

BENEDICT JOSEPH LABRE.*

St. Augustine used to pray, "Lord grant me to know thee and to know myself. To know thee, in order to love thee, to know myself in order to despise myself." And these words were frequently upon the lips of Benedict Joseph Labre, and God answered him in an inspiration which drew him to a life of singular poverty and penance as a means of crucifying all love of the world's esteem.

The parents of this holy man were not poor. True, they had fifteen children, of whom Benedict was the eldest, but by his trade as a merchant, the father gained sufficient to maintain his large family comfortably. On the 27th March, 1748, the little Benedict was baptized at the parish church of Amettes, in France, being then but a day old. From his earliest infancy it seemed as if the child was specially loved and favored by God, his disposition was so patient, so sweet, so docile. To his pious parents then it was an easy and happy task to instruct him in the holy Catholic faith, for he not only listened attentively, but seemed in his childish way at once to put in practice the lessons which he learned, and this is wherein so many of us fail. We are taught the fear of God, we read and hear the maxims of our religion, we have before us the examples of our Lord, His Virgin Mother, and the Saints, and yet this good seed seems to drop into our hearts week by week and year by year, without ever springing up into those beautiful blossoms of love, humility, meekness and fidelity, which God is watching for. However it was not so with Benedict Labre. He was a good, earnest little boy, and had made such use of his mother's teaching, that at five years of age he was thought fit to be placed under the care of a priest who dwelt in Amettes. He soon learned to read and write well, and was so anxious to get on, that his master often had to restrain him. Other children were being educated with him, and to them Benedict was always kind, bearing meekly any injury done to him. Once a little boy struck him, but he did not complain, and when the master found it out and questioned him, Benedict tried to excuse the offence, saying it must have been done by accident. Naturally, boys are very fond of amusement and these little fellows used to play and loiter about the streets when school time was over, but Benedict walked straight home without loss of time, and resisted all the persuasions of his companions to do as they did. This child of six years had a horror of small acts of disobedience, quarrelling, untruthfulness, and such faults. To him they were not little sins as so many call them, but offences which were giving pain to his Lord, and which therefore, were horrible to him. It is very possible that some of his friends would feel vexed and angry with his strict ideas of right and wrong, but at length they loved him all the more because he was so good, and his presence restrained their passions while his example became to many a model which they would strive to imitate. The little Benedict already began to do penances, trying hard to keep them secret from all but God. He would creep quietly out of his soft bed and rest his head on a piece of hard wood, and take that food which he liked least of what was provided by his mother. The child had made himself a small oratory, and at eight years old he would take a younger brother as server, and try to imitate saying mass; not

in jest, but with the deepest devotion of his little heart. It seemed, indeed, as if Benedict's young life was full of but one thought, the thought of God and His service. At all times in the day he loved to go to the church either to pray silently in some retired corner, or to serve the morning mass with his hands joined before his breast, his eyes cast down, and his whole heart fixed upon God. From five years of age he went regularly to confession, for he was so early filled with contrition for every offence, that he could not rest without receiving the pardon of Jesus. He loved to be at catechism, to join in the processions and other offices of the Church, and thus his innocent life passed until his twelfth year. At that age Benedict's good parents placed him under the care of his uncle, who was a priest, so that he might begin the study of Latin and other higher branches of learning, and for four years the boy applied himself to it with great pleasure. But at sixteen he began to have almost a dislike for study; not from indolence, but because his heart was turned to the knowledge of spiritual things, to the reading of books of devotion and the lives of the Saints; and above all, he loved the holy Scriptures, and for the rest of his life always carried a copy about with him. Benedict's uncle at first was much displeased at this sudden distaste for his course of Latin study, and ordered him to persevere in applying his mind; but though the lad tried to obey, he no sooner opened one of his books than the disgust from it became like a great weight upon his heart, and he longed more than ever to read only of Christ and His servants. At last Benedict told his uncle that he felt God did not mean him to pursue studies which would only be useful in the world, and he expressed a wish to go into a cloister the one which he had heard was more austere than any, La Trappe. The uncle represented the hardships of such a life, he told him truly that many far stronger in health were unequal to it, but all this did not serve to turn Benedict from his wishes, although the time had not come for him to seek to enter the cloister for which he longed. So, with this strong desire and hope in his heart, the young Labre went through his quiet routine of duty under his uncle's control. He rose very early, that he might pray in the silence and solitude of the morning hours; he served one or two masses if he had the power of doing so or, if another was before him, he withdrew silently, bearing the disappointment with the sweetness of one who saw in it the Will of God; he employed himself as much as possible in spiritual reading, was frequent in his recourse to the Sacraments, and withal, was so humble that at fifteen or sixteen years old he would place himself among the little boys for catechism, as if he needed the same instruction. When Benedict was eighteen his kind good uncle died, and he then returned home, to carry on the strict rule of life he had taken up. His great desire to enter La Trappe was still strong, but his parents refused their consent, until at last his patience and gentle persistence caused them to yield. Benedict was as much delighted as if he had received permission to enter some place of delight and in spite of the inclement season he set out upon a journey of nearly sixty leagues. Arrived there, the monks would not receive him; they looked at his young frail form, and bade him return to his home, until perhaps at some future time he should be more fit for a life of austerity. Benedict was deeply grieved, but the love of God in his heart was so strong, that he felt quite sure this disappointment had come for his spiritual good, and with that confidence he could not murmur, but returned to Amettes, quite exhausted by