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April 16, St. Benedict Joseph Labre, Pilgrim

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Apr. 16, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Benedict Joseph Labre. [1] He was born at Amettes, near Boulogne, in 1748. After several attempts to join the Trappists, the Cistercians, and the Carthusians, he realized he was unsuited for religious life. He decided to be a pilgrim.

He walked to shrines all over Europe, including Assisi, [2] and Loreto [3] in Italy, Compostela [4] in Spain, Paray-le-Monial [5] in France, and Einsiedeln [6] in Switzerland. He owned only the rags he wore and the few books he carried in a bag. He slept in the open, and relied on alms freely given. He did not beg, and anything given to him beyond his immediate need, he shared with other poor people.

When Benedict Joseph was no longer able to travel, he lived in Rome, sleeping in the Colosseum at night and attending services at Santa Maria dei Monti [7] and other churches by day. He was particularly attracted to churches where the Forty Hours devotion was being observed. He was sometimes asked to leave churches because of his smell and appearance.

Benedict Joseph Labre died on April 16, 1783. His relics [8]are enshrined at Santa Maria dei Monti.

After numerous miracles, he was proclaimed Venerable by Pope Pius IX in 1859 and canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1881. Today he is regarded as a patron of the homeless and the mentally ill.

Click here [9] to see a portrait of St. Benedict Joseph Labre by Antonio Cavallucci and a modern icon by Rev. William Hart McNichols, S.J.

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