of Father Besse:

> He made his novitiate at Clermont. He must have made a good novitiate to judge from the language he used later: "When I entered the Brothers I understood that it was necessary to give oneself totally to God and to do in all things the will of the superiors."

Death of His Mother

In 1821, toward the end of his stay in the novitiate, Brother Benilde received word that his mother had died. This was no doubt a blow to the family because only three years earlier the two youngest girls had died within a week of each other, one only an infant and the other a mere child. Brother Aggée, the recently appointed Brother Visitor, allowed Brother Benilde to

go home for the mother's funeral and to remain as long as necessary to settle the family affairs.

It seems that this visit home was somewhat prolonged. According to the testimony of Jean Borrot, his cousin, Brother Benilde on this occasion taught him to read "in only a week or two." A longer stay than usual could easily have been permitted because the young Brother had not yet been given an assignment, was as yet without vows, and may have been involved in the legal complications following his mother's death.

Another motive for a longer stay may have been the extent of the father's grief. In these circumstances, Jean Romançon may well have tried to persuade his young son to leave the Brothers and to return home permanently. Such an interview apparently did take place, but some authors locate it earlier or later and in the parlor of the novitiate.

In any case, Brother Benilde remained firm. It may have been in this context that he uttered another oft-quoted remark: "I prefer my vocation to that of an emperor." Some say that after consoling the father as best as he could, Brother Benilde invoked the gospel command to "let the dead bury the dead and go forth to announce the kingdom of God."

3
The Education of an Educator

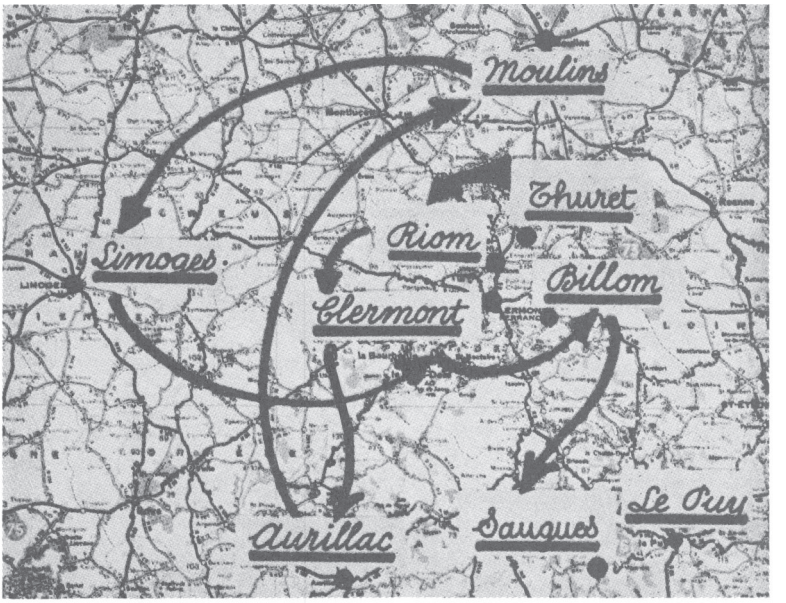
The career of Brother Benilde as an apostle of Christian education both in the classroom and as school principal covered a span of some forty years, roughly divided into two periods. From 1821 to 1841 he served his apprenticeship in the network of elementary schools conducted by the Brothers out of the administrative center at Clermont-Ferrand. Beginning in the lowest classes, he was given increasingly important posts of responsibility until 1841, when he was sent to open a new school at Saugues. There he was to remain for another twenty years, until his death in 1862.

Compared to the abundant documentation for the twenty-year period at Saugues, the material relating to the period from 1821 to 1841 is relatively scanty. Enough is known, however, from the Institute records and from the witnesses who testified at the canonical processes to follow the main lines of Brother Benilde's development in his early years in the classroom. There is evidence to suggest that from the beginning he was a born teacher and that, in time, he proved to be an effective administrator.

Although Brother Benilde completed a full year of novitiate in June 1821, he was kept there, or in the adjoining school community, for an additional six months. No reason has ever been given; perhaps once again it had something to do with the fact that he still looked like a little schoolboy himself.

Aurillac: Primary Class

Finally, on December 20, 1821, Brother Benilde was sent to the school at Aurillac in the department of Cantal, where he was given charge of the elementary class. The school was under the



The tour of duty of Brother Benilde

direction of Brother Odo, one of the veterans from pre-revolutionary days who had urged that the school be reopened for the benefit of the sons of his former pupils.

It was neither unusual nor surprising that Brother Benilde, fresh from the novitiate, should be given charge of the youngest pupils. There is some doubt, however, whether even that responsibility was handed over to him right away. He was quoted in later years as saying that he was at first employed at Aurillac in the kitchen and that he would have been content with that menial service for the rest of his life.

Georges Rigault has shown that the official records of the Institute list no kitchen assignment for Brother Benilde at Aurillac, as they do later on for Limoges. That does not exclude the possibility that as the youngest in the community, he would have been expected to help in the kitchen or even to take regular turns as the community cook.

Brother Benilde remained in Aurillac for four years. Most of the time was spent in the humdrum routine of applying the

tried and true practices of the Lasallian pedagogical tradition to the elementary class. There is nothing to indicate that he was anything but good at it; his earlier experience and his natural talent for instructing others may well have blossomed afresh in these new circumstances.

A break from the routine would come during the summer vacation period, scheduled in most European countries to correspond with the annual harvest. During part of this time the Brothers from the various schools throughout the Auvergne would reassemble at the novitiate in Clermont-Ferrand for the annual retreat.

On September 23, 1823, at the close of the retreat of that year, Brother Benilde had the happiness of pronouncing his religious vows for the first time. According to the custom of the time, these vows were first made for a three-year period and then were renewed annually until perpetual profession, which Brother Benilde would make in 1836.

The formula of vows has remained essentially unchanged in the Institute since the time of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. The opening phrase expresses the essence of religious consecration: "Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate with profound respect before your infinite majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me." Only after this act of total self-giving does the candidate express his commitment to the Institute and profess the specific vows.

The joy of this occasion was considerably mitigated by news of trouble in the Romançon household. Brother Benilde was getting a harsh lesson in exactly what it was that God was requiring of him. In the same year that he made his vows, 1823, his older brother, Annet, who had just been drafted into the army, died in a military camp at Montpellier. Then came word of the death of his stepsister, Marie Baudieu, in a convent at Autun.

Once again, the young and newly vowed Brother had to choose between his vocation and the filial ties of love and duty that he felt towards his father. The only one left at home to care for the elder Romançon was Anne, about seventeen years old at the time. She, too, would soon be off to marry Pierre Morton,

the son of Brother Benilde's godfather. But for Brother Benilde, now more than ever, there was no question of turning back.

Moulins: Intermediate Class

In September 1825, Brother Benilde was transferred to Moulins on the Allier River, far to the north in the Bourbonnais country. The Brothers' school there had a long history, having been founded during the lifetime of De La Salle by Father Aubrey, who himself had a reputation as an educational innovator in the seventeenth century. The Brothers at Moulins had been dispersed by the revolutionary forces in 1792. Two of them, Brothers Roger and Léon, were among the hundreds who perished in the crowded and unsanitary conditions in the prison ships that were blockaded by the British in the harbor at Rochefort.

The school in the parish of Saint Jacques in Moulins had been reopened in 1822. Moulins was at the northern end of the wide-ranging network of schools controlled from the Brothers' center at Clermont. It was a prosperous city with elaborate mansions and palaces built in the opulent years of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was indeed a very different world for the twenty-year-old Brother coming for the first time from the rustic plains and villages of his native Limagne.

Since there is very little source material that refers to the years Brother Benilde spent in Moulins, it is only possible to speculate about what this new experience meant for him. What is known is that he was assigned to the intermediate class, a good indication that he had proven himself to be an effective teacher and that this had become known. This assignment, too, lasted for four years, from 1825 until 1829, except for a brief and unexplained interlude of six months at Limoges in 1827.

It was Institute policy at that time, and long afterwards, to transfer the young Brothers on a regular basis. This not only gave them a broad range of experience but also was a way to test their obedience and to keep them from becoming too attached to a particular school and its clientele.

This policy aroused frequent complaints on the part of parents and students as well as from municipal and ecclesiastical

authorities, especially when popular or effective teachers were sent elsewhere. For that reason, transfers were usually accomplished without warning, even to the Brothers involved, and the departures took place immediately and as furtively as possible.

Limoges: Senior Class

In some such circumstances, Brother Benilde was sent in 1829 from Moulins in the northern end of the province to Limoges at the western extremity, in the region known as the Limousin. This time he was assigned to the senior class, further proof, if such were needed, that he was growing, if not in stature, at least in his ascendancy and effectiveness in the classroom.

In Limoges, Brother Benilde was also given charge of the kitchen. Whether this was permanent or temporary, voluntary or imposed, a practical necessity or intended as a test of humility and obedience, is not known. It even may have been that as senior teacher he did not have as many pupils to contend with as the other Brothers. The simple fact of kitchen duties is noted in the official Institute list, together, of course, with his assignment to the senior class.

Other biographers are at pains to point to a precedent in the case of the famous Brother Philippe. When he was Director of the school at Metz before becoming Superior General, he functioned as the community cook while he was recovering from an eye ailment. The two cases are hardly the same. There was nothing wrong with Brother Benilde, certainly not with his eyes, if he had charge of the senior pupils.

Brother Benilde was just completing his first year at Limoges when the July Revolution of 1830 broke out. Tension in the Limousin was high. The aristocratic and clerically oriented Charles X had been forced to abdicate, the tricolor replaced the banners of the Bourbon monarchy on the public buildings of Limoges, and anti-clerical demonstrations began to be the order of the day.

The Director of the school and community at Limoges was Brother Conteste, an old veteran who had joined the Institute

long before the Revolution of 1789. During the Reign of Terror he had managed to escape to Italy, where he was appointed Director of the Brothers' school at Ferrara. Brought back to France after the Restoration, he was made Director successively at Saint-Etienne near Lyon and then at Limoges.

As the anti-clerical agitation of the 1830 Revolution spread to Limoges, poor old Brother Conteste was terrified. A case of déjà vu. "What will become of me?" he cried to his Brothers. "The rest of you are young and have families to go to. I am alone and without relatives or friends. I'll be thrown out on the street." "Never fear," Brother Benilde interposed, "if the worst happens, you can come home with me. We'll see to it that you don't starve."

Things did not turn out so badly. The school remained open, although the allowance given to the Brothers for their support was considerably reduced. They had to suffer continual taunts and inconvenience, but there was no suppression.

The year 1830 also marked a change of government in the Institute. On September 2 of that year, Brother Anaclet succeeded Brother Gerbaud as Superior General. In an agreement with Guizot, the Minister of the Interior under Louis-Philippe, Brother Anaclet surrendered some of the privileges that had been conceded to the Institute. Under the monarchy, for example, the Brothers had been exempt from the requirement of a brevet, or teacher's certificate. The mere fact of assignment by the superiors brought automatic certification as long as the Brother remained in the Institute. This would no longer apply.

The forced renunciation of this privilege, although probably intended as a repressive measure, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It motivated the Brothers to qualify for the brevet, it relegated those who were not qualified to non-instructional tasks, and it provided objective evidence that the Brothers were not using piety as a substitute for competence in teaching.

Brother Benilde was among those instructed by the superiors to present himself for certification as an elementary teacher, the level of certification most commonly obtained by the Brothers at that time. The examinations covered subject

matter long familiar to the Brothers: reading, writing, calligraphy, orthography, and arithmetic, as well as methods of teaching these subjects. Without difficulty or fanfare, Brother Benilde received his certification on October 8, 1831.

One contact that Brother Benilde made in Limoges was to have significance in later years. In September 1835, Brother Hugolin, still in his teens and totally inexperienced in the classroom, was assigned to the elementary class in the same building where Brother Benilde had the older group. The veteran took the younger man under his wing, helped him over the rough spots, and at the same time, exemplified the possibility of living the Rule integrally in an active community.

Many years later, while Brother Benilde was Director at Saugues, Brother Hugolin was appointed Provincial of the newly formed District of Le Puy, of which Saugues became a part. The roles were now reversed. Brother Hugolin never lost his regard for his onetime mentor. At the canonical process he would testify: "I knew him well. It was he who in one sense formed me to the religious life."

In September 1836, Brother Benilde set out as usual for the annual retreat at the novitiate in Clermont-Ferrand. The property of the Bien-Assis had long since proven inadequate. In 1823, Brother Aggée had moved the whole complex to a much larger property that had once belonged to the Dominican Fathers. In addition to an expanded novitiate, he opened a boarding school on the new property, and it was named in honor of Godefroy de Bouillon. Not only was the school a great success, but it provided the Brothers with a convenient administrative center and adequate accommodations during times of vacation and retreat.

At the end of the annual retreat of that year, on September 11, 1836, Brother Benilde made his profession of perpetual vows, promising to keep them, in the words of the vow formula, "all my lifetime." And that he did. In fact, every year thereafter he celebrated with special acts of devotion the anniversary of his definitive commitment to procure the glory of God by association in community with his Brothers in the Institute.

Clermont: Boarding School

Another transfer of assignment was long overdue, so Brother Benilde could not have been too surprised when, after making his final vows at the end of the 1836 retreat, he found that he had been assigned to the school at Clermont. He was given charge of the second class, no minor responsibility in the large and prestigious Godefroy de Bouillon boarding school. He held that post for two years. Then in 1838, while still living in the community at Clermont-Ferrand, he was assigned to teach the senior pupils in the suburban school at Montferrand.

Brother Benilde always had a great love for the center at Clermont-Ferrand. While he was a member of the community there, in addition to his school duties, he had charge of the gardens, which he supervised and cared for with skill and devotion. As long as he remained a member of the District of Clermont-Ferrand, he would return there annually to contemplate the presence of God in the peace and natural beauty of the place.

The novitiate chapel at Clermont had a special attraction for him. Among other treasures, it housed the relics of Saint Amator, an ancient martyr of Roman times. The relics had been obtained from Rome at the time the new chapel was dedicated.

The story was often told of how Brother Benilde was praying before the relics late one night in the pitch-dark. At the end of his prayer, he bent over to kiss the floor as was his custom and banged his face on the hard edge of a prie-dieu. Blood flowed freely from the wound. He implored the help of Saint Amator so that he would not have to go to the infirmary. The next day the wound closed, and he was able to go about his duties as usual.

Brother Benilde regarded this as a miracle, as he was inclined to do whenever positive results followed quickly after petitionary prayer. To make that point he retold the story rather often, and it probably gained a bit of drama in the retelling. Some of the witnesses in the canonical process thought that this event occurred during his novitiate year, but that is impossible because the relics of Saint Amator were obtained for

the Clermont chapel only after the novitiate was moved from the Bien-Assis.

While Brother Benilde was teaching at Clermont-Ferrand, a new crisis developed in the Romançon family. On April 25, 1837, his married sister, Anne, died, leaving Pierre Morton, her husband, with two young children to care for. Brother Benilde had good reason to be especially concerned about his father, the aging Jean Romançon, who was now left all alone in the world.

Brother Aggée gave Brother Benilde permission to go home to try to comfort the family. The only money he provided was a fifty-centime piece "just in case." Brother Benilde set out on foot to cover the thirteen miles between Clermont and Thuret. A kindly carriage driver met him on the road and gave him a ride the rest of the way. Brother Benilde slipped the fifty-centime piece into the driver's hand as he said good-bye and thanks.

At home, Brother Benilde found his father devastated at the loss of the only one of his children left to comfort him in his old age. Once again he appealed to his son's sensitivity and filial devotion: "Pierre, you should have stayed here with me." Brother Benilde's response, another that was often quoted later, was prompt and unequivocal: "I prefer my vocation to that of an emperor."

After doing what he could to console his father and his brother-in-law, Brother Benilde knew that the time had come to depart. His old godmother, Anne Moltère, offered him two francs to pay for the return trip to Clermont. Conscious of the precise prescriptions of the Rule (and a stranger to the idea of presumed permission), he graciously refused. The long walk back was no great burden. It gave him time to think and to pray for his father, whom he would never see again.

Billom: Director

The penultimate stop on Brother Benilde's hopscotch tour of duty in the schools dependent on Clermont-Ferrand came in September 1839. His success in the classroom at every level

was recognized and rewarded by Brother Aggée, who appointed him to take charge of the school at Billom as Director and school principal. The school had just been opened in 1834, but it already had a good reputation.

Billom in earlier times had been subject to the prince-bishops of Clermont and had always enjoyed a reputation as an intellectual center. The Jesuits had a college there until the order was suppressed in 1762. By the time Brother Benilde arrived, the diocese was headed by Bishop Féron, who held the post for forty-five years. Education in general, and the restoration of the university in particular, were high among the bishop's priorities.

The success of the Brothers' school under Brother Benilde was phenomenal. Here is the testimony of Jean Coissard, a former student who testified in the canonical process:

> As a teacher he was loved by everybody. There was no truancy in the school; in fact people were using all kinds of pressure to get admitted and nobody wanted to leave.
>
> He was young, about 32 or 33 years old, and had the gift of attracting people to him. The most unruly among the pupils were always submissive to him. He was always just and impartial, never making any distinction between the rich and the poor. He was unwilling to accept anything whatever; poor as he was, he preferred to keep his independence.
>
> Everybody appreciated him. In his second year at Billom, there weren't enough places in the school; pupils began to flock there in large numbers from all the countryside.

There was at least one lad who failed to succumb to the persuasive charm of Brother Benilde. That was his own nephew, Jean Morton, son of his deceased sister Anne and Pierre Morton. The lad was sent to Billom at the age of eleven by his widower father in the hope that the Brothers might provide the attention and correction that was lacking at home.

But the young Morton would have none of it. Before the school year was over, the coming of spring and the call of the

open country proved to be too much for him. He fled the school and managed to make his way back to Thuret.

The family tried again in the fall. This time the grandfather, Jean Romançon, volunteered to bring the truant back to Billom personally. He no doubt welcomed the excuse it would give him to visit with his own son. But by the time they got there, Brother Benilde had already left for Saugues.

Jean Morton himself remembered the event and described it for the diocesan tribunal in 1897:

> I remember the time I was going to Billom with my grandfather to see him. But Brother Benilde had just left for Saugues and the new Director told us that we might still catch up with him at Clermont. En route to Billom we met a young man who said to us: "You are on your way to visit the one who taught me how to read. He is a great man, but he left here only a few days ago."

When the pair arrived at Clermont, they were again too late. Brother Benilde had already gone on his way to his new assignment. If the young Morton was pleased at this narrow escape—there was no longer a question of keeping him in the school—the rest of Billom felt otherwise. As Jean Coissard described it: "His pupils cried when he left. His colleagues, the Brothers, seemed to be of one accord with him. Likewise the parents and the clergy of the parish held him in great esteem."

The year was 1841. Billom proved to be the climax and the ending of one chapter in the life of Brother Benilde. The next chapter and a long one, was about to open in Saugues.

4
Saugues and Its School

It was in the school at Saugues that Brother Benilde was to emerge as an outstanding educator and a saint. The story of Brother Benilde is inseparable from its context in Saugues. And Saugues, ever since his presence there, has identified itself with the memory of its most illustrious citizen.

In one sense, then, it is almost necessary to begin the biography all over again. The locale is no longer the fertile plains of the Limagne and the Auvergne but the wild, barren wastes of the Gévaudan. The center of reference—geographical, civil, ecclesiastical, and for the Institute of the Brothers—is no longer Clermont-Ferrand but Le Puy-en-Velay.

Saugues

Saugues is located in a large, irregular basin in the Margeride plateau, austere and isolated, ringed by the mountains that separate it from the rest of the Gévaudan to the south. Open to the cold blasts from the north, Saugues has a wintry climate for a good eight months of the year, with a cover of snow during most of that time. The rocky soil, granitic rather than volcanic, provides only the barest necessities in the summer months.

The town itself boasts a tall turret in its center, a reminder of its medieval past and the marauding armies that crisscrossed southern France in the service of their lords. There is a stone church in Roman style from the eleventh century with a distinctive stone steeple. The streets are narrow and lined with houses, also mostly of stone.

It will be of interest to American readers that Saugues had a saint before Brother Benilde. Noël Chabanel was born in Saugues in 1613. He left for Canada in 1643 as a Jesuit missionary. Unable to learn the language of the Indians, he asked permission to stay and to help as best as he could in support of

the other missionaries. The day after the martyrdom of Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brébeuf, December 8, 1649, Chabanel was assassinated by a Huron convert who had turned apostate. Together with the other North American Jesuit martyrs, Chabanel was beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and was canonized in 1930.

View of Saugues

Just prior to the French Revolution, Saugues had troubles of its own. In 1764, the surrounding area was terrified by a huge and ravenous wolf with a particular appetite for human flesh. The "beast of the Gévaudan," as it was called, ravaged the countryside and the town for three years before it was finally cornered and killed in 1767. Then in 1788, a good part of the town was devastated by fire.

Revolution and Restoration

Saugues was too far from the center of things to have been severely disturbed by the Revolution of 1789. About the worst thing that happened was the imposition of a sworn priest in the person of Father Dumon. As with his counterpart in Thuret, he

was regarded as a shameful person, and the church services he provided were poorly attended.

When the revolutionary authorities divided France into departments for administrative purposes, most of the Gévaudan, including Saugues, was assigned to the department of Lozère. The townspeople protested because they were fairly well isolated from Lozère, far to the south, with the Margeride Mountains in between. Their point of reference was Le Puy to the northeast. Their petition was accepted, and Saugues became a canton in the department of Haute-Loire.

Under Napoleon, with the return to the traditional religion, the major concern of the town council of Saugues and the pastor of the parish church of Saint Médard was the religious education of the children. In 1820, the Sisters of the Presentation took over the convent of the Ursulines, who had been dispersed in the Revolution, and opened a school for girls. It would take another twenty years to get a school for the boys.

In 1821 the town council had tried to engage the Brothers of Saint John of God, who had recently opened a novitiate in Lozère. But they were devoted for the most part to hospital work and had neither the interest nor the skill to take over a school. Two successive pastors had tried earlier and unsuccessfully with Brother Gerbaud to get the sons of De La Salle to open a school for the boys of the parish. As a stopgap measure, the town council engaged a lay schoolteacher on a temporary basis with an annual salary of one hundred francs.

Mayor Estaniol and Brother Anaclet

In 1830 Saugues got a new and energetic mayor in the person of Gabriel-François-Annet Estaniol. In 1832 he made an effort to obtain the services of the Sacred Heart Brothers, who had been founded by Father Coindre in Velay near Le Puy. Bishop De Bonald of Le Puy strongly supported this project and offered twelve hundred francs to help its realization. But there were no Brothers available.

