

THE STRIKING EXAMPLE OF ST. BENILDUS'S DEVOTION TO THE EUCHARIST

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Although St. Benildus hardly ever spoke of himself, he did confide once that his mother would have liked to go to Mass every day, but the excessive amount of work she had prevented her from doing so. Most evenings, however, she would go to the church to visit the Blessed Sacrament, and would take young Pierre along with her, who was only 4 at the time. These were his first memories and his first conscious contacts with the divine guest in the tabernacle. Already Jesus Christ was winning over this chosen soul and extending to him the invitation to live an intimate life of union with him through faith and love.

All who knew the Saint closely were unanimous in saying that his intimacy with God grew constantly and that the greatest proof of this was his devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

A personal experience

We have no details at all about his first communion which he made in 1817, when he was in his 12th year. It is not likely that the young Pierre was favoured with any visions or went into ecstasy, but one can justifiably suppose that he was more pious than was normal. It seems certain that, perhaps without the young man being aware of it, God's influence, which grew stronger every day but lost none of its gentleness, increased its hold on the chosen of the Lord.

From that moment onwards, there is no doubt the Eucharist became one of the sources of great attrac-

tion for the Saint and the object of his deep faith. It was the food and support of his interior life, and the sun which never ceased to fill his heart with light and warmth. His prayer, so full of love and deep faith, consisted in profound recollection in God's presence in the sacred species.

The tabernacle was his favourite place to meet the Lord. One would be hard put to it to count all the hours he spent before the altar. And, let there be no doubt about it, these hours were the most beautiful, the most sanctifying and the most fruitful. The notes sent in when his cause was being examined contained such sentences as the following: "*When Brother Benildus was recollected before the altar, you would have thought he saw God*".

The real presence was the starting off point for his meditation. His contact, his dialogue with God took place in the depths of his heart, totally lacking in any selfish self-concern. Alone in the presence of Jesus, he adored him and united his prayers with his and all his divine intentions concerning the glory of the Father and the salvation of the world.

At a time when deep-rooted Jansenism still kept Christians far away from the holy table, he was an apostle of frequent communion. He obtained permission from his confessor to receive communion every day, and this was a source of great edification for the people of the parish.

When he was close to death, he received holy communion for the last time, and asked to be left alone. At this supreme moment, which both crowned and reflected his whole life, he wanted, he said, to speak with Jesus alone. He remained there completely still and deeply recollected. He seemed to be buried in God, witnesses tell us.

A witness

Father Mateo Crawley once said: "The apostle is a chalice full of Christ which pours out the overflow onto souls". The eucharistic piety of Brother Benildus was both a striking example and apostolic.

In fact, the sweet but powerful action of grace leads the soul to progressively accept the path of love and self-abandonment, so much so that, as St. Paul said, it truly no longer lives, but it is Christ that lives in it. Filled with Christ, St. Benildus radiated him, and this was not the least important aspect of his apostolate.

One Easter, when he was ill and went to the church only for the 9 o'clock mass, some local people attended this mass to fulfil their Easter duties, and to unite their thanksgiving with that of the saintly religious. It is

worth quoting what one of them said, because it alone is enough to show that the example of the saints is more powerful even than what they taught and always remains fixed in the memory. The person in question was one of his former students and a married man: *"I used to go to church with several other persons, not intending specifically to attend benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, but simply wanting to watch the Brothers' superior pray"*.

His attitude in church attracted so much attention that Brother Haram wrote in his deposition: *"I would almost say he went too far in his external signs of piety"*. However, the evidence of most witnesses is in the following vein: *"You would have thought he was an angel in church: he was always on his knees"*. *"His attitude in church inspired even the lukewarm with devotion"*. *"When he went up to receive communion you would think he was an angel and not a man, and I think everybody was very edified by him"*.

This last remark is very often repeated under various forms: *"Brother Benildus had great faith. It was enough to see him after communion to be struck by it"*. Others said he was in a sort of ecstasy.

Brother Benildus's behaviour sometimes surprised unruly little children. Jean Pierre Lougon remembers how one Sunday he was taken by his village school teacher to the parish Mass at Saugues, and was given a place near where the Brothers were. *"Easily distracted, I glanced at them from time to time. The forbidding exterior of the Servant of God made me think. It can't be fun being a saint, I thought"*.

Normally children were not mistaken, however. A little girl who later married, said the following: *"We noticed that his genuflection before the Blessed Sacrament was better than anybody else's"*, and she added: *"Our school mistress suggested Brother Benildus should be our model"*.

In fact it was his pupils who understood him best. The future Father Medard and five or six of his friends, drawn by the example of the Brother Director, used to

go to the church practically every evening to adore the Blessed Sacrament in his pious company.

In St. Benildus's time, the Eucharist was the object of private devotion, to the extent that communion seemed to be separated devotionally from the sacrifice of the Mass; and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament almost took precedence over Mass. Since then, we have returned to a more correct understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist as a sacrifice; but it is still true that Jesus is present in the Eucharist. We should not prevent people who believe in it to venerate this presence, for they need to attach their faith to something they can see, to a visible sign of the divine presence. Sacraments are signs. Here the sign is not only bread, it is Christ himself really present.

One of the choice graces the Lord gives his close friends is an almost physical awareness of his divine presence. The tabernacle in front of Brother Benildus prostrate in adoration is not empty: there is someone there. It is the same Jesus who lay in the stable manger, the young teenager and the simple craftsman of Nazareth, the prophet who walked the length and breadth of Palestine... someone real, someone living, and so close. Happy, like St. Thomas before him, the humble Brother prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus and says to him: *"My Lord and my God"*. He seems to see him, to touch him... It is as if Jesus is reaching out towards him. And this is not a fantasy, imaginings or the hyperbole of emotion: it is something felt and experienced in silence.

St. Benildus maintained this careful balance in his devotion to the Eucharist: it led him from the altar to the tabernacle. Thanks to St. John Baptist de La Salle, he understood the theology and mystical sense of the Mass. The real presence in the eucharistic species kept in the tabernacle after Mass prolonged for him the effects of his union with the God he had received and adored. If there was nothing else he could teach us, this would be enough to make us grateful, for he shows us a way to achieve intimate union with God while awaiting the beatific vision in heaven.