

SAINTS ALIVE!
APRIL 16: ST. BENEDICT JOSEPH LABRÉ
PATRON SAINT OF THE HOMELESS

Benedict Joseph Labré was born into a well-off middle class family where he was educated in his native village in France. He abandoned his materialistic upbringing, however, and lived a life of poverty, sleeping on the streets and eating simple meals from charity or taken from the garbage. On April 16, 1783, he died at the age of 35.



Saint Benedict Joseph Labré is the patron saint of homeless people.

(Excerpts from *“What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church And The Housing Problem,” Document of the Pontifical Commission “Justitia et Pax” on the Occasion of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, 1987*)

“The difficulties that people have in trying to buy or to rent adequate lodging ... are due, on the one hand, to inflated prices in the housing market and, on the other hand, to excessively low salaries in those countries in which economic and sociopolitical structures are in crisis. ... [P]eople's work should provide them with means that are adequate to meet their needs as well as the needs of those who are economically dependent on them.

“One of these essential needs ... is a suitable place to live. Yet a large segment of the population can count only on a job as the unique source of fixed income. The number of those that earn less than what might be called a family income can be counted in the millions. These inadequate salaries ... have a negative incidence on the possibility of access to housing.

“In general terms, the situation of homelessness is the result of poverty and of social marginalization. In other words, it is the result of a whole series of economic, social, cultural, physical, emotional and moral factors that specifically bear down on those who have never been integrated into the current social system.

“The help that social services and various aid organizations are able to give to the homeless can often appear to be the solution to individual or particular problems, as if one were dealing here with a sick person or a handicapped person, doomed to live that way. It can also happen that the public services departments of the State decide that such people do not need any special attention or help beyond that already provided by philanthropic or charitable organizations. In reality, there is a structural problem concerning the overall organization of a given society or country.

“Far from being a matter of simple lack or deprivation, **to be homeless means to suffer from the deprivation or lack of something which is due. This, consequently, constitutes an injustice.**

“**Any person or family that, without any direct fault on his or her part, does not have suitable housing is the victim of an injustice.** ... [I]t is evident that this injustice is clearly a structural injustice, caused and perpetuated by personal injustices.

“The injustice of which homeless persons and families are victims can be laid at the door of a social organization or political will which is, at times, either deficient or powerless.



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“At this point, **it is important to remember that society, as well as the State, has the obligation to guarantee for its citizens and members those living conditions without which they cannot achieve fulfillment, either as persons or as families.** ... Anything which does not meet the basic needs of a person alone or in a family cannot be considered part of any authentic culture. From this point of view, **the right to housing is a universal right.**”

“[H]ousing constitutes a basic social good and cannot simply be considered a market commodity.

“Finally, our reflection on the highly complex situation of the homeless cannot fail to raise the question of the heavy burden of personal suffering that is the result of legal evictions. While they may be legitimate according to the law, such evictions raise a series of ethical questions when it comes to people who truly have no other housing possibilities.

“An important point to be emphasized is that the problem of the lack of decent housing concerns not only the millions of peoples who are its victims, nor even institutions, but is also a challenge to every man and woman with a house and who discovers or becomes more keenly aware of the extent and depth of the drama of those without one. **Each one of us should feel obliged to do what he or she can do, either directly or indirectly, through various existing organizations, so that others can also enjoy a right of which they have been deprived.**”

“For each Christian and for the Church, as the People of God, the stark reality of homeless persons and families is at one and the same time an appeal to conscience and an exigency to do something to remedy the situation.

“In each person or family lacking a basic good, and above all housing, the Christian must recognize Christ himself, as the well known words of Matthew's Gospel state: "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me" (Mt 25, 42ff). In the last two categories of persons, is truly reflected, to a certain degree, the situation of the homeless, and it is necessary to recognize the Lord himself in them. Actually, when he came into the world, "there was no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2, 7).

“Each nation and the entire community of nations is challenged ... to build a society in which there is no one who cannot find what is minimally essential for a dignified life, where no one lacks decent housing, a principal factor in human progress.

“The commitment of the Church to the homeless is a humanitarian and evangelical commitment; it is also an expression of a preferential love for the poor.”

Saint Benedict Joseph Labré pray for us and all those who suffer from homelessness.