In 1833 Bishop De Bonald wrote to Brother Anaclet, offering to pay fifteen hundred francs for three Brothers to open a school at Saugues. The Superior General replied that he did

not have the Brothers and that the sum offered was insufficient.

At this point Mayor Estaniol entered the negotiations. The Imbert-Montruffet family had recently ceded to the town a rather large house. In June 1835, the mayor wrote personally to Brother Anaclet, this time offering the same terms but adding a glowing description of the house "close to the church, to the rectory, and next door to the house of the mayor." Brother Anaclet was not impressed, especially because nothing new was said about the question of money.

The school and Brothers' house at Saugues

Mayor Estaniol was not one to take no for an answer. In a letter to the Superior General, dated December 28, 1836, he appealed once again in plaintive terms. He wrote that the pupils were poorly provided for. A man named Faure, with doubtful credentials and who claimed to have taught in the De La Salle Institute for five or six years, had been hired to fill the vacant post of schoolmaster. The mayor and the pastor now wanted to get ride of this incompetent, but the parents kept asking them to be patient until the Brothers could come to open a school. He wrote on:

> Oh, how badly Saugues has need of your help! What worse spectacle can there be than to see 200 children left in the hands of a schoolteacher who has no religion, no principles, no education, and no talent?

As for himself, the mayor continued, he considered himself responsible before God for the future of the rising generation. His heart was breaking to hear the appeals coming to him from all sides. "In the name of Jesus Christ," he threw himself at the feet of Brother Anaclet to gain a favorable reply.

Almost as an afterthought, the letter addressed the question of an adequate stipend to support the Brothers. Granted, he said, there was as yet no agreement on this. "But we'll find the money somehow," he concluded. "I commit myself to see to it personally."

Father Saugues and Father Tessier

The letter did not have the desired effect. Two years later, in 1838, there was a new mayor in Saugues, Joseph-Louis-Dominique Boulangier, and a new Superior General in Paris, Brother Philippe. In 1840 Bishop De Bonald was transferred to the see of Lyon to be succeeded in Le Puy by Bishop Darcimoles. And finally, the church of Saint Médard in Saugues got a new pastor, whose name, by a strange coincidence, was the same as that of the town. He was Father Claude Saugues. This new cast of characters would see the drama of the school at Saugues to its conclusion.

The first consideration obviously was money. With this in view, Father Saugues engaged a well-known Jesuit named Fa-

ther Tessier to preach the parish retreat. The theme was the importance of Christian education. The school was essential to salvation, the parishioners were reminded; how else could the young learn the fundamentals of the faith? Reliance on anonymous donations had proven ineffective. Accordingly, Father Tessier proposed a subscription whereby the parishioners would be bound in conscience to honor their pledges.

The document drawn up on May 8, 1841, is worth quoting in full, if for no other reason than it is probably the longest single sentence that anyone would expect to come across in French or any other language. Here it is in translation with the original sentence structure preserved:

> We, the inhabitants of the commune of Saugues, realizing the need to establish as soon as possible in our town the Brothers of the Christian Schools so that they may provide our children with a solid and religious instruction, and wishing to contribute to this cause by all possible means, do hereby pledge ourselves by this present act and by the signatures thereto attached to pay the sums subscribed in three payments, of which the first will be due three months after the Brothers arrive, the second at the end of that year, and the third at the end of two years, these to be paid to the prefect of the town with the provision that the monies obtained by this subscription constitute a capital fund to be entrusted to the Most Reverend Bishop of Le Puy to be converted by him into annual revenues which will be exclusively devoted in perpetuity to maintaining the Brothers, with all guarantees that this sum will never, through any other arrangement, be put to any other use; in such wise that if the Brothers, for any reason whatever, should discontinue teaching the children of Saugues, the sums subscribed be returned to our heirs if they so demand or, in their default, that the money be given to the town hospice whose administrators are to use the aforementioned capital only if the hospice has need, certified by some judicial act, to take possession of it, the present act serving as claim to the title; it being understood, however, that either hospice or our heirs, as the case may be, arrange that a solemn

service be held for the said subscribers, and that the same funds be returned to the care of the Most Reverend Bishop of Le Puy, without past interest, at whatever time the Brothers might be reestablished in the commune.

At first the subscription was supported with enthusiasm and generosity, not only in the town but in the surrounding countryside. Everyone got involved, including the pastor and his curates, the local merchants, professionals, and the bourgeoisie. All that remained was to obtain the services of the Brothers.

Bishop Darcimoles and Brother Philippe

The new bishop, like the former mayor, was a forceful personality and accustomed to having his way. He could not understand the reasons for the delay expressed by the Superior General, who was reluctant to open any new school before he had the trained personnel to assure its success. The letter of Bishop Darcimoles to Brother Philippe dated June 26, 1841, is brief and to the point:

> Your letter pained me as much as it astonished me. Evidently you did not understand what I was trying to say. You apparently do not realize the zeal and enthusiasm of these people. If you let it cool now, that will be the end of the enterprise. . . . If you let an opportunity like this get away, you will certainly regret it, since no other part of the country will be able to furnish so many good candidates for your congregation.

On the last point at least, the bishop proved to be correct.

Brother Philippe finally yielded to the pressure and instructed Brother Aggée to let the mayor know that he would agree in principle, provided the sum of eighteen hundred francs would be provided for the maintenance of three Brothers. The mayor agreed to the terms: one-third would come from the town, one-third from the pastor, and one-third from the interest on the subscription—an optimistic projection since the amount collected was far short of what would be needed to produce that much revenue. In any event, the "temporary" schoolmaster

was dismissed on September 15. Everything seemed ready for the arrival of the Brothers.

The Pioneer Brothers

The Brothers, too, were ready. Three of them gathered in Le Puy to make the journey to Saugues together: Brother Geslin from Riom, Brother Gély from Clermont, and Brother Benilde from Billom. Le Puy was an impressive city, even before 1854, when the massive statue of Notre Dame de France, cast in bronze from the cannons of the Crimean War, was erected on the lofty Corneille rock that rises in isolation high above the rest of the city. Late in that September of 1841, the three Lasallians took one last look at the Romanesque cathedral, the Corneille peak, the ancient chapel of Saint Michel on the needle peak opposite, and began the long trip to the scene of a new apostolic adventure.

Even today the scenery en route from Le Puy to Saugues is spectacular. Leaving behind the volcanic slopes surrounding Le Puy, the traveller crosses the wide plains of Blains to the slopes of the Montbonnet hill. Once on the other side, there is a steep descent by twists and turns to Monistrol at the bottom of the gorge of the Allier River. After negotiating the rugged climb up the other side of the gorge, the traveller must yet negotiate the elbow turns deep into the valley of the Ance, difficult enough now by auto and surely precarious a century ago by horse-drawn carriage. From there the road levels out across the Margeride plateau, until suddenly the town of Saugues appears nestled in a wide declivity in the plain.

It was thus that the three pioneer Brothers arrived at Saugues on September 29, 1841, the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel. As they descended from the stagecoach, they were surprised to find the mayor and the whole town waiting to greet them. Marie Borel would one day describe the scene:

> I remember very well the day of his arrival. It turned into a veritable holiday. The mayor and his entourage accompanied the Brothers. There were drums to lead the parade and cheers from all sides. We were happy to have teachers who would instruct the poor as well as the rich. Brother Benilde

seemed happy at the reception but he kept his eyes cast down all the while. I myself followed the parade. I was ten years old at the time.

Among those in the welcoming committee were Dr. Laurent-Basile Lyon, the new but seventy-three-year-old mayor; Dominique Boulangier, his predecessor, who had resigned the office only the week before; and M. Estonial, the mayor before that, the very one who had petitioned Brother Anaclet so tearfully in 1836. He still lived on the property adjacent to the building on the Rue du Prieuré that would soon house the Brothers and the school.

The procession came to a halt at the parish rectory. It was soon apparent that not everything in Saugues would be a foretaste of paradise. The crotchety pastor, Father Saugues, had been conspicuously absent from the welcoming ceremonies staged by the civil magistrates. The Brothers learned that their house was not yet ready; they would have to live with the pastor in the parish rectory.

It was not until October 15 that the house was ready for the Brothers. This was the same house that had been acquired in 1836 and described in glowing terms by M. Estaniol in anticipation of their arrival. But even on that date, practically everything was lacking, including most of the furniture.

Brother Benilde was content enough to suffer privation in the name of poverty, but he felt that it was his duty to insist that the needs of his Brothers be provided for according to the formal agreements that had been made. Brother Aggée had to be called upon to force the town council to take out a loan of three thousand francs to provide what was still needed in the sleeping quarters, the parlor, and the kitchen. Finally, in the following January, 1842, all of the furniture was in place. Father Tessier was invited to come and bless the house and dedicate it to Saint Joseph. It would be home for Brother Benilde for the next twenty years.

Again, Father Saugues

Much of the confusion was due to a feud that had developed between the town councillors and the pastor over the control of

the money raised during the subscription. Brother Benilde found himself caught in the middle. Father Besse would later describe it in general terms:

> There were sometimes difficulties between Father Saugues and the municipal authorities, to the extent that during those years the priest would not come to the annual prize distribution that marked the close of the school year. He was afraid that he would be forced to speak with the councillors. Brother Benilde always refrained from taking sides in these disputes. He treated both the opponents of Father Saugues and the priest himself with the same marks of respect.

Father Raveyre, the assistant pastor of the parish, was more specific as he testified in the canonical process:

> When Father Saugues came to the town as pastor, he had promised not only to be the protector but also to assume some of the responsibility for the funding of the Brothers' establishment. But it happened that the pastor lodged the Brothers in his house for a certain period of time and then charged an excessive amount against them for their room and board. As a result, either because of the excessive charge for the Brothers' lodging, or because of some so-called loss due to a bank error, the subscription capital was reduced by one third. The people of the town were much more disturbed by all of this than was the good Brother Benilde.

Another priest, Father Jean Trévis, who served later on in the parish, testified about the attempted cover-up:

> I have heard it said that there were in fact some problems with the pastor, Father Saugues. In order to provide foundation money for the school, there had been a subscription that raised a fairly large sum of money. The pastor was accused of having badly managed these funds.
>
> In order to justify himself, the pastor conceived the idea of having printed on official diocesan stationery a letter explaining and justifying his conduct. He made up the let-

ter himself out of his own head, but he appended the forged signature of the bishop. These letters he had posted in various places throughout the town.

The archives of the parish contain a letter addressed to the pastor on that occasion by Bishop De Morlhon, the Bishop of Le Puy. In this letter the bishop reprimands the pastor rather forcefully. I can produce a copy of the letter as well as a copy of the poster fabricated by the pastor.

I believe that the antagonisms that grew out of this incident were much more intense in connection with M. Barrand, the town preceptor, than with Brother Benilde. I heard it said that in this matter Brother Benilde was always very discreet.

Even if Brother Benilde could remain aloof about the fundamental questions concerning the endowment for the school, he and his Brothers had to suffer when the allowances for regular expenses were not forthcoming. In the beginning, he even found it necessary on occasion to use some of the money collected from the students to pay for school supplies in order to feed the Brothers.

The Town Council

The fights between the pastor and the town councillors would erupt with particular intensity every time Brother Benilde had to go to collect the regular allotment for the maintenance of the Brothers. On these occasions he always asked the Brothers to pray to Saint Joseph. In fact, as often as he could, he tried to schedule these meetings for a Wednesday, the day traditionally devoted to this patron saint. More often than not, miraculously, as he would say, tempers eased and he got for the Brothers what was their due.

In time, these unreasonable arrangements were replaced by a more consistent policy. In 1843 Father Tessier was invited to preach another retreat and to appeal for a new subscription. The response on the part of the people, the officials, the clergy, and even the pastor was again spontaneous and generous. By that time they realized what a treasure they had acquired in Brother Benilde and the school of the Brothers. But even then,

the squabbles over the control of the money, the principle, and the interest continued for years to come.

The following letter written in May 1846 and presented here in the translation by Brother A. Josephus Liddy gives a good idea of some of the difficulties:

My dear Mister Mayor,

Your careful attention to all that might contribute to the prosperity of our school has resulted in so many benefits that it is not so much to ask for new favors as to express extreme gratitude for those already received that I write this letter.

Nevertheless, my dear Mr. Mayor, I feel I should be failing in my duty to your very wise administration so ably assisted by the distinguished members of your council, if I did not remind you of the repairs required for the proper functioning of our establishment. The following are the principal problems:

(i) A teacher's desk is needed for the lower class and also a desk for the principal.

(ii) The lower classroom needs to be fumigated as do also the parlor and the bedrooms. The oratory needs plastering.

(iii) The house itself, if it is to be kept sound, badly needs plastering on the exterior. A moveable partition is needed to separate the classes and to make them more healthy. A pump is also an urgent need if we are to keep the school and the boys clean.

Your devotedness, Mr. Mayor, and that of your honorable council is so well-known and so encouraging to us that it is ever with the most sincere attachment that I sign myself.

[Signed] Brother Benilde

P.S. I have not mentioned the delay in paying our salary for the last quarter that was due on April 1st because I know you are attending actively to the matter; only, we are badly in need of the money.

Reconciliation

Eventually a reconciliation of sorts was achieved with the pastor. Even during the most difficult period, Brother Benilde retained Father Saugues as his own confessor, and most of the Brothers did the same. This was a source of wonder among the women religious of the town, who had long since looked elsewhere for a suitable confessor.

In order to bring the pastor and the town councillors together at the annual distribution of prizes, Brother Benilde arranged to conclude the school ceremony with a procession of the students, the Brothers, and the dignitaries through the streets of the town to the parish church, where the pastor presided at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

In the long run, it was the excellence of the school, the patience and persistence of Brother Benilde, and especially his success in preparing the twelve-year-olds for their First Communion that won over the insolent old pastor. Long after the death of Brother Benilde, it was proposed to erect a monument to his memory with the following inscription: "He died in the odor of sanctity." When questioned as to whether this was a bit exaggerated, Father Saugues simply replied, "If anybody deserves it, he does."

The School

If personality conflicts over foundational money are inevitable in the opening of a new school, there are other practical day-to-day problems to be dealt with, as the Brothers at Saugues soon found out. On opening day, the school was mobbed with more pupils than the three classes could accommodate. They ranged from five or six years all the way up to twenty years of age or more.

Some pupils had started school with the old schoolmaster, M. Faure; some were beginning school at the usual age; among the older ones were a number of rough lads from the countryside, some of them fathers of families who were free for the winter from their work on the farm and had never been to school before. This led some of the parents in the town to think that it was time for them to get a bit of an education. Evening

classes for adults were opened for a time, but these had to be dropped after a year or two because the health of the Brothers was beginning to suffer.

Brother Benilde saw at once that the three Brothers would not be enough to handle all of these unexpected demands. He appealed to Brother Aggée, who got the town council to agree to pay for a fourth Brother—but at a reduced rate. On October 26, 1841, Brother Guiron came from Clermont to join the pioneers at Saugues. In the following year, another Brother was added, and from then on the community regularly numbered five Brothers.

The situation was also helped by a natural process of attrition, especially among the rural lads. According to the accounts that Brother Benilde kept very carefully, the enrollment dropped from 360 to 340 between 1842 and 1844; there were 295 in 1846, and by 1847 the figures had dropped to a manageable 270.

Thus, within a few years of the opening in 1841, thanks in no small measure to the faith, wisdom, and administrative skill of Brother Benilde, the school at Saugues was running smoothly and would continue to do so under his direction for the next twenty years.

We turn now to the story of the difficulties, the achievements, and the significance of what transpired at Saugues during the twenty years between 1841 and 1862. The narrative that follows will adopt the pattern set by the early biographers by abandoning the chronological approach and examining this period under topical headings. Brother Benilde was an exemplary educator, a Director among his Brothers, and a thoroughly religious person besides. It remains to be seen what that meant on a day-to-day basis.

5
The Sage of Saugues

Solemn canonization sometimes has unintended side effects. It often happens that the human strengths of the persons canonized tend to be overwhelmed or obscured by the aura of sanctity that gradually surrounds them. In the case of Saint Benilde, this is especially unfortunate. Even the Brothers tend to forget, or perhaps not even to know, that in his day he had an enviable reputation as a first-rate teacher and administrator.

The Witnesses

The best way to realize how effective Brother Benilde really was is to consider the testimony of those who knew him firsthand. Fortunately, many of his former colleagues and students were called to testify during the procedures required by the canon law of the time before the case for canonization could be introduced in Rome. Some of the testimony was given in the ordinary process conducted in Le Puy from 1896 to 1899; some of it was heard in the apostolic process, also at Le Puy but under the Roman judges, from 1904 to 1905. Citations from these witnesses have already been provided in earlier chapters; more will be given in the narrative to follow.

The witnesses represent an interesting cross section of the Brothers and students associated with Brother Benilde during the years he was in charge of the school at Saugues. Among the Brothers there were two who later left the Institute. Jean-Baptiste Pulby was in the Saugues community as Brother Genotius from 1847 to 1850. He later made a career for himself as principal of a private school in Clermont.

Father Frédéric Besse, the author of the first biography of Brother Benilde, was at Saugues from 1854 to 1859 with the name Brother Namos-Joseph. When he first came to Saugues, he was only fourteen years old; he left the Institute in 1860 at

the age of twenty to enter the seminary. Both of these witnesses have already been quoted in an earlier chapter.

Prominent among the Brothers who testified were Brothers Nathanaël-Marie and Nomelin-Jean. Brother Nathanaël was sent to Saugues in 1855 after only nine months in the novitiate. The Director of Novices told him that Brother Benilde would more than make up for what was lacking in his formation. Eventually Brother Nathanaël found the discipline at Saugues too strict, and he was transferred to Monistrol in 1859.

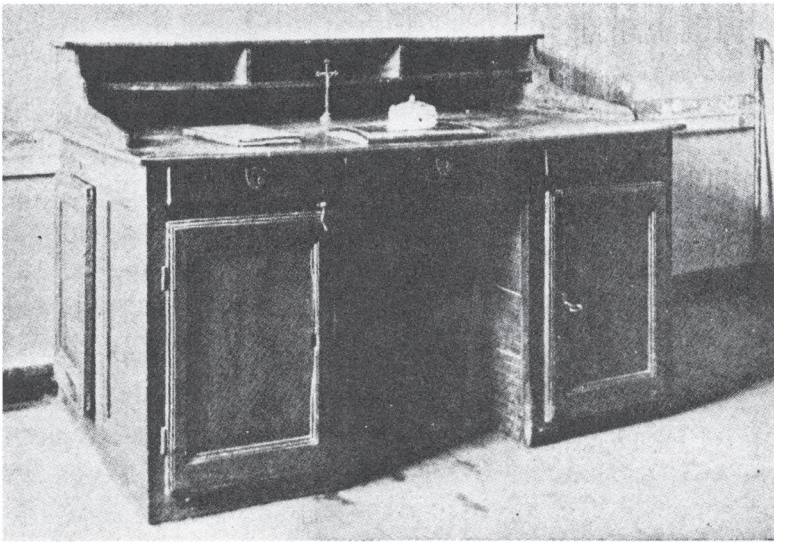
Brother Nomelin-Jean came to Saugues in 1859, also on his first teaching assignment. He was assigned to the primary class. He was at Saugues when Brother Benilde died, and he remained there until he was transferred in 1866. He died in the Institute in 1917.

Many of those who testified in the canonical process as Brothers had been students at Saugues during the Benilde years. The oldest was Brother Nivard-Abel, who was twenty-nine years old when Brother Benilde died; next was Brother Nestéros-Emile, who was twenty-five in 1862. The others were Brothers Benilde-Martyr, Noël-Denis, and Nil-François who were nineteen, eighteen, and seventeen respectively when the Director died; Sidonis, who was fourteen, and Néomède, who was only eleven.

Among the witnesses were several laymen. Jean-Coufort was fifteen years old when the school opened in 1841; Jean-Pierre Merle and Jean-Baptiste Fabre were both twenty when they started school. Fabre later joined the Brothers of Saint Francis Regis. There were two sets of blood brothers: Auguste and Augustin Privat, who were sixty-five and fifty-one respectively when they testified in 1897; Paul-Louis and Augustin Roche, who were fifty-six and fifty-one in that year. Finally there was Father Arthur Tardieu, OP, who was twenty-four years old when his father, the doctor, attended Brother Benilde in his last illness.

The Wise Administrator

From the testimony of all these witnesses, a picture of Brother Benilde emerges, not only of a saint but of a wise and firm leader over a period of twenty years in that remote corner



Brother Benilde's desk

of the Gévaudan. Brother Nestéros-Marie put it this way the first time he testified in the canonical process:

> He had a great success with the school. He was a superior teacher, not so much in terms of his knowledge but rather as an educator. He needed to run his school well since the children of Saugues were often difficult to deal with. They feared him and they loved him. It was enough for him to appear on the scene for everything to return to order.

The same Brother added on a later occasion:

> He was an intelligent school principal and he made sure that the school functioned very well. He knew everything that was going on. . . . The mayor, the inspector, and the prefect of education vied with one another in singing his praises.

When Paul-Louis Roche, a former student who later became a lay teacher, was called to testify, one of the Roman judges asked him whether he thought that Brother Benilde had been sufficiently educated to fulfill his functions as a

teacher. M. Roche replied: "He was in truth at the top of his profession. Under his direction the school was well run, so much so that when I was not quite 16 years old, without any other schooling, I was able to be accepted for admission to the state normal school."

Brother Benilde's success in the school did not go unnoticed by the local authorities. Brother Nathanaël testified to the fact: "He received several medals and honorable mentions from the mayor and the inspector. I myself saw the mayor, M. De Lavalette, present him with a medal." The circumstances of this event are given in detail in the biography authored by Father Besse.

It seems that Brother Benilde was about to begin his catechism lesson one day when the door opened and the mayor walked in. He bowed to the Brother and then addressed the class: "I am going to explain to you the reason for my unannounced visit. I have just received from the rector of the Academy of Clermont an award that has been granted to your beloved superior, an award that is well deserved and that I wish to confer upon him in your presence so that you can join with me in applauding his zeal and devotion."

The mayor then presented the silver medal and the citation describing the great contributions of Brother Benilde to the education of young people. The class broke out in applause that became even more enthusiastic when the mayor, with the Brother's approval, declared a holiday. With Brother Benilde wearing the medal, the mayor then took him through the school, and the scene was repeated from class to class. When it was all over, the humble Brother simply said, "My only thought is to do my duty as best I can." He put the medal away in its box, and no one ever saw it again.

There was a more serious visit from the mayor in 1848 when the Brothers were fearful that the school might be closed in the wake of the revolution that overthrew King Louis-Philippe. Father Besse remembered, "The fathers of the pupils, with the mayor at their head, came to reassure Brother Benilde that the change of government would have no effect on the Brothers or the school."

The Gifted Teacher

The school at Saugues was conducted according to the practices traditional in the Institute and formulated in the *Conduite des Ecoles,* dating back to the time of De La Salle. It is known that Brother Benilde was also influenced very much by the commentary by Brother Agathon on the twelve virtues of a good teacher as enumerated by De La Salle. By the time Brother Benilde came to Saugues, he had not only been imbued with these principles and ideals but also had twenty years of solid educational experience of putting them into practice.

The description of Father Médard, another of Brother Benilde's former pupils, allows us to picture Brother Benilde in charge of his class:

> He was small, a bit stooped, his head held lightly to one side, but not in any exaggerated way. He would examine the copy books with an attentive eye; a silent gesture would invite one whose work was exceptionally good to come and occupy the seat of honor; he had a special smile for those about to be rewarded for their work. If anyone spoke in class, he would rap for order, put his index finger to his lips, or point to one of the customary posters on the wall that served as reminders of the rules of order.

Father Besse gave his impressions from the point of view of a Brother teaching in the school:

> At Saugues I came to realize how totally devoted he was to the children. He took care of the very smallest ones like a mother. I myself had charge of the elementary class for three months. He gave me a lot of good advice which I badly needed at the time. He was careful to assign the pupils to the right class, to divide them into groups, each group in charge of a monitor working under the supervision and direction of the teacher. In general, in addition to prayer and the observance of the Rule, his whole life consisted in fulfilling his duties as a religious educator.

Although Brother Benilde himself taught class full-time in his first years at Saugues, poor health and the pressure of

administrative duties forced him to give up trying to teach and run the school at the same time. This freed him to devote more time to supervising the classes and training the less experienced teachers. He visited all of the classes daily. Each day he gave the catechism lesson in a different class. He also devoted a good bit of his time to tutoring the slowest of the pupils.

Brother Sidonis, a former student, gave in his testimony a good description of how Brother Benilde conducted his school:

> When I was a pupil at Saugues he was not directly in charge of any particular class. He went from one class to the other in turn. I know this because I was enrolled in all three classes in succession.
>
> He would come into the class to see how we were progressing; he would preside over the examinations, teach catechism, and replace any of the teachers who were ill. When he came to inquire about our studies, he never left without saying a prayer. He taught catechism at least once a week in each class.
>
> He discharged all of these functions perfectly. All he had to do was to walk into a class and there would be silence immediately. He was energetic, besides, and he insisted that we always do our work well. But he never showed impatience or used harsh words to anyone.

The Effective Catechist

Brother Benilde had no equal as a catechist. A description by Brother Nil-François, who had been his pupil at Saugues, gives us a glimpse:

> He was an excellent teacher. His methodology was based on emulation. He gladly rewarded the most studious pupils by giving them a holy picture or a crucifix. He taught catechism very well, something he did every day in one class or another. He would first of all present the doctrine, then he would make it concrete by giving some examples. No one ever got bored listening to him.
>
> He was especially demanding of the pupils whenever it was a question of their duties as Christians. His catechism lessons gave us a taste for piety. The children themselves,

as soon as he came into a class, would beg him to give a catechism lesson. When he smiled, they knew that he would agree to do so.

Auguste Roche made this telling remark: "When he taught us catechism he didn't have to read to us from a book; he spoke to us from the heart." Paul Roche also remembered the examples taken from Holy Scripture and the lives of the saints, noting that Brother Benilde "knew a great number of these stories and we always found them very interesting." If there is one characteristic that emerges from the testimony about Brother Benilde's catechism lessons, it is that they were never dull. The students never became restless or inattentive when it was his turn to take the religion period.

The catechism took on a special dimension when it came time to prepare the pupils for their First Communion. According to the church practice at that time, this took place when the youngsters were about twelve years of age. The other requirements were just as strict, including good conduct and a thorough mastery of the approved catechism. The preparation was intensive. In most parishes, a fair number of candidates were rejected by the pastor, who had the final say about who would and who would not be admitted to the Lord's table.

Father Besse added further details:

> As the time approached for the children to receive their First Communion he redoubled his usual zeal. He took charge of this himself, supervising them, bringing them to the church and back, reviewing the catechism with them, summarizing and clarifying the priest's instructions, preparing them for confession, and trying to provide for the children the confessors he thought most suitable for them without interfering with their freedom of choice. . . .
>
> He would take to one side those who were the most backward for special catechism lessons. He spent hours with them going over again and again the principal truths they were supposed to know. He was so thorough that the pastor once said to him: "We will accept without any questions asked any candidate you consider ready for First Communion."

The most telling example of his concern for disadvantaged young people involves the case of a twenty-year-old deaf and almost dumb lad who was brought to Father Raveyre, one of the curates of the parish at the time. The parents were most anxious to have him receive his First Communion, but the young man could only communicate in sign language. Father Raveyre mentioned the case to Brother Benilde. The Brother thereupon undertook to study the sign language himself. When he had mastered it sufficiently, he taught the young fellow how to read and then instructed him in the catechism. Eventually he had the great satisfaction of seeing his grateful pupil admitted for the first time to the table of the Lord.

Not only the mayor but also the clergy and the city officials would frequently visit the school. As Brother Sidonis remembered it, they were usually impressed:

> I know that the clergy of the parish had a great respect for Brother Benilde. When the pastor of the parish, Father Saugues, came to examine us, he always showed the greatest deference to Brother Benilde. Any time Brother Benilde recommended a pupil to the pastor, that was enough. Whenever Brother Benilde expressed an opinion, the priests accepted it at once; that was something that we all noticed.
>
> The municipal councillors would sometimes come into our classes. Brother Benilde received them very politely and they always had words of praise that they addressed to him. It was the same with the primary school inspectors.

Religious Life in the School and Parish

The total religious education provided by the Christian school of the Brothers was not then and is not now limited to the formal religion lesson. In the mostly elementary schools conducted by the Brothers in nineteenth-century France, it was customary and possible to do more in this regard than has since become the case.

In most places, for example, the pupils were brought to the parish church for Mass each day before the beginning of school.

After the morning prayer in the classroom, the Brother would give a short reflection, as it was called, urging some practice of piety or some specific means of doing good and avoiding evil. Prayers would then be said throughout the day on the hour and the half hour.

At Saugues, Brother Benilde added some additional devotional practices to the school schedule. Here is how Jean Coufort remembered it:

> He used to have us say the rosary before the statue of the Blessed Virgin. For this purpose we were divided into four classes. He would designate one pupil from each class to form a group which would then be instructed to say at least five decades. . . . They were to remain before the statue until the next group came to relieve them, and so on throughout the day.
>
> At each half-hour one of us was appointed to say "Let us remember that we are in the presence of God." At each hour, the partition that separated the first and second class would be drawn back and we would recite together a much longer prayer, including the Our Father and three Hail Mary's.

After a few years, the superiors ordered Brother Benilde to discontinue the perpetual rosary devotion. Apparently it was too much of a distraction from the work of the classroom. One practice of piety, however, that has generally survived in the Brothers' schools, despite all the vicissitudes of time and culture, is the regular call to remember the presence of God.

At Saugues, as in many parishes, the Brothers were expected to supervise their pupils in the parish church. In his testimony, Léopold Mercier supplied some interesting details:

> He used to insist that we behave in a most exemplary manner whenever we were in church. We were always kept either kneeling or standing, a good arms-length from one another in such a way that no communication with one another or foolery of any kind was possible.
>
> As for himself, he always remained kneeling. He would only get up now and then to make sure that we were follow-

ing the prayers of the Mass in our prayer books. He brought us every morning to Mass, and sometimes in the evening also as, for example, during Forty Hours Devotion or on the feast of Corpus Christi.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance, "confession" as it was then called, was an important part of the Catholic upbringing of the young adolescents in the school. From the testimony of Jean Coufort, it seems that Brother Benilde was able to develop a sense of sin and repentance without scrupulosity:

> He brought us often to confession and he himself would try to excite us to contrition. The next morning he would prepare us to receive communion. He would ask us if we had anything on our minds that was disturbing us, suggesting that we let him know what it was if it wasn't anything very serious.
>
> I remember one time when something was bothering me, he asked me to tell him what it was. When I did so, he said it was all right to go to communion without fear but first to make an act of contrition.

Supervision

A source of special concern for the Brothers were the boys from the neighboring countryside who boarded in town in order to attend the school. Brother Benilde-Martyr, a former pupil who later joined the Brothers and was given the name of his model and inspiration, was one of them:

> The children from the countryside who came to the school lived as boarders, not with the Brothers, since they had no such facilities, but in certain residences which Brother Benilde selected with great care. There were sometimes many of us together in one house. Brother Benilde came often to check on our behavior and to insist that we say our prayers before retiring, even though we had already said them in school.

According to Paul-Louis Roche, another area of concern was the presence of so many young girls in the town:

He constantly urged us to good behavior and to avoid bad companions. If he saw any of his pupils playing games with the girls in the streets, he would admonish such an imprudent one in private, and take the occasion to inspire him with a love of chastity.

Brother Nivard-Abel is our source for the fact that Brother Benilde had the weekly free day changed so that it would not coincide with the free day at the neighboring girls' school conducted by the Sisters of the Presentation. This may strike a late-twentieth-century reader as strange, as indeed it is, but at the time it was exactly what was expected of a well-conducted school for Catholic boys.

Discipline

One aspect of school discipline, where a more enlightened age might well raise serious questions, concerns corporal punishment. In fact, this was one of the principal objections raised by the Promoter of the Faith, popularly known as "the Devil's advocate," at the Roman hearings on the beatification. The evidence is clear that Brother Benilde himself used the ferule, a sort of stick or ruler applied usually with some vigor to the back of the hand of a recalcitrant child. All of the biographers treat this problem in some detail.

It must be said, first of all, that this was not the only punishment or even the one first applied by Brother Benilde. There were a whole series of graded penances for offenses, going all the way from copying or memorizing a text of several pages, to forfeiting "good points" or honor marks already earned, to receiving strokes with the ferule, and beyond that to dismissal for the ultimately incorrigible.

The usual approach of Brother Benilde was to remain absolutely calm in a disciplinary situation. This would serve to diffuse both the bravado and the resentment on the part of the offender while increasing the student's apprehension as to what punishment would eventually be inflicted on him. On such occasions, Brother Benilde would hand a set of keys to the erring one to be returned to him at the end of the school day. Then, in a moment of calm, justice would be meted out.

In the course of his testimony already cited, Brother Nestéros had remarked that Brother Benilde "needed to run his school very well since the children of Saugues were often difficult to deal with." Several notable instances have come down to us.

There was, for example, a lad who took off his heavy boot and hurled it straight for Brother Benilde's head as the Brother was writing on the blackboard. It was a narrow miss. Brother Benilde remained perfectly calm and escorted the now trembling lad to a chair in the corner of the room to mediate on his crime and to speculate on the punishment. In such a case the father would probably be sent for.

The bigger and older lads from the rural areas were often the most difficult to handle. Sometimes the younger boys from the town came to school with bullwhips and pieces of iron to protect themselves against the importunities of the older farm boys. When a Brother one day reprimanded one of these oafs, the enraged young man grabbed the Brother by the chest and was about to haul off in physical retaliation. At that moment Brother Benilde entered the room, his eyes flashing. The youth was so terrified that he let go of the Brother and broke down in tears.

To make this same point, one of the Brothers reported to the canonical tribunal the story of how another of the country toughs, whose name was Beral, after spending a good part of a free day in the local wine shop, got into an argument with another boy, named Thiouhouse, and killed him in the bloody fistfight that ensued.

Not all of the incidents were so dramatic or tragic. There was the redhead named Sénac, for example, who thought he would prolong the recess by pushing back the hands on the school clock. This was looked upon as a major disruption in the regularity of the school schedule and was a particular sore point with Brother Benilde. When the culprit was discovered, Brother Benilde handed the boy the symbolic keys to be returned at the end of the day. That incident merited the ferule.

Often it fell to Brother Benilde to supply for the inadequate or intemperate discipline administered by the other Brothers. One lad, who felt he had been unjustly punished, fled the class-

room and climbed up on the garden wall outside. From that safe perch he shouted insults through the window at the Brother, who was trying to continue the class. Brother Benilde ordered the windows closed, came out, and said very calmly to the aggrieved lad, "If you have any complaint, blame it on me. Now are you satisfied?" The boy climbed down sheepishly, wandered down the street, and then came back later to apologize.

Then there was the story involving Brother Gombertus. One day he inflicted a rather severe punishment on a boy named Tardieu, the son of the town doctor. On the way home the boy developed a bloody nose. He got the bright idea of smearing the blood all over himself and complaining to his father that the Brother had done this to him.

The boy was probably aware that at the time, his father, the doctor, had little regard for Brother Benilde. He often referred to him as "Tartuffe, the hypocrite." At the sight of his bloodied son, the doctor became enraged, seized his heaviest cane, and went storming to the Brothers' house, determined to have his revenge on Brother Gombertus.

Brother Benilde met him at the door. "You'll not come in here," he said, "except over my dead body." Then the Director explained the full truth of what had happened. Doctor Tardieu calmed down, apologized, and then went home to administer appropriate paternal correction to the boy. Doctor Tardieu and Brother Benilde became great friends after that. His contributions to the subscriptions for the school, which had earlier been notably meager, were thereafter significantly increased. It was one of his other sons, Arthur, and not the young delinquent, who later became a Dominican priest.

No different from schoolboys everywhere, the lads in the school at Saugues soon pinned a nickname on their principal, Brother Benilde: "Chazot." That was the name of the local cobbler, a small man, slightly hunchbacked, with penetrating eyes. The resemblance was too much to escape notice. Whenever collective shenanigans were in full swing, a lookout would cry, "Cheezit, Chazot!" Brother Benilde would come upon the scene to find only silence, order, and a sea of innocent-looking faces.

In view of the objections by the Promoter of the Faith dur-

ing the canonical process leading to beatification, it is not surprising that a number of former students came to the defense of their old master. Some of these are worth quoting because they present what seems to be an accurate and balanced picture of what really went on. Testimonies such as these were evidently successful in overcoming the objections of the Roman tribunal.

Thus, Paul-Louis Roche, himself a teacher, said later on:

> We were afraid of him or, rather, we respected him. He was kindly without being weak, vigorous without being brutal. He would try at first to win the children over by appealing to their feelings, reminding them of how much annoyance their disobedience would bring to their mothers. But when this failed he would have recourse to punishment.
>
> In the beginning people used to criticize him for using the ferule. I even recall having had to endure it myself. This form of chastisement was rather painful, above all in winter. But in those days it was common enough and we never dreamed of complaining about it to our parents.
>
> I don't think he used excessive severity in his punishments. I myself have been a teacher and know from experience that one sometimes has to be severe. There were a great number of us in every class at Saugues, including some fully grown pupils 18 to 20 years old.

Jean Coufort stressed Brother Benilde's self-control:

> He was neither too indulgent nor too severe. If he was sometimes a bit severe, it was because he had to keep order. I saw on many occasions that he closed his eyes to what was going on so he would not have to be giving punishments continually. He would never get excited when he had to punish someone; it was clear that he felt that he had to do it. Anyone else in his place would have punished far more than he.
>
> When the occasion warranted, he would use the ferule. He would begin by saying to the child: "Make the sign of the cross." Then he would hit him on the fingers.
>
> He used to repeat an expression which I think comes from Saint Paul: "Be angry and sin not." In my opinion he was not too severe; he could have punished far more often.

I never heard any person of good will say that he was too severe. I used to see mothers come to complain that their child had been punished. Brother Benilde would say to them: "Keep better watch over your children. I have to correct them since my Rule requires me to do so." I was happy to hear this, since some of these kids were rascals.

The testimony of Brother Sidonis was in the same vein:

He did not recoil when it became necessary to use corporal punishment in the case of a recalcitrant pupil. I saw him strike with the ferule without saying a word, as calm as could be, keeping himself under total control. He always kept his dignity and that brought him a great deal of respect from the pupils. . . . He was neither too indulgent nor too severe. Strong discipline was needed to keep that school in order. There were in those days some pupils who were exceedingly difficult to manage.

This sort of self-control under aggravation did not come easily to Brother Benilde. He had a vivacious and impulsive temperament, as many of those who knew him well attested. He said to one of them: "It is the holy Virgin herself who prevents me from doing some irreparable harm to anyone of my turbulent little flock. I suppose that if the angels themselves were to assume human form and become schoolteachers, they would be hard put not to get into a fit of anger."

Respect and Love

For all of his reputation as a disciplinarian, the pupils loved Brother Benilde, and he loved to be with them. Jean-Baptiste Pulby, who had once been a Brother, reported: "His pupils loved him to the point where, as soon as he appeared on the streets, they would all run after him. He always had some little thing to give them like a medal or a holy picture. He often took me along with him when he went into town. I witnessed for myself what an impression he made on those children."

Part of this was due to the respect that he had for the children as persons. He would salute them on the streets with the same seriousness with which he greeted the adults. He always called them "Monsieur" and shunned the familiar form

of address in speaking to them. And, of course, he knew them by name.

The poorer children were his special love, as Brother Nomelin-Jean testified:

> His charity extended to everyone, but his preference was for the children who were poor. As he walked through the streets, he could scarcely avoid their importunities. His dear little angels, as he called them, would not leave him in peace until they had received from him either a medal or some sign of affection.

Every summer during the vacation period, Brother Benilde would go with the other Brothers to make the annual retreat at Clermont-Ferrand or, in later years, at Le Puy. It was well known that the transfers among the Brothers were usually effected at the end of the retreat. Each September the children would eagerly await the return of the carriage bringing the Brothers back from retreat. As one of the Brothers remarked, "It was evident that they didn't really care about the rest of us. They only wanted to be sure that Brother Benilde would be back among them for another year."

On one occasion at least, his gentleness with the students got Brother Benilde into a bit of trouble. He was teaching the catechism one day in the garden, as was his custom in the spring of the year when the weather was good. To illustrate the point of his lesson, he picked a fresh sprig from a tree and began to draw out the sap. "We know what you're doing," the students exclaimed. "You're making a whistle." "Yes," he said, "I learned how to make them when I was a little boy. But you should realize that God's grace is like that: the sprigs are good for nothing when the sap goes out of them, and so are we when we lose God's grace."

The next day at the opening of school, the neighborhood was filled with the sounds of whistles and flutes of all sizes and tonal qualities. The neighbors were alarmed, thinking that a riot of some kind was in progress. Brother Benilde appeared at the door, let the cacophony reign for a bit longer, and then clapped his hands for silence. He offered to "buy back" the whistles for good points, awarding extra for the best ones. That

day became known forever after as the day of the whistles. It has never been reported whether the point about God's grace was equally well remembered.

Again, M. Estaniol

Dealing with the neighbors was another part of Brother Benilde's responsibility as head of the community and the school. Notable among these occasions was the controversy with M. Estaniol, the former mayor, whose house next door had been a selling point years earlier in his ardent plea to Brother Anaclet.

It happened one day that a violent storm reduced to a pile of rubble the high wall that divided the mayor's house from the school courtyard. The mayor had the wall rebuilt, but only to a half of the original height, giving him, as he said, more air and a better view. The problem was that it also gave him an unobstructed view of what was going on in the school and in the Brothers' community.

Brother Benilde objected, but Estaniol refused to have the wall built any higher. The Brothers then set to work to erect a makeshift screen of poles and canvas that failed to survive the next blast of wind and rain. Estaniol was sure that this would teach the Brothers a lesson. But he underestimated the determination of Brother Benilde when it came to protecting the Brothers' rights. After secretly assembling the necessary materials, Brother Benilde, with the help of his sturdy cook, Brother Nabor, worked feverishly one moonlit night to rebuild the stone wall to its original height.

Estaniol was fit to be tied. He addressed a nasty letter of protest to "The Brother Director of the *Frères Ignorantins.*" He received no reply, and the wall remained.

Not longer after, M. Estaniol fell suddenly and seriously ill. His housekeeper came running for Brother Benilde. The sick man pleaded with the Brother not to leave him. Without a near relative or a close friend, the dying man needed help. Brother Benilde called the doctor and the priest and did all he could to make the poor man comfortable. Estaniol died shortly thereafter. It fell to Brother Benilde to make all of the arrangements for the funeral and burial, a generous response to the dying

wish of someone who had given him nothing but trouble while he was alive.

Again, Doctor Tardieu

Another "convert" who came to love and respect Brother Benilde was Doctor Tardieu, already mentioned in connection with the son who had faked a bloody nose. Although the Tardieus had seven sons, they had only one daughter. She entered the convent of the Trinitarian Sisters despite the strong opposition of her mother. During the course of the novitiate, the daughter died.

No one had the courage to break the news to the family for fear that the mother would go out of her mind. Neither the Mother Superior of the Trinitarians, nor the pastor of the parish, nor the doctor felt equal to the delicate task. Finally, Brother Benilde was asked to do it. He spoke so gently to the mother, and with such conviction, that by the time he left her, she was at peace and fully resigned to accept God's will.

Vocations

The most enduring evidence of Brother's Benilde's effectiveness in the conduct of the school at Saugues, especially for the Institute of the Brothers, has been the remarkable number of religious and priestly vocations that the school produced. The estimates vary.

In 1896, more than thirty years after the death of Brother Benilde, Brother Sidonis thought that there were still between 120 and 130 Brothers in the Institute who had come from Saugues during the time Brother Benilde had been Director there. Brother Nathanaël-Marie put the figure somewhat between 150 and 200. Others calculated that in the early years as many as ten candidates a year entered the novitiate at Clermont and that three or four a year went to the junior seminary.

In his testimony, Father Besse not only set a higher figure still, but he also added something about the quality:

> He did all that he could to recruit vocations to his Institute. It is claimed that more than 300 vocations to the Brothers came out of Saugues while he was there. He certainly devel-

oped these vocations both by the quality of the education he offered and by the example of his life.

When cross-examined by Father Vigérie, one of the Roman judges in the apostolic process, Father Besse replied:

> He encouraged vocations wherever he thought he could find them, that is, in those young people who manifested to him some such desire. But he never forced a vocation if it wasn't genuine. He also developed many vocations to the priesthood and was always proud of them. Every time he saw one of his former pupils in a cassock, it gave him a great deal of joy.

It seems that Brother Benilde considered the long period devoted to the preparation for First Communion as a particularly appropriate time to raise the question of vocations. Brother Nestéros-Emile testified.

> He never failed to use this occasion to give a talk on vocations. He would speak at length about the dignity and the advantages of the priesthood, the religious state, and the vocation to the foreign missions. He would also come back to this subject at the beginning of the vacation period. He had the happiness of seeing many of his former pupils receive Holy Orders or enter the novitiate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Some also went to the foreign missions.

To a present-day Catholic, First Communion might not seem to be an appropriate time to be encouraging vocations to the priesthood and religious life. It must be remembered, however, that the lads Brother Benilde was dealing with were at least twelve years old, many no doubt older. A large percentage of them would be leaving school for good in a year or two to return to the farm or to begin some other apprenticeship in the town.

Other factors were the length and intensity of the preparation for First Communion, the thoroughness of the instruction, the atmosphere of prayer, the exhortations to have a horror for sin and a love for virtue. Everything in the situation served to

create an ideal climate for generous and idealistic young souls to consider seriously a life dedicated to God and neighbor in the priesthood or in a religious institute. The evidence would seem to indicate that the rate of perseverance was very high.

Not all of the factors that attract vocations need be explicitly religious. One element that is not mentioned explicitly by any of those who fell under the spell of Brother Benilde is implicit in all that has been presented in this chapter. Not only was Brother Benilde himself an attractive role model for his pupils, but he also generated a love and an enthusiasm for the school.

As we have seen, he ran a good school. It was a well-ordered and pleasant place to be, an attractive alternative to whatever other career opportunities were then available. The impact of what the Brothers were doing for persons and for the local society must have made this option seem desirable and meaningful to the young teenagers of Saugues. When integrated with a strong religious motivation, the vocation of the teaching Brother must have indeed seemed worthy of a lifetime commitment.

The success of the Brothers' school at Saugues in terms of education, religious instruction, school discipline, respect for persons, and the development of religious vocations all witness to the competence and wisdom of Brother Benilde during the years in which he was in charge. They also testify to his holiness; but it now remains to turn to those particular aspects of his religious life by which the man emerged as a recognized saint.

6
Religious Life in Saugues

The term *religious life* has many meanings. The foregoing chapters have already given some insights into the religious life in Saugues, that is, the religious climate of the town and the devotional life of the parish of Saint Médard. In that religiously monolithic culture, the town and the Catholic parish were one and the same. The life of the town was religious.

Much has been said also about the religious life in the Brothers' school at Saugues during the years that it was under the direction of Brother Benilde. For the Brothers, the school is a means of evangelization. It opens up to young minds the message of salvation in Jesus Christ in a way that is suited to their age, their abilities, their culture, and the level of their faith.

From the time of Saint John the Baptist de La Salle, the Founder, up to and including the most recently revised and approved Rule of the Brothers, there is no dichotomy between the work of Christian education in the school on the one hand and the religious consecration lived in the religious community on the other. This should be kept in mind as the chapter that follows comes to focus on that more specific form of religious life in Saugues, the religious life of the apostolic community of consecrated men known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

The Religious Superior

With the title of Brother Director, Brother Benilde was the religious superior of the Brothers' community at Saugues, as well as the principal of the school, from its foundation in 1841 until his death in 1862. John Baptist de La Salle was so convinced that the Institute was "in the hands of the Directors," as he put it, that he wrote a special Rule for them. As a result, in

The church of Saint Médard at Saugues

every community of the Brothers, the religious life and the concrete way in which the Rule would be lived was conditioned to a great extent by the personality and the policies of the Brother Director. At Saugues, the Brothers were "in the hands" of a saint.

For Brother Benilde there was only one rule for himself and his community, and that was the Rule of the Institute. Brother Nomelin-Jean described what Brother Benilde was like in this regard: "We observed him day by day at the head of the community, observing the Rule article by article. The Rule was his whole life, he wasn't conscious of anything else." And Brother Nathanaël: "He never failed in the observance of our Rule which, by the way, is very strict. I never saw him violate a single article of the Rule." Brother Néomède put it most succinctly: "He was the living Rule."

Even before he entered the novitiate, Brother Nivard-Abel got his first insight into the importance Brother Benilde attached to the Rule:

> Now that I am fully acquainted with the Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, I am convinced that he never violated it. I remember when he was preparing me to enter the novitiate—it was he who brought me there—he spoke to me about the Rule and said: "In order to become a saint, in our case there is nothing very great that is required; all you have to do is keep the Rule."
>
> During those days I had occasion to meet with him often. He told me that one of the popes had said that if he were ever presented with a Brother of the Christian Schools who had observed his Rule to the letter that he would canonize him without any further formal process. Brother tried to convince me that I too ought to observe the Rule very well if I should decide to enter the Institute. But he did nothing to force my decision in the matter.

The Rule in question had originally been elaborated by the Founder and the pioneer Brothers during the formative years from 1686 to 1718. Despite some modifications adopted over the years by subsequent general chapters, the Rule in the mid-

nineteenth century was substantially that of the Founder. By today's standards it would be considered rigorous, as it was even then, and much too detailed, leaving almost nothing either to chance or to personal initiative.

By the time Brother Benilde was called to be a community Director, it had already become customary to make some small allowances, either in the name of common sense or to accommodate human weakness. For a person of religious sensitivity, however, this created problems of conscience. In the traditional theology of religious life, the Rule was imposed by obedience, and as such it was looked upon as an expression of the will of God. Not even the superiors could change or violate it. For Brother Benilde, the will of God was not something to be trifled with.

What this meant in day-to-day living for the community at Saugues can be seen from the testimony of those who experienced it. Once again, Brother Nomelin-Jean:

> He fulfilled his responsibilities as Director in a very conscientious manner: we followed the Rule exactly, article by article. Even during the days of Holy Week where the Rule is painfully detailed, we made all the prescribed religious exercises at the appointed hour. If the bell ringer slipped up, he was immediately called to order. The Director even insisted that we ring with the clapper the precise number of tolls that the Rule prescribed.
>
> I remember one time out of playfulness I held back the bell rope on the floor above while the bell ringer was trying to ring the tolls. Brother Benilde learned that it was I who did it. *"Malheureux!"* he cried. "You have caused an exercise of piety to be badly rung. As a penance you will make your particular examen on your knees in the oratory, you will take your supper on your knees in the dining room, and you will kiss the floor seven times." I had learned my lesson.

The same Brother testified on another occasion:

> His admonitions to the Brothers were very paternal. He considered the virtue of obedience to be of the greatest im-

portance, both for himself and for his community. The orders of the superiors were for him the word of the gospel. He did not like it when anyone answered him back. When anyone of us did, he would take us to one side and then oblige us to ask pardon before all the other Brothers with arms extended in the form of a cross and then to kiss the floor.

Most of the Brothers seem to have accepted this regimen without undue complaint. Their testimony years later, tinged with a hint of nostalgia and even admiration, is an indication of that. It evidently was a happy community. Brother Nestéros-Emile recalled what it had been like when he was a pupil in the school: "It was easy to see that unity reigned in the community. To those outside, Brother Benilde always showed his great love for his Brothers, taking the occasion often to praise them in front of the pupils."

Brother Gabinus put it this way:

> He was a man who would do anything for you; he was obliging toward everyone. He used to say to me: "When you are having trouble with another Brother, go to him, do something nice for him, and you will touch his heart." I believe that is what he himself always did.

The superiors quickly learned how to take advantage of the Saugues community and its reputation for strict observance. Brothers who were unsteady in their vocation were often assigned there to help them make up their mind. As Georges Rigault put it, "In Brother Benilde they encountered the living Rule. They either were encouraged to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their vocation or, recognizing that they were mistaken in trying to live such a life, they quickly left the Institute."

Not all of the Brothers were equally receptive to the way in which Brother Benilde interpreted and applied the Rule. Brother Nomelin-Jean's testimony in the canonical process was so favorable to his hero that one of the judges asked whether his opinion was shared by all of the Brothers. The reply was honest: "To be sure, there was always one or another who complained. When Brother Benilde had to deal with such a one, he would have the rest of us pray for his conversion."

When Father Besse was similarly pressed by the tribunal, he replied: "As for the opinion that the other Brothers had of him, it was the same with him as with all the saints: some loved him and some loved him not, and the reason was his insistence on religious discipline."

Brother Herlin, a relative latecomer to the community, had this to say:

> As a Director he acquitted himself very well of his responsibility. I know, however, that certain Brothers did not like the idea of being put under his charge. I believe that was because of the regulations he imposed. They were afraid of the way in which he insisted on the strict observance of the Rule.
>
> I heard it said that he sometimes made the Brothers kiss the floor, regardless of where or when. During my time at Saugues, I never saw anything like that. Besides, by then this practice was no longer very much used in the congregation.

It might be noted in passing that the last remark is not completely accurate. Up until a new Rule was adopted after Vatican II, penances such as kissing the floor during the accusation of faults were still performed in community.

Continuing Formation in the Community

One of the responsibilities of the Brother Director is the continuing formation and in-service training of his Brothers, especially the young. Part of this, as already noted, was accomplished by supervising the classes in the school. Brother Benilde visited the classes regularly, observed the Brothers as they taught, gave model lessons himself, and in private review sessions later on, suggested things to be corrected.

Brother Nomelin-Jean, in his testimony, provided a remarkable example:

> I still think of Brother Benilde as my father and I always had a lively affection for him. I always took very seriously everything he said. In the beginning I used to talk too much

in class. He said to me that I would wear out my lungs talking so much. Besides, what I was saying was not that interesting to the children. He promised to give me a remedy on the next Thursday afternoon walk.

When the day arrived, he picked up a small round pebble and gave it to me. "Put this in your mouth," he said, "and don't take it out except on the three occasions the Rule allows: the morning reflection, the catechism lesson, and to suggest an answer to a pupil when neither he nor anyone else in the class can arrive at the answer by themselves. Next Thursday I want you to tell me how many times you removed the pebble."

In order to please him, I kept the pebble in my mouth for six weeks. At each weekly reddition he never failed to ask me whether the remedy was proving to be effective.

In community, the religious development of the Brothers was provided for by a weekly personal interview with the Director. This practice, called reddition, was required by Rule and consisted in having each Brother give an account of himself to the Director. Present-day church law limits to external conduct only the obligatory subject matter of such encounters, but in the nineteenth century and earlier, it was expected to include matters of conscience.

Not surprisingly, Brother Benilde developed a skill in this form of spiritual direction. When questioned on this point, Father Besse was quite explicit:

> He had the ability to discern the reasons for the sadness or the discouragement of the Brothers. He quickly found a way to speak to their heart. I remember people like Brother Généreux and Brother Gosselin, both now deceased, who had made up their minds not to say a word to him about what was troubling them, but they wound up telling him everything.

Another form of continuing education prescribed by the Rule was the daily "study of catechism," as it was called; perhaps not the best way to describe what was intended to advance the religious knowledge of the Brothers.

Brother Benilde had a favorite text for this purpose that he called his "Collot." Its full title was *Explication des premières vérités de la réligion, pour en faciliter l'intelligence aux jeunes gens.* The author was Father M. P. Collot, a doctor of theology from the Sorbonne, identified on the title page only as M.P.C. The first edition, published in Paris in 1763, included 510 octavo pages. There were four editions in the eighteenth century; it was so popular in the nineteenth century as a source book for catechists that it went through twenty-nine printings before 1890.

The book was a gold mine for the catechist. It gave simplified explanations of the principles of doctrine and morality, followed by a generous sampling of stories and quotations from the Bible.

In his biography of Brother Benilde, Father Besse tells how Brother Benilde treasured his copy of the book: "He used it for almost 30 years. He had learned it by heart at Clermont-Ferrand and the Director of novices let him keep it as a souvenir. It was read over and over again and had to be rebound several times. He always found some new treasure in it." Although a copy of the small catechism used by Brother Benilde is preserved in the Generalate archives, his "Callot" has unfortunately disappeared.

Brother Benilde was not one to keep such a treasure to himself. He used it to help his Brothers with their catechism lessons. Brother Nathanaël-Marie had a vivid memory of it:

> Our Rule requires that we spend most of our free time preparing our catechism lessons. We had for our use at that time the book by Collot. Brother Benilde urged us to master this volume well. He used to say to us: "If you can recite a certain number of pages of Collot, I'll give you ten holy pictures for your class." Sometimes he would offer other rewards. That is how I won my first rosary, by reciting 300 pages from this author.

Community Meals

If an army travels on its stomach, so does a religious community. Under Brother Benilde, the Brothers had little to complain about in this regard. He personally ate very little and always reserved for himself the least desirable portions. Nevertheless, despite the poverty of the community, he made sure that the quantity and the variety of the food served were adequate for the needs of the hardworking young men in his charge.

There were some incidents, of course. On one occasion a Brother complained that the peas were of poor quality and had a strange taste. The Director quietly removed the peas from the Brother's plate to his own and ate them all.

One year there was an abundant grape harvest. Brother Benilde bought two hundred pounds of grapes at a very cheap price. The only place to store them was the room sometimes used as an infirmary. "That will keep the Brothers from wanting to get sick," he remarked wryly. After a while the Brothers got tired of grapes for dessert and barely touched them. That only induced Brother Benilde to pile the grapes all the higher in the dish for the next time.

For many years the Brothers had to take turns in the kitchen. More often than not, Brother Benilde, who had some culinary skills and a bit of kitchen experience, did the honors himself. When this became too much of a burden, he appealed to the Director of the novitiate at Le Puy for a healthy young novice to take charge of the temporal affairs of the house.

Brother Nabor-Victor

It was a happy day for Brother Benilde and the rest of the Brothers when, on March 3, 1853, Brother Nabor-Victor joined the Saugues community. He was twenty-two years old, a giant of a man, solidly built, strong as an ox, yet gentle and simple as the lambs that he once shepherded on his father's farm. The Director of Novices wrote: "Here is the man you need. He's a tall pole of a fellow and probably still growing. In any case, under your direction he will surely grow in virtue." Brother Benilde took to him at once, and a strong bond developed be-

tween them. He called him "our very dear Brother with the long limbs and the arms of steel."

There were at least two occasions when Brother Benilde owed his life to the physical strength of Brother Nabor. One time the Director was coming back from Le Puy, and Brother Nabor went to meet him with a saddle horse so that he could ride the rest of the long way home. Brother Benilde got into the saddle, and with Brother Nabor walking alongside, they made the steep climb up from the gorge of the Allier River. When they got to the top of the cliff overlooking the gorge, a pair of sheepdogs bounded out of the bushes. The horse shied away in terror and was close to dumping its rider back over the cliff. Brother Nabor grabbed the horse and pulled it away from the cliff until the dogs scattered and the horse calmed down.

Another time the two Brothers were returning from visiting a sick person out in the country when a large bull managed to get loose from his pen. The bull had his head down and was pawing with his feet, ready to charge at Brother Benilde, who was wrapt in prayer and totally oblivious of what was happening around him. Brother Nabor spotted the bull, grabbed a big stick, and dealt the beast a couple of mighty blows over the head until it fled.

According to the account of Father Besse, when asked how he could reward the man who had thus saved his life, Brother Benilde said: "I'll pray continually to God for him and I'll do all I can to correct his defects so that he will become a true disciple of our Venerable Founder. I do not know and I could not imagine any other way to show my gratitude. And that is the kind of thanks that best suits his own desires and his actions."

In that light, the following account of Brother Nomelin-Jean is more understandable:

> I remember that one day, as we were about to set out for the weekly walk, the Brother Econome [Nabor] tried to insist against Brother Benilde that a certain key was the key to the front gate and not the key to the garden. It turned out that the Econome was wrong.
>
> That evening as a punishment, Brother Benilde ordered him to kneel down with his arms extended in the form of a

cross and to repeat ten times: "That was the key to the GARDEN!" This led to a very amusing scene. The Brother was so big and so heavy that when he went down on his knees the whole floor shook under his weight.

Auguste Privat, among others, had this story about Brother Nabor:

> One day while the Brothers were at church, a thief broke into the house. The Brother in charge of the kitchen returned ahead of the others and caught the culprit in the act. He grabbed a meat axe and was threatening the terrified man with it when Brother Benilde arrived on the scene. "Excuse me, Brother, excuse me!" he said. "Don't harm this poor man." And although Brother Benilde knew full well who he was, he never pressed charges.

We can be sure that the man never went near Brother Nabor or his kitchen again.

Community Recreation

One of the means envisioned by John Baptist de La Salle for building a spirit of community was recreation in common. He listed this, along with reddition, as one of the exterior supports of the Institute. The Brothers took recreation together every day after the noon and the evening meals and once a week on the free day, which in Saugues was Thursday.

In the tradition of the religious life at that time, recreation was something rather different from what we think of today. There were no competitive sports or games of any kind—only walking and talking. The talk was centered on religious topics, school duties, or amusing incidents associated with either; no gossip, silly jokes, or arguments were allowed.

The Thursday walks at Saugues often turned into little pilgrimages. The route was chosen so as to avoid places where there were large gatherings of people. The walk would always begin with a prolonged visit to the cemetery to pray for the deceased. Brothers would be assigned topics beforehand to dis-

cuss as the five of them walked along the road. At stated intervals, a Brother appointed for the purpose would interrupt the conversation with a short prayer. The same would be done whenever they passed a church or an outdoor shrine.

Once they arrived at their destination, usually some celebrated shrine, they would seek a quiet spot to rest for a while. Some would take off their shoes and go wading in a nearby stream. Brother Benilde would usually withdraw to a secluded spot to pray by himself. From the time he was a child, he had the habit of praising God for the beauties of nature. Towards evening, the little group would return home, refreshed in mind, soul, and body and ready for the work of another week.

When it seemed opportune, or some matter of business required it, the Brothers would interrupt their weekly walk to pay a visit to the home of a person connected with the school. In his biography of Brother Benilde, Brother Josephus Liddy gives a highly dramatized account of how one of their hosts on such an occasion prepared some refreshment for the Brothers but was dismayed when Brother Benilde would not allow them to partake of it. The testimony of Brother Nil-François on which the story is based, however, says only that the Director would not partake himself, not that he forbade the Brothers to do so. The testimony of Brother Nathanaël is more to the point:

> When we went for our weekly walk, he would allow the Brothers to accept some small refreshments that were offered by the people we sometimes went to visit. But he never took anything. That happened, for example, after a two-hour walk to Pébrac or to Compéyrène. He absolutely refused to take anything at all.

From the testimonies, it seems that the Director genuinely enjoyed these outings. Again, Brother Nomelin-Jean:

> During part of the time on our walks, we were expected to give a short discourse for which the subject matter had been assigned by Brother Benilde the previous Thursday. This we were expected to prepare during the week. He wanted in this way to train us in speech.
>
> Once we arrived at the destination of our walk, he would take out of his pocket a book of songs, choose one, and

sing it in a not altogether melodious voice. Each of us had to sing it in turn until we had all learned it. He also taught us little ditties that we could teach our children on Sundays while waiting for Vespers to begin. He said that such songs would keep them from having to learn naughty songs later on when they were grown up.

Music and song seem to have played an important part in the life of both the community and the school at Saugues. Auguste Privat was one of the pupils who developed a love for music at the school and later became a musician himself. He had these memories of Brother Benilde:

> On occasion when he was going out for the weekly walk he took along with the Brothers some specially selected pupils. They would stop somewhere in the country and Brother Benilde would say to the Brother in charge of the music: "Now you and your youngsters can give us a song." We all sat down in a circle and sang our songs. Brother Benilde sat there with his hands joined and his eyes looking up to heaven, happy as could be.

When one of the judges at the Roman process asked whether Brother Benilde had any interest in church music, Auguste Privat replied: "He loved church music, even though he himself didn't have much of a voice. He managed to get a Brother qualified to teach the pupils music. We used to take part in the singing at church every Sunday and at all the important parish ceremonies."

The Brothers at Saugues evidently had access to musical instruments as well. Brother Herlin remembered that "a Brother used to accompany the singing on the accordion." In the account books, scrupulously kept by Brother Benilde, there are entries for a bassoon, a flute, two clarinets, and a French horn. In his biography of the saint, Brother A. J. Liddy quotes this interesting entry: "Aug.-Sept. '44—beer and biscuits for the Brother musicians."

One of the very few letters written by Brother Benilde that has survived gives evidence of occasional get-togethers with Brothers of neighboring communities. The letter is addressed to another Brother Director, probably of Langeac. It shows

Brother Benilde in a most human and unbuttoned mood and is worth quoting in full. (The original French was published in Volume 111 of the *Bulletin de l'Institut*, October, 1947.)

J.M.J. Saugues, October 18, 1847

My dear Brother Director and my good friend,

I have received your very kind invitation that would be so much more satisfying to accept rather than to have to put it aside. Our Brothers as well as myself are all on fire with a desire to take advantage of it but the bad weather forces us to put it off. I presume you must have had a rather poor crop of grapes this year if things there are the same as they are here.

We get outside for a little bit on Thursdays, but we hardly get out of the town when the rain catches us in the fields and sends us back disappointed. So our jovial and fraternal reunion will have to wait another time.

The barrel of wine you speak of is perfectly acceptable, above all if it is full and on its way. It will be a great pleasure for us to drink your health; one barrel will suffice for the moment.

The oil at 50 or 55 centimes will be enough for us. The merchants here proclaim that they won't have any trouble selling their supply but you can only believe half of what they say. This year oil will not be more expensive than last year. From Brioude to Clermont the walnut trees were full of nuts and there was an abundance of hemp seeds; the one will make up for the other when they are mixed together.

Some Thursday when the weather is good, one or two of us will come to say hello and to thank you in the name of all of us and to pay you at last for what we owe. They'll bring with them the small vial of oil, if it is full; if not, that can wait until later.

When our Brothers come to see you they will bring with them some beautiful songs that are easy to learn. Ever since the return of Brother Glastien our Brothers are up to their heads in music: a bassoon, a piston trumpet and clarinets all sound off at once when time permits.

If your two very fine Brothers want to come up here some Wednesday evening, we'll be happy to welcome them.

Then one of these days during your grape harvest, they'll come back to you full of music—they'll get as much of it as they want. Let's show a bit of courage to climb over the mountains that separate us; after that comes the enjoyment.

The "old man" that is my body has been treating me rather roughly these past few days, but that is an enemy that has to be lived with; you don't say whether yours leaves you in peace. In heaven we'll be able to rest, we and the other old men; we will know the music of the angels without having to rehearse it.

It is with this consoling hope for you and for us, that I say, in greeting you, my very dear Brother Director, and all your wonderful Brothers,

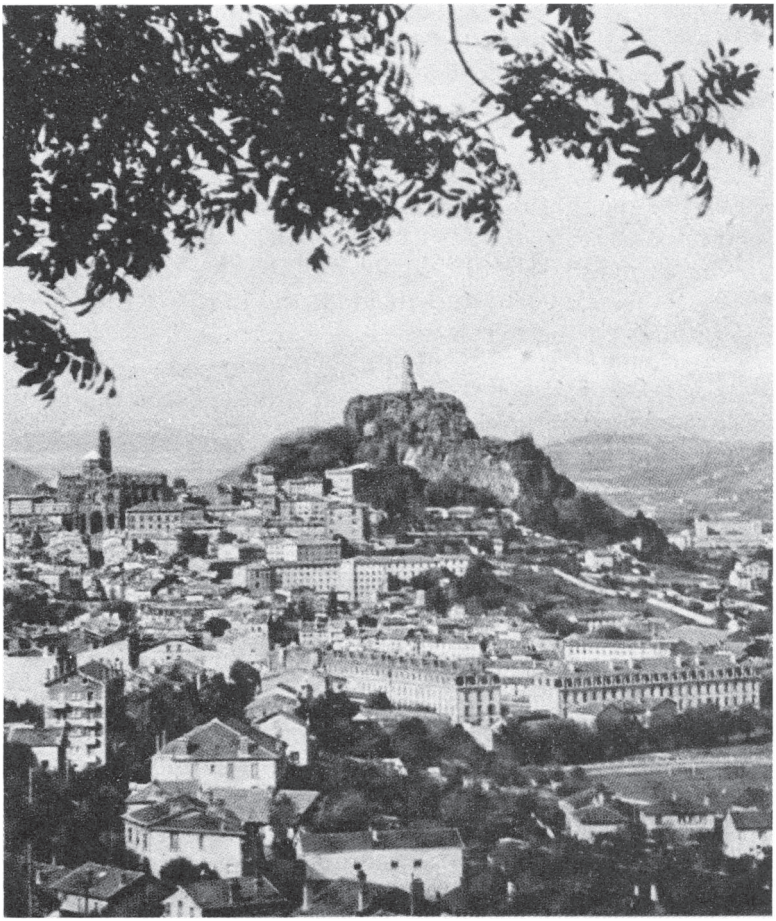
Your very humble and grateful servant,

[Signed] Brother Benilde

The New District of Le Puy

In addition to occasional visits to other communities, there were regular contacts with all of the Brothers of the area at the annual retreat. When Brother Aggée died in 1851, the territory that he had governed for thirty years from Clermont-Ferrand was divided. A new District was established with its center at Le Puy. A novitiate and a boarding school were opened in that capital of the Haute-Loire, and Brother Paulinus was appointed the first Brother Visitor of the new District. It was from then on, also, that the Brother novices at Le Puy were given religious names beginning with the letter N. In 1860 Brother Paulinus was succeeded as Visitor by Brother Hugolin, the very same who had been "broken in" by Brother Benilde in Limoges almost twenty-five years earlier.

Once the new novitiate at Le Puy was opened, it was there rather than at Clermont where the Brothers from Saugues would assemble for the annual retreat. When business was urgent (for example, the need to replace a Brother in a hurry), in the absence of telephones or a dependable mail service, it was not uncommon for Brother Benilde to go personally to Le Puy to consult with his superiors.



Le Puy

It is also known that Brother Benilde was invited to come to Le Puy in 1854 for the solemn dedication of the heroic statue of Notre Dame de France made from the iron salvaged from the cannons of Sebastopol. The statue was set atop the lofty Corneille rock, where it dominates the skyline of the city to this day.

The journey between Le Puy and Saugues has its perils, even in good weather and with modern means of transporta-

tion. For anyone who has made the trip, it is not difficult to envision the scene of a narrow escape more than a century ago.

At the close of the annual retreat in September 1855, Brother Benilde was returning from Le Puy to Saugues with Brother Nathanaël-Marie, who had just been given his first assignment. With them in the carriage were a priest and two other Brothers, Haram and Naval-Louis, who were going on to Malzieu. It was about ten o'clock on a very dark night as the horse-drawn carriage was negotiating the steep climb up from Monistrol in the Allier gorge when the driver fell asleep. The carriage went off the road into a ditch and overturned. No one was seriously hurt.

Brother Benilde, who had been saying the Rosary all the while, remarked to them that if the accident had happened only a few minutes earlier, they would have all gone over the edge and been killed. Some thought he was being dramatic, but a later inspection of the site proved that they had in fact narrowly escaped falling into the gorge.

Brother Naval-Louis described the sequel: "We prayed continually all the rest of the way to Saugues. When we got there, Brother Benilde brought us to the church but the door was locked. So we stood there in the pouring rain saying our prayers of thanksgiving for the narrow escape. Brother Benilde made his prayer with his arms in the form of a cross. I know, I was there."

Care for the Brothers

It is evident from all of this that Brother Benilde genuinely loved his Brothers. By and large he was older and more experienced than most of them. Within the framework of his convictions about religious discipline, he did all he could to make community life supportive and agreeable for them.

There were many testimonies later on to his special concern for the Brothers who were ill. He provided for them as well as the limited resources of the community would permit. He called in the doctor, or the priest, if the situation seemed to require it. He replaced the sick Brothers in class and exempted

them from the community exercises until they were completely well.

One example comes from Jean-Baptiste Pulby, who fell sick under the pressure of the evening classes that had been added to his regular day assignment in an overcrowded primary class:

> I fell sick and had to be put to bed. Brother Benilde took care of me personally. He moved me from my cell to one that was more comfortable. He called Doctor Tardieu. He came often to look in on me and brought me hot tea. When I was feeling a little better, he added some little sweets to my diet. Then, when I was strong enough, he sent me to the country, in company with Brother Glastien, to have a bowl of milk. I remember well how happy he was when he saw that my health was improving.

One of the stories that recurs in the testimony, a story which is found in all of the biographies and has even been depicted in visual art, illustrates very well the fatherly care of a Director for his Brothers. It concerns two of them who had to go to Le Puy for their qualifying examinations in March of 1860. Since snowstorms were still rather frequent at that time of the year, Brother Benilde sent them on their way fortified with heavy leggings that he had made for them himself.

On the night of their expected return, there was a heavy snowfall; all the roads were blocked, and visibility was reduced to zero. Brother Benilde kept candles burning in the window all night long to guide them home on the last leg of the journey. But the Brothers wisely decided to stay the night at Le Puy to wait out the storm.

The next day they decided to risk the trip home by foot. The storm only intensified, and they had a most difficult time covering the rugged thirty miles in the blinding snow. They arrived home very late that night, heartened at the end of the journey by the candles burning in the window. They fell into the Director's arms, completely exhausted. He prepared a hot meal for them, warmed them by a blazing fire, and sent them to bed with instructions to stay there in the morning. Late as it was, he himself went to the oratory to thank Providence in prolonged prayer for their safe return.

This picture of Brother Benilde at prayer in the middle of the night raises the question of the religious life as Brother Benilde lived it within himself. The religious life of the town, the school, and the community of Brothers provided a context. But what did religiousness mean in his own life? The answer has to be found in his life of faith.

7
The Man of Faith

The religious life as it was lived in the depths of the heart and the soul of Brother Benilde is itself a mystery of faith. The full reality of such a mystery cannot be penetrated, of course, either by eyewitnesses or by historical investigation. It is only from the cumulative reports of its external manifestations that we can get some insight into the life of grace as it functioned in this man of God.

The Look of a Saint

Unfortunately, there is no photograph of Brother Benilde, not even a painted portrait made during his life, to enable future generations to find in his expression some clue to his inner life. The portrait that has become so familiar over the years is a composite prepared at the request of the superiors by Brother Nicanor-Marie, the Vice-Postulator when the cause was first introduced.

As Georges Rigault describes it, Brother Naval-Louis, who was still alive at the turn of the century, was always thought to have a striking resemblance to Brother Benilde. Brother Nicanor had a photograph taken of this Brother and then retouched in the light of suggestions made by those who knew the saint, including some of his surviving relatives.

The reactions to the finished product were mixed. Jean Morton, Brother Benilde's nephew, thought that the resemblance was fairly close; Jean Borrot, his cousin, thought otherwise. Marien Astier thought that it made the Brother look too naive, that it didn't represent him forcefully enough. Father Tardieu, the son of the doctor, said that he couldn't recognize his old teacher in the portrait. Brother Nivard-Abel thought that the resemblance was striking. Two revisions of this composite, one at Saugues and one at Clermont, have been used to illustrate holy cards, posters, and books ever since.

The Saint Within

The true portrait of the man, therefore, has to be drawn in words. The general opinion of those who knew him was that he was a saint. They did not hesitate to use the word, either during his lifetime when they saw him in the town, the school, or the community or afterwards when they were called upon to testify in the canonical process.

Here are some of those words from which it is not too difficult to get a life-size glimpse at the sort of person Brother Benilde was. Thus, Father Besse: "Sin and Brother Benilde were to each other like fire and water." Marie Bastet: "He lived in the love of God from morning until evening." Brother Néomède: "He was a saint but a pleasant and loveable one." Auguste Privat: "Nobody could pray the way he did. His piety made him amiable and he was always smiling." Jean Coufort: "He was a man of faith. If he wasn't, no one was." Brother Herlin: "His piety was not morose." Brother Gabinus: "He said he would rather live on potato skins than be unfaithful to his vocation."

Ascetical and Devotional Practices

Most of the practices favored by the masters of the spiritual life in the centuries after the Catholic Reformation and the Council of Trent were adopted by Brother Benilde as a matter of course. These consisted of acts of humiliation; instruments of penance, such as the hair shirt or the discipline; strict separation from the world and from unnecessary contacts with seculars, especially women; literal observance of the Rule; and blind obedience to the superiors.

The devotional life of Brother Benilde was likewise centered around the traditional practices of piety that were characteristic of nineteenth-century French Catholicism. For Brother Benilde, his saintly patrons were as real as any of the townspeople, the Brothers, or the students that he had to deal with every day.

As one Brother said, "He always had us making novenas." He was convinced that he could obtain almost anything from Saint Joseph, and he usually proved to be right. He was as conscious of the guardian angels as he was of the students

themselves; in greeting the students, he did not forget to greet the angels that watched over them.

His own patrons, Saint Peter and Saint Benilde; the patron of the parish, Saint Médard; the patron of the novitiate at Clermont, Saint Amator—all of them got the honor due to them. Concern for the suffering souls in purgatory, especially the recently deceased, was ever on his mind. John Baptist de La Salle had not yet been canonized, or even beatified, but the "Venerable Founder" was always invoked with the appropriate veneration and respect.

It would be unthinkable in a saintly Brother at that time, or any other time, if devotion to Mary did not have a dominant place. In the case of Brother Benilde, this was most commonly manifested in his fidelity to the Rosary. He traced his vocation to the day when he saw the two Brothers saying the Rosary, as the Rule prescribed, while walking the streets of Clermont. He prayed the Rosary continually himself; it was rarely out of his hands. For a while he kept a perpetual Rosary going in the school, the students reciting it all day long by turns, until the superiors suppressed the practice as too distracting.

Brother Benilde prepared carefully for the weekly reception of the Sacrament of Penance, arousing in himself sentiments of contrition and unworthiness. Those who observed him kissing the floor in the church often wondered what it was that he had to confess. He received the Eucharist as often as his confessor allowed, which was more often than was customary in those days.

His entire manner when he entered the church was testimony to his awareness of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. His genuflection was deliberate and prolonged, his gaze ever directed to the tabernacle. He followed the actions of the priest with intense concentration during the unfolding of the Eucharistic sacrifice. His example had an unforgettable impact on those who witnessed it, parishioners and students alike.

Obedience and Humility

Of all the virtues traditionally associated with structured religious life, obedience and humility characterized Brother

Benilde in a special way. His meticulous obedience to the Rule, but without scrupulosity, as well as the exact observance he demanded of others has already been amply documented in earlier chapters.

For more than twenty years as superior, he never put on any airs of superiority. He was often quoted as saying, "They made me a Director even though I'm only fit to be a cook." Father Besse related an interesting insight into Brother Benilde's relationships with the other Directors:

> His humility was great. He always thought of himself as the least of all and he always kept his place. On the retreats, he put himself in the lowest rank among the Directors.
>
> One time, when the president of the retreat had to be absent, the other Directors said to him: "You are always preaching to the rest of us about obedience. Why don't you show this by your actions? Why don't you obey when we ask you to give us the retreat talks?" So challenged, he agreed to preside despite his reluctance. And everyone was pleased with the talks that he gave.

Brother Haram dated this incident as taking place in 1852, when the Visitor was unable to preside at the retreat that year.

In accord with the doctrine of the Founder and the traditions of religious life, Brother Benilde accepted the orders of his superiors as the will of God. Beyond that he had an almost exaggerated respect for them personally and for their office. When he had occasion to write to them, he did so on his knees. There is evidence that the superiors in turn appreciated his deference, his spirit of cooperation, and his obedience.

Brother Paulinus, the first Visitor of the District of Le Puy, considered Brother Benilde to be a saint. By the same token, it must not have been easy for him to learn how to deal with a saint under his command. Brother Benilde was always coming with some urgent problem in the school or the community, often in the form of a request for another Brother—Brother Nabor for the kitchen, a Brother for the music, and so on.

According to Father Besse, Brother Paulinus thought many times of assigning Brother Benilde to a more important post in

the District. Yet he could never bring himself to give the direct command. "Brother Benilde always pleaded his case so eloquently," he said, "that I would never have dared assign him to any of the places that I had in mind for him."

Brother Benilde was also well-known to Brother Philippe, the Superior General who governed the Institute from 1834 to 1878, the period of its greatest expansion. The Superior visited the Saugues community on at least one occasion. That was in 1849.

When the Superior, in a half-serious tone, chided Brother Benilde for the lavish dinner that had been served on that occasion, Brother Benilde replied: "Most Honored Brother, this is the first time that we have had the honor of receiving you in our house. We want to make this a special event. We will have plenty of time later to repair the damage done to our budget."

There are pages and pages of testimony from the canonical process that document the details of the ascetical and devotional practices, the instances of humility and obedience, that have been summarized in the preceding paragraphs. But none of this gets to the heart of the matter. Many of these approaches to religious life have since been abandoned as exaggerated, too individualistic, too sentimental, and bordering at times on either subservience or superstition.

Another objection that could be raised, if we consider the saint only from this point of view, is that there is not very much in these fairly widespread devotions and practices that is specifically Lasallian. That brings the search into the religious life of Brother Benilde to something more profound, namely, what it means to say that he was a man of faith.

Faith and Zeal

Saint John Baptist de La Salle left to his Institute a legacy that came not from his financial resources but from the depths of his own spirituality. That was to be the characteristic spirit of his Institute, a spirit of faith. Such faith was not to be identified with mere credulity nor with some vague trust in God, not even with assent to formulated doctrines. It was, rather, a way of looking at things, a faith-vision, an insight that served as an interpretative principle for all that one did or experienced.

De La Salle wrote in his Rule: "The spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God. . . ." And again: "Secondly, the spirit of their Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children . . . bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the gospel."

Enough was said in a previous chapter to demonstrate that the spirit of zeal for the Christian education of young people was a driving force in the life of Brother Benilde. The point to be made here is that such zeal was a manifestation of the more fundamental spirit of faith from which it sprung. If it could be said of anyone, it could be said of Brother Benilde that he never did anything but in view of God, that he attributed all to God, that he saw in everything that happened to him an expression of the will of God.

Of the means recommended by De La Salle to acquire and develop a spirit of faith, among the most important are the prayerful study of the Scriptures, awareness of the presence of God, and the practice of mental prayer. These practices were at the heart of the religious and devotional life of Brother Benilde.

His familiarity with the Scriptures was one of the features that made his catechism lessons so attractive. To those who knew him well, he seemed to have a continual awareness of the presence of God. God was real to him, he was wrapt up in God, and he thought of nothing else except in relation to God. As the Rule required, he never failed to adore the presence of God when he entered a room in the house or a classroom in the school. A priest friend said of him, "He adored God while he was planting cabbages as devoutly as he did while he was in church."

Following the doctrine of the Founder, Brother Benilde cultivated this sense of the presence of God by prolonged periods of meditative prayer. The Rule prescribed for the Brothers extended periods of mental prayer every morning and evening in community. He was ingenious in finding other opportunities.

There is more than one story of Brothers stumbling over him late at night in the darkened chapel. Sometimes he would

begin his prayer before the 4:30 A.M. rising bell. Or he would steal away to a quiet spot to pray during the weekly walk. Brothers who surprised him in such moments testified that he would often appear to be in a state of near ecstasy.

It was this intense spirit of faith in the Lasallian sense, nurtured by prayer and awareness of the presence and providence of God, that explains the effectiveness of Brother Benilde in the classroom and in the community. His spirituality was rooted in the spiritual doctrine of John Baptist de La Salle.

In the vision of De La Salle, the spirit of faith and the spirit of zeal are not two distinct or subordinated dynamisms. Faith and zeal are two aspects of the same spirit. Faith overflows into zeal; zeal is rooted in faith. The same is true of the relationship in Lasallian spirituality between the spirit of faith and the spirit of community. The spirit of faith that overflows into a spirit of apostolic zeal is lived in a community of men consecrated in faith and brotherhood to an educational mission.

For a Brother of the Christian Schools, therefore, sanctity consists in living day by day the spirit of faith, zeal, and community. Faith is the dominant element that integrates and energizes the other two. Thus, to call Brother Benilde a "man of faith" is to define his sanctity.

8
The Death of a Saint

In September 1858, Brother Philippe presided over a special retreat for the Directors that was held at Clermont-Ferrand. The Directors of the newly formed Districts of Moulins and Le Puy were invited to attend, Brother Benilde among them.

Brother Gemer-Bertin, who was a novice in Clermont at the time, related how one day he and several other novices were cleaning the chapel when Brother Benilde came in. They didn't know who he was but were struck by the unusual reverence with which he genuflected and bowed to the altar. When they pointed out to him that the Blessed Sacrament had been removed from the chapel during the cleaning, the Brother replied, "Even if the Blessed Sacrament isn't here, don't forget that there are the relics of Saint Amator." Later, Brother Hérène, the Director of Novices, told them that they had spoken with "the saintly Brother Benilde."

Family Concerns

The Clermont retreat of 1858 was the occasion of Brother Benilde's first trip back to his native Auvergne in a long time, only the second in the twenty years that he had been at Saugues. It was also to be his last. When the retreat was over, he obtained permission from the Superior General to visit his relatives in Thuret, which was not very far away. There were some family problems that needed attention.

The man of faith was never less than a man. He had a genuine love and concern for others. Despite all of his self-discipline and self-effacement, he seems to have had a satisfying affective life in his relationships with his Brothers, his students, and the people of Saugues. This was also the case in his dealings with his family.

Brother Benilde's father had died in 1841, the year he was assigned to Saugues. His mother, his brother, and his two sis-

ters had already died before that. His principal contact with the family in Thuret was through his cousin, Jean Borrot, with whom he corresponded regularly from Saugues. Much of the correspondence had to do with Brother Benilde's patrimony, his share in the profits from his father's estate.

The capital from the estate was in the hands of the Morton family: his brother-in-law, Pierre Morton, who lived with his recently married son, Jean, and his daughter, Françoise. Brother Benilde had obtained permission over the years to use his share of the annual interest, estimated at about six hundred francs, for the maintenance of an extra Brother at Saugues.

This arrangement with regard to his inheritance corresponds to the advice that he gave to other Brothers about how to deal with their patrimony. He suggested that they leave the capital and the use of the property to their relatives but that they use the interest to support the establishments of the Institute, especially the novitiates.

Brother Benilde's visit in 1858 came at a critical time for his relatives in Thuret. Jean Morton had just been married in April of that year when a terrible fire spread through the town, destroying some thirty houses. Jean Morton wrote to Saugues to say that their holdings had been "annihilated" at a loss of twelve thousand francs. Brother Benilde intended to turn over a good portion of his share of the revenue from the estate, but Jean Borrot convinced him that the estimates of the loss had been exaggerated and that this was not really necessary.

The presence of their saintly relative among them was a kind of spiritual retreat for Jean Borrot and the Mortons. He brought his own sense of the presence of God with him into their homes. He urged all of them to trust in Providence, to persevere in virtue, and in general to share in his vision of faith. He encouraged Jean Borrot in his political ambitions, predicting accurately that he would one day become mayor of the town. He met and became friends with the new pastor of the parish, Father Barrat, who was to be successful in 1880 in having a school of the Brothers established in Thuret.

The visit lasted only two days. Jean Morton drove his uncle in the family carriage as far as Clermont-Ferrand. From there

Brother Benilde made his way back to Saugues. The family would never see him again.

Chronic Illness

Brother Benilde never really enjoyed good health during all of the years that he was at Saugues. Very early on, he had to give up part of his teaching duties and ask for another Brother to help out. The chronic physical problems were due for the most part to rheumatism and arthritis that eventually paralyzed his left shoulder. This condition was no doubt aggravated by the long and severe winters in Saugues with no central heating either in the house or in the school.

As early as 1845, the superiors ordered Brother Benilde to go to take the baths at the hot springs in Bagnols, which was not far away in Lozère. He returned there annually from 1856 on, usually staying for a period of two weeks. Father Besse quoted a letter that Brother Benilde wrote to one of the Brothers:

> The force of obedience takes me away from my community so that they can cook me alive here in the course of these treatments. The thought that I am doing the holy will of God makes it all bearable. They can roast me here as long as they like.

If obedience took him away from the community for a brief respite, nothing could take him away from his fidelity to prayer and community observance. Brother Herlin testified: "Whenever he went to take the baths at Bagnols for his rheumatism, I heard that he was so exemplary in his manner that people said his presence there made it seem like a parish mission."

Brother Benilde suffered a very serious attack during the school year of 1855. He was accustomed to writing letters on behalf of the relatives of the students from Saugues who had joined the Brothers. One such letter, written on behalf of the blood brothers of Brother Rigobert, was addressed to him on April 10 of that year. In a postscript, Brother Benilde wrote:

I've been stricken here with an illness that consumes me and hardly ever allows me to leave my bed. Unable to talk, I can't do a thing anymore. I sometimes think that death awaits me from one minute to the next.

Evidently he recovered sufficiently from this setback to resume his duties. In the following year he wrote this letter to his cousin, Jean Borrot, at Thuret:

J.M.J. Saugues, October 24, 1856

My very dear cousin Jean,

Your very pleasant, much appreciated and rather short letter was an agreeable surprise to me. I was astonished beyond words that in your inquiries about my health you did not say anything about your own, or the health of the family. But, as you say, you will let me know another time some of the important matters you want to share with me. I await them with thanks in advance to a cousin as dependable as you are.

Although my own health is not completely restored, it is better than it was last year. This year I have been able to attend to my duties, although the rheumatism torments me a great deal. But it has not deprived me of the use of my two arms or my speech as it did last year. I don't know how it will go once we get into the worst part of the winter. . . .

When you write to me the next time, let me know how your health is and that of my brother-in-law and all the family. How are things going with all of them and with you?

It is always a pleasure for me to say how grateful I am for the affection you have for me and how completely I desire to reciprocate it. So it is with the most profound tenderness that, embracing you and your family many times over, I am, dear cousin,

Your very grateful servant and cousin,

[Signed] Brother Benilde

Another pair of letters enables us to date the recurrence of the sufferings that would mark the beginning of the end. Dated a year apart, both of these letters are addressed to another of

his former pupils, Brother Nestéros-Emile, in response to the new year's greetings he had sent to his former teacher.

The first of these letters is dated January 11, 1861. In it Brother Benilde makes no mention of his health nor is there any hint that anything is wrong. The first half of the letter is filled with news of a visit he had made to the Brother's family in Beauregard, near Saugues. The second part of the letter is filled with spiritual advice, encouraging the Brother to request to make vows and urging him to be a model of piety and obedience. The letter concludes with this postscript: "There is nothing new in this part of the country. By and large there was a good harvest, especially of potatoes."

The second letter to Brother Emile was sent a year later, again in response to new year's greetings:

J.M.J. Saugues, January 11, 1862

My dear Brother Nestéros-Emile,

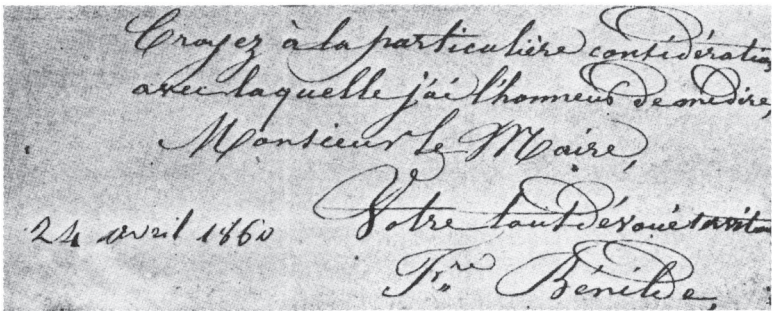
Your very lovely letter was an agreeable surprise and has given me very special pleasure. In return for the very many and precious good wishes you extend to me, I hope that you yourself will enjoy a hundredfold and for many long years all the things you wish for me. That is what I pray for to the Lord every day of my life: that he may bless and grant all of this to the very dear Brother Emile, whom I have always loved and whom I cherish dearly.

Yes, dear brother, let us continue to be true children of the Venerable De La Salle, full of fervor, faithful to the Rule, and full of respect for the superiors. Then we shall surely have a happy new year. . . . Soon we will find ourselves reunited in the glorious new year that is eternity. How happy we shall then be to know that we have used well the years here below.

Pray God that it will be so for me; I, for my part, will not forget you. While awaiting such a fortunate end to it all, embracing you most affectionately in the holy hearts of J.M.J., I am, my very dear Brother Emile,

Your very devoted servant,

[Signed] Brother Benilde



Brother Benilde's signature on a letter to the mayor

Before the end of that new year, 1862, Brother Benilde would indeed be experiencing "the glorious new year that is eternity."

Clairvoyance and Cures

During the years immediately preceding the onslaught of his final illness, Brother Benilde seems to have become clairvoyant, a phenomenon not altogether foreign to human experience in other such gifted persons before and since. The instances cited by the witnesses are simple enough, only premonitions, perhaps, but forceful all the same.

Brother Nil-François, for example, related the tragic story of a mother who came to Brother Benilde to ask him to pray for her sick daughter. He consoled her but finally had to tell her that it was too late. When she got home, the woman found that the daughter had just died.

Brother Natal-Denis, among others, told the story of Brother Gablin. Assigned to the community at Saugues, he raised all sorts of objections to going there. Brother Benilde predicted that he would have a lot to suffer during the ensuing year. And he did.

Jean-Baptiste Pulby related two such instances. One day Brother Benilde told the Brothers to pray for the eternal repose of Brother Elzéar. It was only a few days later that the notice came that he had died. On another occasion, during a violent snowstorm, Brother Benilde told the Brothers that there were

two men from Saugues who were at that moment lost in the storm, mentioning them by name and asking the Brothers to pray for them. Two days later the men returned and related how they had almost perished in the storm.

One prediction that became everybody's favorite concerned Brother Namase. Brother Nil François, told it this way:

> When it comes to predictions, I can tell this story which I got from Brother Namase himself. One day two young Brothers came to Saugues with the idea of spending a few days there in rest and relaxation. Finding the life there much too severe, they decided to leave. Brother Benilde said to them: "Hah! You want to get away from here, do you? Well, that won't prevent one of you from coming back here some day as my successor." And that is what happened: it was Brother Namase-de-Vienne.

There were also some scattered instances of cures effected by the prayers of Brother Benilde. As these began to multiply, he shrugged them off, saying, "It has nothing to do with me; it is all due to the intercession of Saint Joseph." One of the more impressive of these was described by Mme Victoire Chassagne in her testimony during the apostolic process:

> My son, Louis-Michel, who was then seven years old, had his whole face covered with scabs, so much so that he was practically blind. He always kept himself bent over with his head in his hands and we weren't even able to get him to eat. Someone suggested that we try washing him with a mother's milk but that produced no results. The child wouldn't let anyone touch him. I consulted a doctor about the case, but he wasn't able to provide any relief for the child either.
>
> Then—I think it was at the suggestion of Mlle Saugues, the sister of the pastor, Father Saugues—I brought the child to Brother Benilde. When the Brother saw me he said: "That will be no problem. Go wash the boy in the river."
>
> I had to do this only twice. The boy didn't cry and he let me do it. On the second morning the scabs fell off and since then he has never had any problem with his eyes.

One final "miracle" story, this one from the testimony of Brother Benilde-Martyr, helps to date the onset of the terminal stages of Brother Benilde's illness:

> I believe that Brother Benilde had the gift of foreseeing the future. It was he who sent me to the novitiate at Le Puy. As I was getting ready to leave, he embraced me and said: "You will probably be the last one I will ever send to the novitiate." That was on May 5, 1862.
>
> I was in fact his last novice because he fell mortally ill during the last days of May.

Terminal Illness

Three of the Brothers who joined the community at Saugues in the last years of Brother Benilde's life came to testify during the canonical process. They were able to supply the details of the saint's last illness. These Brothers were Brother Natal-Marie, sent to Saugues as an "aide" in August 1861; Brother Narcisse-Marie, an older man who had to be persuaded to accept an assignment at Saugues that year as teacher of the senior class; and Brother Herlin, the Sub-Director of Novices at Le Puy, who was sent to take over the duties of the ailing Director at Saugues during the final months. Still in the community were Brothers Nomelin-Jean and Nabor-Victor.

The first sign to indicate that there was something seriously wrong came on a Thursday walk. Brother Natal-Marie described the incident:

> His last illness began a short time before the month of May. He led us out for our weekly walk as usual. Each of us had his book of songs. Brother Director always enjoyed music and he took advantage of the weekly outing to have us practice the songs.
>
> On that particular day he had barely sung a stanza or two when he suddenly lost his voice. He tried several times to start again but he couldn't; he just couldn't regain the use of his voice. Nevertheless he indicated to the Brothers that they should continue to sing their songs.

Some days later he was obliged to take to his bed and the disease advanced rapidly. I believe it was cancer of the liver.

That was around the feast of Pentecost. Unable to join the Brothers for the traditional renewal of vows on Trinity Sunday, he asked to do so from his bed. Again, Brother Natal-Marie:

During his last illness, on the feast of the Holy Trinity, Brother Benilde had us bring him a copy of the Rule so that he could renew his vows. Once he had the book in his hands he broke into tears.

Brother Nabor, who has since died, asked him three times, "Why are you crying?" After the third time he replied: "I'm crying because I have not observed this holy Rule well enough." All the same, I never saw him violate any part of it.

In the early days of his confinement to his room, Brother Benilde tried as best as he could to struggle against the debilitating disease and the pain it caused him. Whenever he was able, he would get up to join the community or even try to make it to the parish church. When he could no longer get to Mass, he would face in the direction of the church and follow the services in his memory and imagination with as much devotion as if he were physically present.

Meanwhile he insisted that the routine of the community and the school go on as usual. To make himself useful, he spent his time mending the clothes of the Brothers or washing the "bas," the long woolen stockings that religious men wore in those days in place of trousers under the cassock.

As the time for the annual distribution of prizes approached, the Brothers were fearful that the noisy music rehearsals would disturb him, so they ordered them to stop. But he insisted that they continue. Far from bothering him, he said, the sound of music gave him great pleasure.

Letter Writing

For a while he was able to continue writing letters. One of the last went to his friend and protégé, Brother Nestéros-Emile:

> His last letter to me was dated June 11, 1862. This letter was in response to another letter that I had written to my father to let him know that, because of certain problems I was having, I had made up my mind to join the Trappists. My father showed the letter to Brother Benilde who wrote to tell me that this was a temptation from the evil one, that he was convinced that my vocation to the Brothers was genuine.
>
> With regard to the difficulties I was having, he closed with these words: "What are all the pains of this life compared to the rewards which God has reserved for those who persevere to the end?"

When asked by those around him about his pain, Brother Benilde replied with expressions such as these: to Brother Herlin, "It is a cross of straw"; to Brother Nomelin-Jean, "I only suffer what God wants me to. It is nothing. We all have to suffer something to expiate our sins." He seemed more concerned about the trouble he was giving those who attended him, and he would kiss the hand of anyone who did him the smallest service.

To those at a distance, however, he was somewhat more open in his letters, and he did not hesitate to communicate what he was suffering. To the Director of Novices at Le Puy, he wrote: "I am sorely afflicted. The lamentations of Jeremiah and the complaints of Job are appropriate to the state that I am in."

By July 7, he was no longer able to write at length, so he dictated the following lines to his cousin Jean Borrot at Thuret:

> I can hardly ever get up out of bed, that is how sick I am. . . . Also, you will not be able to count on me to lend a hand with the problems of my nephew and my niece after their marriage. . . . I don't forget them in my prayers as I ask God to bless and protect them. I embrace you, your family, my

brother-in-law, his son Jean and his daughter Françoise, and his new grandchild.

Then in a postscript he added:

> P.S. I will never recover from this illness. I am writing these few words myself here on my bed. . . . I am very close to making the great crossing from time into eternity. I hope to do so in the grace and love of Jesus, my Savior, of Mary, and of Saint Joseph. My sickness leaves me very exhausted with sharp pains in my side that never leave me.
>
> —Brother Benilde

Not all of his suffering came from the physical pain. Brother Natal-Marie, among others, had this story to tell:

> An old retired priest, an eccentric sort of person, came to see him one day and spoke to him at length about the rigor of God's judgments. This harangue made a deep impression on Brother Benilde and troubled him painfully. When we came back from school, he asked us to go to the library and to find a book that treated of the mercy of God and read it to him. I sensed that this reading restored his calm.

The Final Days

Toward the end, Brother Benilde agreed to allow the visiting nurses who belonged to the third order of the Trinitarians to come to care for him so that the Brothers could get some rest. He sought and received permission from the bishop to receive Communion every day. According to Brother Natal-Marie, this was such a moving experience for Father Saugues, the pastor, that he would break into tears while giving him Communion, barely able to recite the liturgical formulas.

The end came rather quickly. The events of the final days left an indelible impression etched on the memories of all those who witnessed them. The best way to share in this experience is to read of the testimony of those who were there. Thus, Brother Narcisse-Marie:

Three weeks before his death, he decided that he wanted to go once more to the parish church. He went there in his stocking feet, since he was no longer able to get his shoes on his feet. I went with him, supporting him with my arms. Once he was in the church, he prostrated himself on the floor and prayed. On the way home he said to me: That is the last time someone will lead me to the church. The next time they'll be carrying me in.

Father Besse:

The last time Doctor Tardieu visited him, Brother Benilde asked him, "What do you think of my condition?" He replied: "My dear Brother, this is probably the last time that I will see you." "Thank you," said Brother Benilde and he kissed the doctor's hand.

Father Arthur Tardieu:

My father told me that when Brother Benilde asked him whether he had long to live, he replied, "I know that you are brave and that I can tell you the truth. It will soon be over." Brother Benilde thanked him, not only for this occasion but also for all the services he had rendered the community, adding that he would remember the doctor in the next life.

Brother Nomelin-Jean:

He received extreme unction with great devotion. It was administered by Father Raveyre, the assistant pastor. . . . Brother Benilde followed the prayers of the liturgy attentively. When he asked pardon of the bystanders for any bad example he might have given them, I did not catch what he said but I saw that everyone was in tears. The room was full of people. Once they had left he asked to be left alone; he wanted to commune with Jesus. He lay there without moving, his eyes fixed on the crucifix on the wall. You could see that he was all absorbed in God.

Father Raveyre:

I can say that he bore his suffering with the patience of an

angel and he never faltered. He asked for and received the last sacraments. After he had received the Viaticum, someone asked me to see if he would give his blessing to all those present. He protested that he was unworthy but finally yielded to my request as his confessor.

There were a great many people in attendance. If his little cell had been big enough, I think the whole town would have been there. His blessing was received with visible signs of sincere veneration.

I think I remember that he was concerned that he would have to render to God an account of all the children he had had under his charge, but without any unusual sign of anxiety.

Brother Natal-Marie:

A short time before he died, I think it was the night before, he asked the Brothers to recite the prayers for the dying. The Brother who was to lead the prayers took a long time to find the page. Brother Benilde took the book himself and immediately opened it to the right place.

The Death of a Saint

Two slightly different accounts of Brother Benilde's death were given at the diocesan process thirty-four years later. Brother Nomelin-Jean remembered it this way:

He died on August 13, 1862. I was at Saugues at the time but I didn't seem him actually die. It was about seven o'clock in the morning and we were at breakfast. The Brother who had relieved me at his bedside did not even notice that he had breathed his last. When I went back upstairs this Brother said to me, "Let him sleep." I went in to look at him and realized he was dead.

Brother Narcisse-Marie insisted that he was there:

I was the only one with him at the time and I'm the only one in a position to describe the circumstances. Father Besse says that all the Brothers were in the garden. How-

ever, I was with him. He had received communion at about six o'clock and he died at just about seven in the morning.

Shortly before he died I had offered him something to drink but he said that he wasn't thirsty. I said to him: "Your rheumatism is really bothering you." "Yes," he replied.

At that moment he stretched out his right leg, something he never used to do since he had a slight paralysis in that leg. He died without any struggle, without pain, joining his hands, and fixing his gaze on the crucifix on the wall.

I went at once to call the Brothers who were in the dining room and I said to them, "He just breathed his last." Then Brother Nabor-Victor and Brother Herlin dressed the body and brought it to the chapel. Then I went to take charge of the children.

Melanie Merle:

I remember that Brother Benilde died on a Friday and was buried on the feast of the Assumption. When my mother came back from the market she told me that when they first heard that he had died people broke into tears and kept saying over and over, "The saint is dead."

Wake and Funeral

The wake and the funeral brought out the whole town, from the dignitaries to the humblest of townspeople. A composite picture can be drawn from the recollections of those who were there. Since each of the witnesses adds a particular detail to help fill out the picture, it is best to read of their accounts in their own words. First, Brother Narcisse-Marie:

He was buried on the feast of the Assumption. The crowd was so great, in spite of the bad weather, that the church could not hold them all. The entire population of Saugues, including the mayor, was present. The coffin was carried to the cemetery by a group of former students who vied with one another for this honor.

Marie Bastet:

The body of Brother Benilde was buried in the cemetery at

Saugues and the funeral was held in the parish church which was much to small to hold all those who came in spite of the driving rain. This gathering was made up of all sorts of people, rich and poor alike. I don't think that the Brothers had anything to do with the large turnout; it was due rather to the initiative of the people themselves.

Brother Nomelin-Jean:

The funeral was a solemn occasion. The former students felt privileged to carry the coffin of their old teacher. You might say that the whole town of Saugues and all the people of the surrounding countryside were there for the burial, in spite of a torrential rain. As they followed him to his final resting place, many of the people invoked him saying, "Saint Benilde, pray for us."

I can vouch for the fact that all the important people in town assisted at the obsequies along with the common people. We ourselves did nothing to assemble such a crowd; it was all quite spontaneous.

Brother Benilde-Martyr:

He was buried on August 15. From what I heard from the people at Saugues, in spite of a torrential rain the head of the procession had already arrived at the cemetery, a kilometer away, before the body had even left the church.

Melanie Merle:

I remember his burial very well; I was present for it. The rain fell heavily but there were many people all the same. A eulogy had been prepared and was supposed to be given at the cemetery but it had to be cancelled because of the rain.

Father Besse:

He was buried in the cemetery at Saugues called La Gardette. He was buried a short distance from the chapel to the left of the entrance.

The last word is from Brother Natal-Marie: "When he died, everyone said he was a saint." A saint he evidently was. But dead? Not really.

9
Life After Death

The preface for the Mass of Christian Burial has this expression: "For your faithful ones, O Lord, life is not taken away but only changed." Most of the time Christians have to take this on faith. In the case of those who knew Brother Benilde, however, there were impressive signs that the saint who had died had entered into a new life and could be counted upon to intercede for those whose invoked his name.

Signs of Life

Extraordinary phenomena began to occur almost at once. His nephew, Jean Morton, related how one night his sister Françoise and her husband were awakened by a brilliant and mysterious white light that illuminated the whole house for about a half hour. A day or two later, they received the news at Thuret that Brother Benilde had died.

There was another astonishing event on the day of the funeral. Brother Nomelin-Jean described the cure of Marie Mazet, a tertiary of Saint Dominic. She had been confined to her home for years, unable to walk or move about easily. Regretting that she had been unable to visit the Brother during his last illness, she managed to get to the front door of her house to watch the funeral procession go by. At the sight of the coffin, she invoked Brother Benilde to ask for help in her affliction. All of a sudden she felt a surge of strength in her limbs and found that she was able to walk. She joined the procession for the rest of the way to the cemetery and never had any problem walking after that.

Events such as these were nothing new to the people of Saugues, who already had great faith in the intercessory power of Brother Benilde, even while he was still alive. Now they were convinced that they had an intercessor of their own in

heaven. The favored instrument for this purpose was a small crucifix that had belonged to Brother Benilde and was the prized possession of the Bastet family.

Testifying in the apostolic process on October 19, 1904, Marie Bastet, then sixty-two years old, related the story of how the crucifix came to the family:

> My father was the one who made his coffin. When the time came to close the coffin, Brother Nabor gave my father the crucifix that had been placed in Brother's hands during the wake. Brother Nabor kept the rosary for himself. He replaced both the crucifix and the rosary with new ones just before they closed the coffin.
>
> This little crucifix was often in the hands of Brother Benilde during his last illness. I don't know whether or not he wore it regularly before that. It is a small crucifix with an ivory figure about two inches long. It opens up in the back on a kind of hinge and is closed by a little clasp, which has since been lost. I think someone may have taken it off as a relic.

On the occasion of the solemn introduction of the cause of Brother Benilde into the court of Rome in 1903, Father Billot waxed eloquent on the wonders worked through this little crucifix: "When people kissed it and venerated it, fevers diminished, pains disappeared, and internal disorders were no longer a threat. When it was brought to hardened sinners, they repented before they died."

When she appeared before the apostolic tribunal in 1904, Marie Bastet had the crucifix with her. She also had a list of some twenty people to whom she had loaned it during the course of the previous two years, with an account of the cures that were effected. She noted that every time she gave it to someone, she made a secret mark so that they couldn't substitute another one for it.

The grave site, too, became the scene of almost continual pilgrimages from the day Brother Benilde was laid to rest in the rain-soaked earth. Mothers often brought their sick children there because the intercessory power of the Brother was

known to be particularly effective in these cases. The flowers and herbs that had been planted around the grave were valued as relics. People would gather the leaves to make a kind of tea that was credited with many cures.

As these visits to the cemetery continued over the years and new interments required a better arrangement of the available space, it became necessary to create a passageway around the chapel. The municipal council decided to give the Brothers a new plot next to the central cross that dominated the cemetery.

Late one night in 1872, the remains of Brother Benilde and three other Brothers were quietly exhumed to make room for the new pathway. The grave digger found that all of the coffins had deteriorated. The bones of Brother Benilde were wrapped in his robe, which was still intact, and reburied in the new plot.

The new grave site continued to attract the people of Saugues. The memory of the Brother was kept very much alive with no diminution in the spiritual and temporal favors that were granted through his intercession. Eventually, the former students of the school decided that it was time to erect a more suitable monument. This made it necessary to determine the precise location of the Brother's mortal remains.

During this period, Brother Namase-de-Vienne had become Director of the school and community at Saugues, just as Brother Benilde had predicted many years earlier. In November 1884, he wrote to Brother Noël-Denis as follows:

> On the 6th of this month, three Brothers from Le Cambon came at my invitation to exhume the precious relics of the venerated Brother Benilde. After having implored the light of the Holy Spirit, we went to the cemetery. Paparic had opened the grave and stopped digging when he found the clothing in which the bones had been placed.
>
> We then made certain that we had the right remains: the curved spinal column, the ribs, the skull covered with the calotte, the leg bones covered still with the stockings.
>
> We gathered together everything that looked as if it had belonged to Brother Benilde and placed it in a casket of white wood. . . . This casket was then placed in the center of

a small excavation and sealed with the tombstone which you sent us.

Brother Namase was concerned that no one should be able to steal what someday might become a precious relic. However, he himself took away one arm bone and a piece of the robe, which he cut up for distribution. Brother Namase also related to his correspondent that the visits to the tomb were continuing and so were the many remarkable cures.

The money raised by the former pupils proved to be enough to erect a rather tall tombstone surmounted by a cross. The inscription read: "To the memory of the venerated Brother Benilde, first Director of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at Saugues, died in the odor of sanctity, August 13, 1862—*Requiescat in pace*—'The memory of the just one will be everlasting.' "

It was no doubt the publicity surrounding these events that led Father Frédéric Besse to write the biography of the man who had been his Director during the years that he lived as a member of the Institute in the community at Saugues. The booklet, consisting of 155 pages, was published in 1886. By that year, therefore, Brother Benilde had acquired a memorial in stone and another in a printed text to add to the living memory in the hearts of the people of Saugues.

The Road to Canonization

As Georges Rigault remarks in his biography, it was a long road that led from the funeral in Saugues to the beatification in Rome. But there was continuity and development in the movement forward. We have seen its beginning with the townspeople of Saugues and how it increasingly involved the local Brothers. Before long the entire Institute would become involved, then the Roman authorities in the Congregation of Rites. Finally, the popes themselves, from Leo XIII in 1903 to Paul VI in 1967, would be called upon to authenticate the various stages in the canonical process.

In 1888, John Baptist de La Salle was "raised to the honors of the altar," to use the traditional expression, in a solemn

ceremony of beatification presided over by Pope Leo XIII in the large hall over the main portico of Saint Peter's in Rome. This event prompted the superiors of the Institute to begin to consider other candidates for such honors among the faithful followers of the Blessed De La Salle. High on the list was the saintly Director of Saugues.

As if to give fresh impetus to such a movement, a medically certified cure took place in favor of Brother Nestéros-Emile. It may be remembered that he had been a protégé of Brother Benilde and the addressee of several of his letters. In 1894, at the age of fifty-five, he developed a very painful double hernia as the result of an accident. A large barrel filled with water had fallen on top of him when the wheelbarrow he was pushing overturned.

The Brother tended to be shy about such matters, so it was a long time before Brother Emile got to a doctor. The truss that the doctor prescribed gave some relief, but the hernias were so large that Brother Emile had difficulty sleeping or walking, and he could not do anything involving physical exertion. This condition prevailed for almost three years.

As the truss began to wear out, Brother Emile decided to go to Monistrol on the Allier River to procure a new one. En route he stopped at Saugues to visit his relatives. He also decided to visit the church at Saugues to pray in the pew of the chapel of Saint Joseph that had been so favored by Brother Benilde. Later he stopped at the Brothers' house to ask for a relic, and then he visited the grave.

As he was walking on the road from Saugues towards the Allier River, he became suddenly aware that all of his discomfort had disappeared. He found an isolated spot where he could examine himself, and he found that the two hernias had completely disappeared. The doctor later verified that there was not a trace of the condition that he had previously treated—that never had he seen in an adult hernias of any kind, much less aggravated ones such as these were, spontaneously disappear.

The Institute began to commit itself officially to the cause of Brother Benilde when, in 1895, Brother Gabriel-Marie, Assistant and soon to become Superior General, appointed

Brother Nicanor-Marie of Le Puy to be the Vice-Postulator for the Cause. He would work in close cooperation with the Procurator-General in Rome, who was Brother Robustinien at that time.

One of the first actions to be taken was to provide for the preservation of the remains with a view to their formal identification in the canonical process. In September 1895, therefore, there was yet another exhumation. This time the remains were put in an oaken casket that was then covered with a layer of zinc.

The Diocesan Process

It is not generally realized that in the mind of the Roman Catholic Church, the initiative for canonization must come from below, from the people of God. This reflects the ancient tradition whereby Christians who died as martyrs were recognized and honored by the community of the local church. They were looked upon as heroes of the faith who had merited their heavenly reward. When martyrdom became less common, the practice continued for centuries of recognizing by popular acclamation that certain Christians, after a lifetime of heroic virtue, had merited the same reward and were entitled to be invoked as saints.

Once the Church instituted a more formal process and incorporated it into the canon law (hence "canonization"), the rule remained that the first step had to be taken locally. This procedure is known as the ordinary process because it takes place under the control of the local bishop (technically called the "Ordinary") of the diocese.

The principal function of the ordinary process is to gather information. For that reason it is sometimes referred to as the informative process. In the case of Brother Benilde, this took place at Le Puy between 1896 and 1899. During the course of the investigation, some seventy-five witnesses testified under oath. All of the testimony was recorded by a secretary; a good bit of it has been reproduced in translation in this present volume.

Meanwhile a commission was established in Rome to examine the writings of Brother Benilde. In his case, this was rela-

tively simple. Most of what survived in his own hand consisted of financial accounts and administrative correspondence with his religious superiors. There were a few personal letters to his family and to Brothers who had been his students. Some of these also have been cited earlier in this narrative. Nothing was found in these writings to raise the theological eyebrows of the Roman experts who examined them.

Once the ordinary process was completed at Le Puy, all of the documents and testimony had to be sent to Rome to the Congregation of Rites, as it was then called. The Promoter of the Faith, "the Devil's advocate," then had to sift all of the evidence to find the weak spots in the case.

Finally, a summary volume was prepared and printed containing summaries and/or verbatim excerpts from the testimony, the report on the writings, the objections of the Promoter of the Faith, and the answers to these objections by the Promoter of the Cause. Entitled *Positio super introductione,* this volume was made available to the cardinals and other officials who had to decide whether the case should go any further, that is, whether it should be "introduced" into the court of Rome.

In addition to the *Positio,* postulatory letters had to be solicited from bishops and civil authorities, petitioning the pope to have the case opened in Rome. Then a commission of cardinals reviewed the informative process to determine that everything had been done according to law. After studying the evidence in the *Positio* and weighing the import of the postulatory letters, the commission then made its recommendation to the pope.

While all of this was going on, Pope Leo XIII solemnly canonized Saint John Baptist de La Salle on May 24, 1900. Three years later, the same pope, on April 23, 1903, promulgated the decree approving the ordinary process conducted at Le Puy and all that had been done thus far in the cause of Brother Benilde. This decree marked the formal introduction of the cause into the court of Rome. From that time on, Brother Benilde was to be designated officially with the title of Venerable.

The Apostolic Process

The papal decree inaugurated a new stage in the cause of

Brother Benilde known as the apostolic process. This also took place at Le Puy, but this time under the authority of the Roman (hence "apostolic") officials. The ultimate goal of this apostolic process was to inquire into the quality of the spiritual life of Brother Benilde to determine to what extent his practice of virtue could be considered heroic.

In a sense, the whole investigation had to begin over again. Most of the same witnesses were recalled. This time they were carefully cross-examined by the Roman judges who had read their previous testimony. The questions focused more pointedly on the precise issue of heroic virtue.

Some of the replies make interesting reading as we see the simple folk of Saugues being pressured to fit their testimony into the language and the categories of the Roman court. A common response goes something like this: "I don't know what you mean by that word. All I know is that the Brother was a saint."

Again, all of the testimony taken in the apostolic process was brought to Rome. This time the objections of the Promoter of the Faith were precise and persistent. Altogether there were some twenty specific objections, with the corresponding replies, in the first *Positio super virtutibus* ("On the virtues"), published in 1918.

The objections of the Devil's advocate were basically two. The first was that although Brother Benilde was clearly a virtuous man, there was no strong evidence to show that his virtue was heroic; there was nothing extraordinary about it; he merely did his routine duty, albeit very well. The second objection was that Brother Benilde had been excessively harsh in punishing his pupils, especially in the matter of corporal punishment.

The Promoter of the Faith did not give up easily on these objections. The case dragged on from 1918 until 1927 in a long series of meetings within the Congregation of Rites. The required antepreparatory, preparatory, and general meetings were drawn out and difficult. At one stage it was necessary to have a new edition of the *Positio super virtutibus* prepared and printed.

Finally, on January 6, 1928, Pope Pius XI signed the decree

acknowledging that Brother Benilde had indeed practiced virtue to an heroic degree. On that occasion the pope himself addressed the two objections that had been raised.

The first objection was the more substantive of the two, and the pope treated it at length. He developed the theme of the *terribile quotidianum,* the terrible daily grind, the humdrum routine of ordinary tasks. He said: "How much there is that is not ordinary and not routine in the ordinary daily routine! It is that routine that is appropriately called the *terribile quotidianum.*"

Pope Pius went on to say that "sanctity does not consist in doing extraordinary things, but in doing ordinary things extraordinarily well." It might be noted that this same principle was exemplified in the "little way" of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who had just been canonized three years before in 1925 by the same pope.

With regard to the second objection, the pope remarked, "How necessary it is to be severe in dealing with young boys if you expect to keep them in discipline, habits of study, and morality." He might also have added that the bulk of the testimony affirmed that the severity of Brother Benilde was tempered with justice, kindness, and concern for the person of the child and that he never lost control of himself in a disciplinary situation.

The Beatification Process

In the language and the thought of the Church, the cause of Brother Benilde had now reached the stage when human testimony had done all that it could. Now it remained to wait upon some divine sign, some extraordinary events called "miracles," to serve as divine testimony that the servant of God was worthy to be imitated and invoked by all the people of God. At that time, church law required that two such miracles, carefully examined and certified, were required for beatification and two more for canonization.

Miracles with varying degrees of supernatural quality had been taking place ever since the death of Brother Benilde. There are some twenty pages of them recorded in the *Positio* of 1918. Among the best documented is the account that Brother

Nestéros-Emile gave of the cure of his double hernia. It occupies four pages, and the collaborative testimony of the doctor covers two more.

By 1928, however, these cures were considered as too remote in time to stand up under fresh critical examination. It was decided that it would be better to wait. Meanwhile, the Institute would pray. Brothers everywhere were encouraged to invoke the intercession of the Venerable Brother in the hope and expectation that signs of divine approval would not be long in coming.

Within a few years, there were two outstanding examples ready to be submitted to the Congregation of Rites for examination. One took place in Spain in 1931 when Brother Joaquin-Donato was cured of a brain tumor; the other in Italy in 1933 with the cure of Brother Valeriano from a life-threatening complex of stomach disorders. The cure of Brother Joaquin is the more dramatic of the two, and it is interesting to read of his own account:

> I fell sick early in April. From the beginning the doctors diagnosed a brain tumor in the cerebellum. The diagnosis was that I did not have long to live.
>
> The symptoms were as follows: immediate vomiting as soon as I took any nourishment orally; progressive loss of the use of all my external senses, with total loss of eyesight since the tumor affected the optic nerve; inability to remain standing, much less to walk; a temperature of 89 degrees and a pulse of 35 to 40. According to the doctor, that alone would suffice to bring on death. The smallest ray of light would increase the pain considerably. When the suffering became particularly acute, I would lose consciousness. . . .
>
> On the 20th of April, 1931, about midday, they brought me to Cambrils . . . to get ready to bury me. I arrived there at two o'clock. At three o'clock they began to dig the grave where, according to all the calculations of science, I was soon to be put into the earth.
>
> On April 22, the junior novices of Cambrils, at the suggestion of their Director, an old confrere since we had taken the religious habit together, began a novena to Brother

Benilde in accord with the recommendation of the Superior General. It was a particularly fervent novena. . . .

On the eve of the "day of the miracle," April 30, the Brother Director came to me and said: "Brother Joaquin, we are making a novena to Brother Benilde . . . to obtain your complete cure." I replied: "Thank you . . . but let me die." I was happy enough to have persevered in the Institute.

He said: "No, I command you to join in the novena and to ask for your cure." I obeyed, and from that moment on I began to pray for that intention. . . .

Before going to bed for the night, I asked the Brother Director General to send to bed the infirmarian who used to keep watch during the night because he himself was not feeling well. . . .

Then I began to be tormented with pain. That was a terrible night and I shall never forget it. I suffered without losing consciousness for a single moment. It seemed to me as if two swords were cutting my brain into pieces.

The spasms of pain got to the point where I began to feel the approach of death. I put the picture-relic to my lips. I asked the Venerable Servant of God the grace of resignation during this torture and to prepare me to appear before God.

I also took the scapular, my rosary and the crucifix and pressed them to my heart. I made an act of resignation in the face of death as atonement for my sins, those of my family, and my present and former students.

I had scarcely finished when I felt an extraordinary sense of well-being; all the torments had disappeared! I thought I was dreaming. . . .

Then suddenly I was overcome with a tremendous hunger. . . . I knew then that I was really cured. I thanked God and the Venerable Benilde with all the fervor of my heart. . . . You can imagine how I felt. . . .

When the Brother Director came early the next morning to see whether I was alive or dead, he opened the door very gingerly. "Come in, Brother Director," I said, "I am completely cured."

"Be quiet," he said, "be quiet." But I continued to cry out about the miracle. . . . He finally entered and saw that I was not delirious but perfectly normal.

"One favor, Brother Director. I would like to receive holy communion. Then I want a full breakfast because I'm dying of starvation."

Once I was up, I went to visit the grave they had prepared for me in the cemetery. Then I took a tour of the property. At the end of the day I was able to join the community for the religious exercises.

This cure and that of Brother Valeriano, which occurred under similar circumstances, were submitted to the judgment of a board of four medical doctors. After a long series of detailed inquiries over a period of ten years, the two miracles were accepted by the Congregation of Rites as proof of "God's action" in the matter. That was on February 16, 1947. On June 5 of

Brothers Valeriano and Joaquin-Donato with descendents of Pierre Morton at the beatification ceremony in Saint Peter's in Rome

that year, Pope Pius XII promulgated the decree "de tuto," indicating that it was "safe" to proceed with the beatification.

Blessed Benilde

The ceremony of beatification took place in Saint Peter's Basilica on April 4, 1958. It was a spectacular affair. The basilica was illuminated with the dozens of chandeliers that used to be hung from the ceiling on such occasions. (These have since been replaced by brilliant, permanently installed arc lights.) The crowd was estimated at some sixty thousand pilgrims. There were actually two ceremonies, one in the morning, the other in the late afternoon.

During the morning service, the decree of beatification was read in the presence of the cardinals and bishops. At that moment, a curtain was drawn to reveal a huge illuminated tapestry depicting Brother Benilde being received into heavenly glory. This had been hung high in the apse in the center of Bernini's golden sunburst that surrounds the west window above the chair of Peter. The humble Brother had finally been accorded what was then known as the "glory of Bernini." (This practice also has since been abandoned.) After the unveiling of the tapestry, a Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated.

In the afternoon, Pope Pius XII was carried into the basilica on the *sedia gestatoria* to deliver in French a panegyric of the new blessed. This was followed by solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Kneeling in the center of the apse on either side of the pope were the Superior General, Brother Athanase-Emile, and the Postulator of the Cause, whose persistence had brought it to success, Brother Leone di Maria. The Benediction concluded with a rousing rendition of Handel's "Alleluia Chorus."

There was one embarrassing moment during the pope's address, which, as was his custom, he had written himself and was delivering from memory. At one point his mind went blank. After an awkward moment or two, he recovered his train of thought and concluded without further difficulty. When the Brother Superior went to thank him in the name of the Institute, he apologized for the lapse. "I'm sorry to have done so

poorly," Brother Leone heard him say, "but I was up a good part of the night writing it."

The ceremonies in Saint Peter's were followed during the ensuing days by a triduum of thanksgiving in the church of Saint Louis of the French in Rome. Similar ceremonies took place in Le Puy, in Saugues, and generally throughout the Lasallian world.

The Canonization Process

As the excitement attendant on the beatification died down, the Institute returned to the *terribile quotidianum* of business as usual. Before anything further could be done to move the cause for canonization forward, it was necessary once again to pray and await some new testimony from the other side of the barrier that divides eternity from time.

It was not that spiritual and temporal favors of various kinds were lacking. But such minor miracles, as they might be called, were not of the kind likely to be effective in the canonical process. Finally in 1956, there was a striking cure that did in the long run survive the scrutiny of the Roman congregation.

The beneficiary was a widow named Mme Arbousset. Since 1942, she had served in the kitchen of the Brothers' school in Nîmes in southern France. During the course of the year 1956, her health began to deteriorate to the point that she could no longer eat solid food. She had lost more than forty pounds by the time her only son was able to persuade her to see a doctor. She was sixty-seven years old at the time.

It was decided that an operation was needed. Aware of the seriousness of her condition, she said a tearful farewell to the Brothers in these words: "I am resigned to die. I have already said the prayers for the dying on my knees and I have put my life into the hands of God."

After the initial incision, the surgeon found that cancer had spread throughout her whole body: her stomach, esophagus, pancreas, aorta, and diaphragm had all been infected. The operation went no further; it was evident that nothing more could be done. The doctor notified the Brothers and her son that her situation was terminal.

Brother Charles Henry, Superior General, and Brother Agustin-Maria at the 1967 canonization

She lingered between life and death for four months. She had a picture-relic of Brother Benilde with her all the time. In her own words: "I prayed to him with fervor and confidence. I told him that he ought to do a favor for me and my son since I had always been like a mother to the Brothers. . . . I had the nurses put the picture-relic on the wound every time they changed the dressing." The Brothers and the students of the school joined in the prayers to Blessed Benilde.

Little by little, without medicine or treatment of any kind, Mme Arbousset began to improve. Her appetite returned, and she gained weight. It was soon apparent that she had been cured. She made a pilgrimage of thanksgiving to Lourdes in 1958 and several times visited Saugues to thank Brother Benilde. A medical and X-ray examination in June of 1959 revealed that she had completely recovered without any trace

of the cancer that at one time had spread so extensively throughout her body.

The beneficiary of the second verifiable cure was again a Brother from Spain, this time from Tarragona. His name was Brother Agustin-Maria. After the failure of three operations to cure serious gastrointestinal problems, the doctors gave up all hope of restoring his vital functions and determined that death could come at any time. They removed all of the life-support systems so that the Brother could die in peace.

On that very day, March 25, 1958, Brother Joaquin-Donato came to visit the dying man and encouraged him to pray to Brother Benilde as he had done. That night Brother Agustin realized that his system had begun to function normally and that he had been cured. Subsequent radiological examinations verified the fact. By the end of the Easter recess, the Brother was back at his normal duties, and he remained in good health thereafter.

These two cases were presented to the newly constituted medical commission of the Congregation of Rites. There were long discussions and delays and a surprising number of negative votes. The objection to recognizing a miraculous element in the cure of Mme Arbousset was that it was not instantaneous but gradual. Eventually it was admitted that in the cure of an advanced and generalized cancer, the fact that it happened at all was miraculous enough.

In the case of Brother Agustin, some of the doctors held out the possibility that one or another of the three operations might somehow have had a delayed effect that resulted in the cure. It was finally admitted that if such were the case, the cure would have been effected gradually and not so instantaneously as it actually occurred. It was not until May and June of 1966 that the medical commission finally accepted the two cases as miraculous.

With the official decree of the General Congregation accepted by Pope Paul VI on July 17, 1967, the way was clear to proceed with plans for the canonization. In view of the fact that the second session of the 39th General Chapter of the Institute of the Brothers was due to be held in Rome in the autumn of that year, the Vatican officials agreed to speed the prepara-

Processional banner at the canonization

tions. The Synod of Bishops, the first ever to be held, was also scheduled to meet in Rome that October. It was decided, therefore, to celebrate the closing of the synod and the canonization of Saint Benilde on the same day, Sunday, October 27, 1967, the feast of Christ the King.

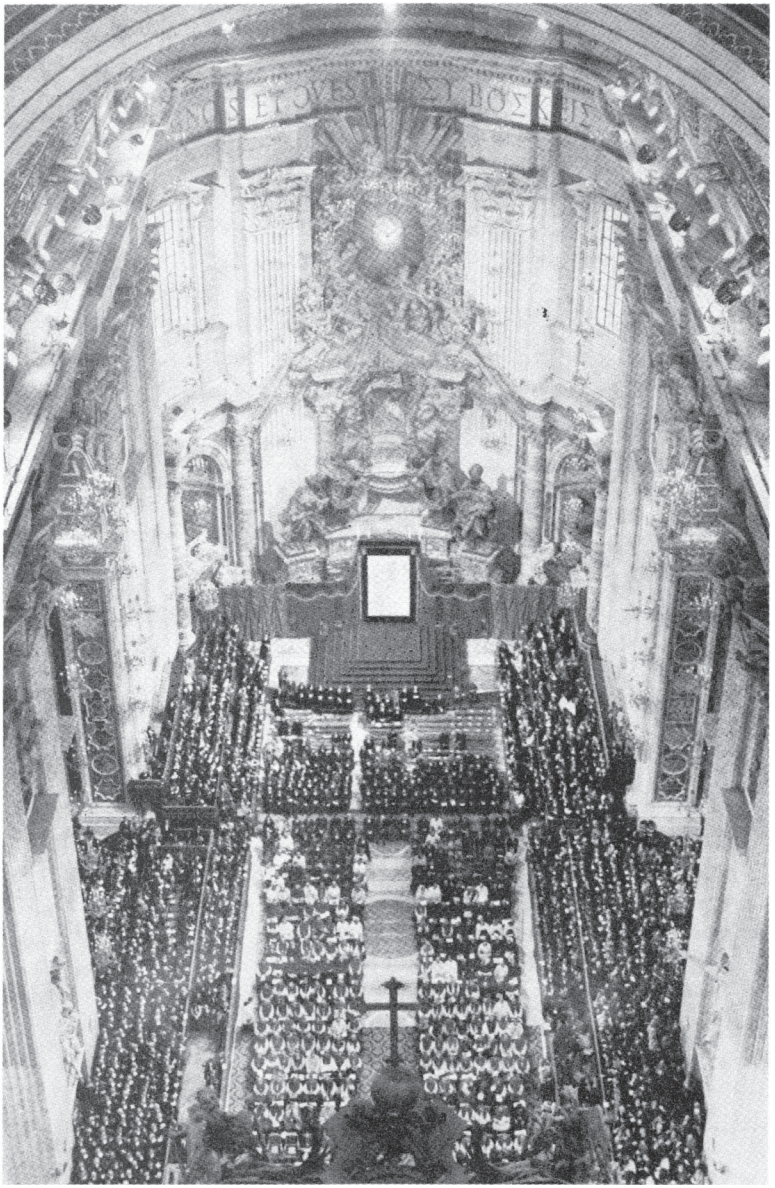
Saint Benilde

The day of the canonization dawned with the first rays of the morning sun illuminating the huge tapestry of Brother Benilde that was hanging over the main entrance to Saint Peter's Basilica. The square was filled with Brothers, students and former students, friends, and benefactors from all over the world, vying with each other to be first into the basilica. Some of the older Brothers were nearly trampled in the mad rush that ensued once the doors were opened. This author was lucky enough to be present among the delegates to the Chapter for whom special seating had been provided.

The cardinals and bishops who had attended the synod, a colorful group clothed in various shades of red and purple, completely filled the center of the long apse behind the papal altar. Crowded into the tribunes on either side of the apse and surrounding the papal altar were Brother Charles Henry, the Superior General, and his council; the delegates to the General Chapter; superiors of the other religious congregations of Brothers; representatives from Le Puy, Saugues, and Thuret; together with the Brothers from Italy and Rome, who have long experience in obtaining preferred seating at Vatican events.

Since the area in the central nave of Saint Peter's is assigned mostly on a first-come, first-served basis, the basilica was completely filled long before the ceremony was scheduled to begin. When that hour arrived, there was what seemed to be an interminable delay. At last the loud speaker blared the news: the Holy Father, who had been ailing for some time with prostate problems, was running a high fever and, under doctor's orders, would be unable to attend. A shock of disappointment, tempered by concern and understanding, ran through the assembly.

The disappointment was overcome by the splendor of the ceremonies themselves. The entrance procession was domi-



The "glory of Bernini" in the apse of Saint Peter's

nated by several large banners depicting scenes from the life of the new saint. These were carried aloft by teams of Brothers. The black robes and white rabats of the Brothers were everywhere visible, probably for the last time on such an occasion.

As the Mass progressed, the decree of canonization and the papal homily were read by cardinals designated to replace the ailing pope. When the ceremonies were over, the crowd poured out into Saint Peter's Square only to find that the morning sun had given way to threatening clouds. It seemed for a while as if the scene in the cemetery at Saugues was going to repeat itself.

It was a day of mixed emotions, of joy and disappointment, of celebration and serious reflection. The long road leading from Saugues to Rome had finally been traversed. The humble Brother from the Auvergne, who had not even wanted to be remembered, had finally been granted not only heavenly but earthly glory in a form that few can ever achieve.

What Remains?

Once Brother Benilde was proclaimed a canonized saint, a new significance was attached to his mortal remains, from then on officially designated as relics. In a way this negates the traditional language that refers to those who have died as being "laid to rest" in their "final resting place." That is not what usually happens to those who die with a reputation for holiness. It was certainly not the case with the remains of Brother Benilde—or, for that matter, with the relics of De La Salle or the other saintly Brothers Miguel, Solomon, Mutien-Marie, Arnold, and Scubilion.

Especially in the history of the relics of Saints De La Salle, Benilde, and Miguel, there seems to have been a certain restlessness within the decaying corpse to break loose from the earth in which it had been planted, to be an instrument of good beyond the limitations of time and space, to serve as a reminder of the real self through which the flesh and bones had once been animated. In all of these cases, there was no lack of historical circumstances and living human agents to keep the inert relics on the move.

The story of the three successive exhumations of the mortal remains of Brother Benilde in the cemetery at Saugues has already been told in an earlier chapter. Further disturbance of the proverbial final resting place was yet to be required. According to the church law in force at the time, the formal identification of the relics was an important part of the canonical process once the cause reached an advanced stage.

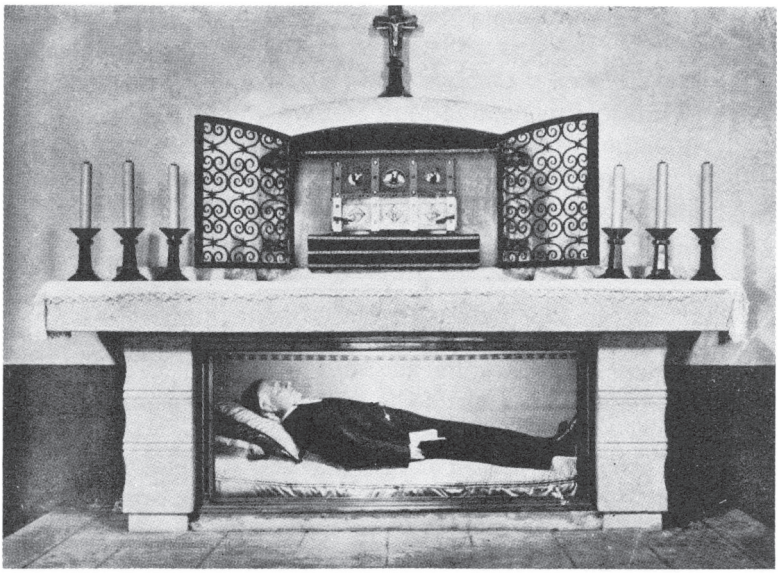
Accordingly there was a new exhumation in December 1932. It was then decided that the time had come to transfer the relics of Brother Benilde from the cemetery to the church in Saugues. In a procedure that lasted until the following April, a medical expert examined carefully all that remained and set aside anything that seemed not to pertain to Brother Benilde.

The oaken casket was then resealed and enclosed in a lead box with an ivory plaque inscribed with the name, origin, and date of death of Brother Benilde. This was buried in a chapel off the central nave of the church and covered with a stone slab to await further developments from Rome.

As soon as all of the obstacles to the beatification were cleared away and the miracles had been approved, a date was set for the final identification of the remains, which took place on April 30, 1947. This was a very solemn affair. The proceedings were under the authority of the Bishop of Le Puy, Bishop Joseph-Marie Martin, who later was to become the Cardinal Archbishop of Rouen. Present as witnesses were the Superior General, Brother Athanase-Emile; two Brother Assistants; the Postulator General, Brother Leone di Maria; and Canon Bertrand, the pastor at Saugues.

The ceremony was mostly a formality because a team of three doctors had already examined the relics beforehand. There was one incidental but interesting outcome of the examination. The doctors were able to determine from the measurement of the bones the exact height of Brother Benilde: he had been just short of five feet tall!

The relics were then entrusted to the care of Canon Bertrand. As part of the beatification celebration, they were enshrined in an elaborately designed reliquary and carried in procession through the streets of Saugues. Then they were set permanently on top of the altar in a chapel just opposite the



The altar and relics of Saint Benilde in the church at Saugues

side door at the center of the church. Beneath the altar behind a glass panel was placed an effigy of the Brother lying at rest and dressed in his religious habit. The relics so enshrined were left to remain in what was thought to be their final resting place as the object of veneration for all the years to come. But yet another adventure awaited them.

The "Star" of the Sea, 1983

In the spring of 1983, a dramatic and almost unbelievable series of events surrounded the relics of Saint Benilde such as to rival any of the previous miracle stories. The paragraphs that follow are a translation and adaptation of the account given by Father Bongiraud, the pastor at Saugues, as it was published in the Institute news bulletin, *La Salle Intercom,* no. 34, the issue of September – October 1983.

> It all began on Friday, April 22, 1983, about 6:45 A.M. Madame Chassin came to me in a state of distress as I was going to the chapel of Our Lady to say Mass. She told me something which at first seemed impossible: the reliquary

of Saint Benilde was gone! The niche at the altar of Saint Benilde was empty and the iron grill open. As soon as they were informed the police made a preliminary inspection.

On the afternoon of May 26 I was making some parish visits when an old lady I met told me she had dreamt that the reliquary was in the ocean. Amused and incredulous, I replied that I hoped she was mistaken and told the story to my friends without giving it any importance.

The wait lasted to June 13. Two friendly policemen asked me to accompany them to the station without delay. There was news. When we got there I was told that a commissioner from Biarritz had just telephoned to say that a metal object resembling the reliquary had been found by skin divers at the foot of the "Rocher de la Vierge." The description of the casket and particularly the mention of the still legible inscription "Servus fidelis et prudens" left no doubt as to its identity.

Next day all the papers mentioned this incredible discovery. It was Tuesday, June 14, the 178th anniversary of the birth at Thuret of Pierre Romançon. On June 20 the relics of Saint Benilde made their triumphant return to Saugues.

On July 2 Luis Garcia, Yvan Lopez, Philippe Lesca and his sister, and Gustave Calderon arrived in Saugues to take part in the reinstallation ceremony which was to take place the next day and in which they were to be the heroes. They gave a detailed account of their adventure.

On the afternoon of Friday, June 10, Luis and Yvan went underwater fishing, their favorite sport. Luck was with them for they spotted a rare and highly prized starfish. It tried to escape toward the rocks.

The place is rarely visited because there are no fish there and the undertow of the ocean could dash the diver against the cliffs. That day the sea was like glass and the temptation strong. Luis took the risk and it was then that he noticed a curious object caught among the rocks at a depth of about 30 feet.

Back on land he told Yvan of his find. "Stuck on the rocks down there is a church thing. It's probably Spanish."

Brother Leone Morelli with the divers who recovered the relics from the Atlantic Ocean

They told their companions of their discovery and decided to organize an expedition the next day if the sea remained calm. Conditions were perfect as Philippe Lesca, a champion diver, and Gustave Calderon, a diving instructor, went to the site. They brought with them a buoy capable of supporting a considerable weight.

Gustave, in diving gear, went down to secure the casket which was tottering in a precarious position on the edge of an underwater cliff. On the surface Philippe guided the buoy while the others remained, impatient and curious, on the beach. The police had no difficulty in identifying the casket from the well-known photographs that had been circulated. The very next day, Sunday June 12, the sea became stormy. What would have happened if the reliquary of Saint Benilde had not been found?

Father Bongiraud concluded his account with the reflection that after June 14, 1983, we ought not to be quite so skeptical about the miracle stories from the lives of the saints that used

to be a feature of the second nocturne of the Church's divine office.

What now remains to be said? The immortal soul of Brother Benilde is wrapt in the full and immediate experience of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is the glory of eternal life. The mortal remains of Brother Benilde are once more at rest, enshrined on the altar of the chapel in Saugues. His memory is held in honor and benediction in the Church and in his Institute throughout the world. Perhaps now it is time to ask what it all means.

10
The Medium and the Message

At the conclusion of this account of the life—and afterlife—of Brother Benilde, the teacher-saint, it seems appropriate to ask these questions: What does it all mean? What can a series of miracle stories about an obscure religious teacher from the rural France of more than a century ago have to say to anyone today? Even for disciples of De La Salle, what is the relevance of this holy man for people living a mobile, technological, and secularized global society on the verge of the twenty-first century? What message is there for any of us in the story of the life and canonization of this humble Brother from Saugues?

1862

Different answers have been given over the years to the question of meaning, depending on the times. In the very month and year of the saint's death, Brother Philippe, Superior General, in his circular to the Institute of August 20, 1862, tried to answer that question for the Brothers of his day:

> The worthy Brother Benilde has been one of the most perfect models of simplicity and humility. We do not fear to repeat with the entire population of Saugues, "The saint is dead. He has left us and gone to heaven." In him has been verified the fulfillment of this saying of the divine Master: "Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

That image of simplicity and humility has endured. Properly understood, it still makes sense today. It is a needed antidote to the ambition, competitiveness, and self-sufficiency that dehumanize persons and society in the modern world. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that this is only one side of

Brother Benilde. He was no shrinking violet. He could be forceful and determined; he was unusually effective as a teacher and administrator; he was proud, if not of himself, of his Brothers and his Institute.

1928

The element of truth in Brother Philippe's remarks was taken up, given a somewhat different focus, and developed at length by Pope Pius XI. The occasion was the proclamation on January 6, 1928, of the heroicity of the virtues of Brother Benilde:

> The daily routine, always the same, which always comprises the same tasks, the same situations, the same difficulties, the same temptations, the same weaknesses, the same misery, has been well named the "terrible daily routine."
>
> What strength of soul is needed to protect oneself against this terrible routine that is so wearying, so monotonous, and so suffocating!
>
> What uncommon virtue is needed to accomplish with attention, religious devotion, and interior fervor, the whole range of very common things that fill every day of our lives!
>
> When something extraordinary and exciting occurs, when glorious enterprises are to be undertaken, they stimulate us and reawaken within us our best feelings, our generosity, and the energy that often lies hidden in the depths of our soul. . . . But common, unappealing, daily things provide no relief, nothing praiseworthy, and certainly nothing to excite or fascinate us. . . .
>
> How many times do extraordinary circumstances actually present themselves in the course of our life? Very rarely, in fact. And it would be a sad thing if sanctity were reserved solely to such extraordinary circumstances. What would then become of the greater number of people?
>
> Nevertheless the call to sanctity is addressed to all without exception. Life is a struggle to win a palm of victory that can be obtained only through sanctification. "Be

perfect," said the divine Master, "as your heavenly Father is perfect." "Let him who is just become more justified still."

Here then is the great lesson that this humble servant of God has given to us one more time, that is, to realize that sanctity does not consist in doing extraordinary things but in doing common things in an extraordinary way.

With all due respect to the source of these remarks, to the important truths that they contain, and to their effectiveness in refuting the objections of the Promoter of the Faith, there is a sense in which they exaggerate the routine aspect of the teaching vocation. At its best, teaching can be exciting, as can the challenge to administer a school. There are ever so many incidents in the life story of Brother Benilde to indicate that not everything was routine and that it was not always so terrible.

It was this reference to the "terrible daily grind," however, that was most often cited in the decades after 1928. It found a special echo in the lives of a great number of Brothers. In the circumstances of that time, dominated by economic depression and war, most of the Brothers were overworked. Apart from teaching, there was not much excitement in their lives; the only available ministry was teaching or some form of service within a Brothers' school. There were many cases of "burnout" long before there was a term to describe it.

In those final days before Vatican II, community life could also degenerate into a deadly routine. There was no dialogue, at least not officially, no personal options, and no community search for the divine will. The only expression of the will of God for a Brother or a community was to be found in the Rule and the directives of the superiors. Most of the excitement was provided by attempts, more or less successful, to get around them!

From that perspective, it is easy to understand the popularity of Brother Benilde during those years. His life story in its main outline was not so different from that of many Brothers. His lifestyle, too, including in some instances the enforced observance of the primitive Rule, coincided in part at least with their own experience. The assurance of the pope himself that

this was the way to sanctity provided an authoritative answer to the question of meaning in a life controlled by routine.

1967

As the time for the canonization of Brother Benilde approached, it was clear that a more positive note had to be struck if the meaning of the event was to resonate in a new generation of Christians and of Brothers. In the wake of World War II, Vatican II, and the 39th General Chapter then in progress, rapid and radical change had transformed the world, the Church, and the Institute. The world in which Brother Benilde lived and died, the world in which his cause for canonization had been processed, no longer existed.

In searching for an element of meaning that would straddle both worlds, Brother Charles Henry, the Superior General at the time, saw in the canonization of Brother Benilde an affirmation of the vocation of the teaching Brother. In his preface to the biography of the new saint by Canon Charles Alméras, published in 1967 as a "homage to the members of the General Chapter," Brother Charles wrote:

> For the first time, in the person of Brother Benilde, a teaching Brother is going to receive the signal honor of being raised to the altars. This honor will be conferred upon him, not because he was a founder of a religious congregation, a martyr, or a spiritual author, but simply because he was a teaching Brother who lived his vocation and his apostolate as a teaching Brother to a high degree of perfection.
>
> In canonizing this new saint, the Church proclaims that the vocation of the teaching Brother, for anyone who pursues it, is at one and the same time a road that leads to sanctity and a fruitful means to exercise an apostolate.

At the time Brother Charles Henry wrote these words, vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, including the teaching brotherhoods, were still abundant and flourishing. The impact of Vatican II and the renewal chapters had yet to take hold. We now live in a situation of departures, diminish-

ing numbers entering, and an ever-advancing average age of those who remain.

The teaching profession itself is not now held in high esteem, at least in the sense that it is not attractive to many young people today. In an affluent society there is little to motivate a young person to embrace a career that requires specialized training, long hours, difficult working conditions, and poor pay. Add to this the obligations of religious observance, especially of celibacy, and it is easy to see why the vocation of the teaching Brother is less attractive.

The "vocation crisis," as it is called, is prompting some Brothers to turn to the example and the intercession of Brother Benilde. How did he do it? The context of a First Communion class of rural twelve-year-olds is not available today. Nor are there many elementary schools, or any other kinds of schools for that matter, that are dominated by a community of Brothers. The vocation remains essentially the same, but the opportunities are radically different. The challenge is to search for the deeper secret of Brother Benilde's success and to pray that it will not elude us.

A bolder attempt to find in the canonization a message more suited to the post-Vatican II generation was made by Brother Didier Piveteau. It is particularly appropriate now to rescue his perceptive essay from oblivion. Brother Didier died only recently after a long career as a dynamic leader of the catechetical movement on both sides of the Atlantic.

In an article prepared for the canonization issue of the Institute *Bulletin,* Brother Didier developed the theme of the prophetic import of the canonization:

> The prophetic gesture that a canonization represents often runs the risk of being badly understood or interpreted in much too narrow a sense. The Brothers of the Christian Schools, who rejoice to see one of their own so acclaimed, are very conscious of this. At the moment they are assembled in Rome for their 39th General Chapter in order to study the purpose their Institute serves in today's world and the forms that its apostolic action ought to take.
>
> The Brothers would not wish this canonization to ap-

pear as a sort of recompense for good and loyal service in the past, or even as an encouragement, in the midst of today's uncertainties, to persevere in a specific activity to be accomplished within the framework of narrowly defined Christian institutions.

The Brothers are aware that the message embodied in this canonization goes beyond themselves as a limited audience and that it is addressed, rather, to the whole Church. It is precisely because canonizations are so rare these days, and because of the call to renewal from the Vatican Council, that we are invited to pay careful and sustained attention to this ecclesial gesture, to try to see what the Spirit wants to tell us by this means at this time. . . .

Better than any other commentator, Brother Didier was able to locate the canonization of Brother Benilde in the context of the ecclesiology that emerged out of Vatican II:

For the first time, perhaps, we have had sharply defined for us a life story that provides us with a kind of sanctity that is made to the measure of our time, fashioned out of the labors and the daily life of a man who worked no great miracles and who experienced no other revelation than that which is communicated day after day in the liturgical life of the ecclesial community.

The canonization of Brother Benilde makes explicit in a radical way the lesson already splendidly provided by the glorification of the little saint of Lisieux, a lesson which perhaps was not at that time completely understood, deflected as it was through the prism of historical time.

The life lived by Brother Benilde already belongs to the Church, the Church as it is, a servant Church, a Church of the poor, a Church trying to rid itself of triumphalism, a Church anxious to engage itself in the world in order to bring the world to new heights, a Church accepting as did Christ, her spouse, the slow pace of a journey in process and dialogue.

It must be admitted that Brother Didier had to leave to one side some of the evidence and stretch the rest of it a bit to turn

Brother Benilde into a symbol of the post-Vatican II era. Yet, as he points out, Brother Benilde himself had to adjust to a world that was itself undergoing change: the beginning of compulsory and universal schooling, the expansion of the railroads and industrialization, and the republican movements that would bring France closer to democracy. These developments were bound to have an impact even on a remote elementary school.

In this context, Brother Benilde was much more innovative than has been generally supposed or emphasized. He admitted older students, some of them married, to school for the first time in their lives; he experimented with evening classes for adults; he provided tutoring for backward and handicapped pupils.

Brother Benilde was much more open in dealing with the townspeople than was customary for the Brothers at that time, especially for those with a reputation for piety. Thus he often visited the families of pupils to assist them with the sick or to provide material assistance in time of need; he allowed the school to be used as a community center during vacation periods; he dealt successfully with the authorities both in financial matters as well as in adjusting to the ever-changing political situation, as in 1848.

For Brother Didier, then, the conclusion is inescapable that Brother Benilde "was faithful to respond to the demands of persons and situations, fortified constantly by his love for young people and by the desire to educate them so as to deliver them from the chains that bound them."

And so Brother Didier related this to his 1967 readers:

> The world of the present day poses an endless number of questions to Catholic teachers: What should we be doing? What enterprises should we undertake? In what direction should we go? The answers are not always immediately apparent.
>
> One fact is certain: whatever solutions may be proposed by institutions, there yet remains for each person the pressing obligation to do more, not to be satisfied with what the law requires, but to go beyond what has already been provided for.

That is the challenge that Brother Benilde sets before us from his place in the glory that he now enjoys and that we venerate. It is the profound meaning of this symbolic gesture of the Church, as we understand it today.

In this time of change in which we live, the love of children and young people ought to motivate us to do more, to look around us, to be inventive and creative, to be of help where it is needed the most.

1987

Twenty years have elapsed since this essay of Brother Didier celebrated the canonization of Brother Benilde. The mood today is not quite the same. There is less enthusiasm for transition and change, less optimism about the future, more uncertainty about the direction to take, more hesitancy to engage in bold adventures.

For the Institute of the Brothers—and consequently for all those in any way associated with them—this twenty-year period coincides with the period of experimentation with a new religious Rule. The revision of the traditional Rule mandated by Vatican II was first adopted in 1967 in the weeks immediately following the canonization of Brother Benilde. The final and definitive revision has now been approved and promulgated by church authority. It became the official Rule of the Institute in September 1987, just twenty years after the canonization of the Brother who was described as the living Rule.

In the *avant propos* of his biography of Brother Benilde, Georges Rigault applies to our saint and our Institute what someone said of John Berchmans and the Jesuits: "In canonizing him the Church has canonized the Rule and the way of life in the Society of Jesus." Therein may lie the clue to the perennial significance of Saint Benilde. He is the saint of the Brothers' Rule.

It might be objected that the Rule that Brother Benilde lived so faithfully in sanctity and heroic virtue was very different from the Rule that has emerged out of the renewal process set in motion by Vatican II. That is a problem only if one thinks

of the Rule as a legal document, of church approval as merely a juridical act, of canonization as an isolated past event.

Looked at from a different perspective, juridical acts are only one manifestation of the dynamic life of the Holy Spirit within the Church. Canonization is an open-ended challenge to all Christians to grow in that life of the Spirit. The Rule of the Institute, as an expression of the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, "is entrusted to us as living men," to quote the 1967 *Declaration* on which the revision of the Rule is based.

At first glance, the Rule of 1987, compared with the primitive Rule, seems to be something very different. It is less prescriptive and more inspirational; less restricted in its focus and scope and so more open to a variety of persons and changing circumstances. Like the Gospel that it attempts to express, it is more difficult to violate but also more difficult to observe integrally.

Nevertheless, along with the changes, there is continuity. The Rule of 1987 expresses the same essential goals and values as the Rule that Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote in 1718 or the Rule that Brother Benilde lived for forty years a century and a half ago. The purpose of the Institute remains the same, as does its spirit, its mission, and its priorities. The Brothers are challenged, as much as they ever were, to live their brotherhood as consecrated men in apostolic communities. One would hope, were Brother Benilde alive today, that he could adjust and be at home with such a Rule, finding in it a sanctity appropriate to the times and circumstances in which we live.

In one important aspect the Rule of 1987 represents a significant step forward, a creative adaptation of a traditional value inherited from the Founder. That is the extension of the meaning of association, in the mission and even in the spirituality and community life of the Brothers, to include the entire Lasallian family: students, graduates, relatives, friends, but above all the lay and clerical colleagues who share the day-to-day involvement in the ministry of Christian education.

The more we study the life of Brother Benilde, the more we recognize the conjunction between his canonization and the adoption of a new Rule for the Institute, the clearer it becomes that the message concerns the future far more than the past.

The message conveyed by the medium of the canonization of this man of the Rule, this Rule come alive in his person, is that saints can and must emerge in the context of the Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1987 version. When that happens, some of them may even be canonized.