

# The Remarkable Father Benac, S.J.

**A timely tribute to the senior member of the Garabandal apostolate who reaches some rather unique milestones this year.**

*By Marie FitzPatrick*



Father Benac in front of the sodality retreat house in Bombay.

FATHER FRANCIS A. BENAC, S.J., is a very unique person and 1994 holds several red-letter days for him. On January 29, when he celebrated his 90th birthday, the Seva Niketan Chapel was packed with well-wishers for the Mass he concelebrated with six other priests. A great number of congratulatory messages were read. On November 1, he will celebrate 75 years as a Jesuit and on November 21, will commemorate the bestowal of his Holy Orders (60 years).

Father possesses almost unlimited energy and manages to devote himself to many activities. Since 1933 as National Sodality Promoter, he has been involved in managing and rebuilding the Sodality Retreat House in Bombay and has toured the continents seeking benefactors for that project.

In 1974, after meeting Conchita Gonzalez, a seer of the Garabandal apparitions, Father became interested in Garabandal and with his intelligence, resourcefulness and command of languages, soon became the National Garabandal Coordinator for all India. In this capacity, he is the editor of the informative publication *THE CALL OF GARABANDAL*. He is conversant with and enjoys the friendship of all the people at the heart of the Garabandal apostolate and is considered an authority on the Garabandal events. Father says that working for Garabandal is a "call," a special grace from God.

This giant of a personality, crammed into an average sized body, is, at times, known and identified according to the various facets of that personality: Our Lady's Beggar, Our Lady's Dynamo, The Firebrand, The Frequent-Flying Father.

He loves two mothers passionately, Mother Mary and Mother India. In times of need and disaster, he doesn't differentiate between them. When Mother India suffers, Mother Mary also suffers. So he must act.

Learn more about Father Benac and his apostolate through his own words and works.

"I was born on January 29, 1904, in

In 1978, Father Benac interviewed visionary Mari Loli LaFleur at her home.



Burgos, Province of Old Castille, Spain. My father, Marino, was born in the little town of Benac, French Pyrenees and my mother, Maximina, in Estella, Navarra. Out of eleven children, I am number seven and by now the only surviving member of the family in the direct line. Two sisters, Maria Josefa and Maria Rosario both gone to the Lord, had been members of a Secular Institute. A third sister, Maria del Camino who died on March 5, 1993, was a member of the Religious of Mary Immaculate whose Foundress was St. Vincenta Maria Lopez y Vincuña. On various assignments as Superior she had travelled a lot; following a car accident, she was bedridden for 17 years. She offered all her sufferings for my apostolate."

At the time of Francis's birth his father was assigned to the Administrative Garrison in Barcelona. Later, in 1909, when his father was appointed Administrative War Commissar in Melilla, Spanish Morocco, the entire family moved there.

Back in Spain: "my first encounter with the Society of Jesus was as a member of the Students' Marian Sodality. It was the late Brother Remigo of the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine and Father James Balasach, my professor at St. Joseph's College in Valencia, who inspired me to join the Society of Jesus.

"My vocation as a missionary was the result of much praying during a six day guided retreat and thinking how I could thank God for the gift of faith given to me. I felt that as a missionary I could share it with millions of people.

"After having read much about India and the 40 million untouchables at that time who had hardly any human rights in society, I felt an urge to go there."

### Enter Garabandal

"On September 18, 1966, while in Colombo (Sri Lanka) giving a confer-

ence on Sodality Promotion at the Sisters' Marian Hostel, after Mass a Sister gave me a book titled UNDER THE SHADOW OF GOD. This little book dealt totally with the Garabandal apparitions. However, on my way back to Spain, I didn't hear a word about them.

"It was later in 1968 when I was giving a retreat to the Sister Servants of Mary in Bronx, New York, that I was introduced to Dr. Jerónimo Dominguez, a surgeon, and his wife, Gladys, who had been to Garabandal during the apparitions and made a documentary about them. Providentially it was he who brought Conchita Gonzalez to the United States for the first time, helping her to obtain a nurse's diploma. On January 27, 1974, Dr. Dominguez and his wife introduced me to Conchita. I interviewed her at length."

### Joey Lomangino's Trips to India

"It was on November 5, 1975, at the invitation of the late Cardinals Valerian Gracias and Parecattil, that Joey Lomangino came to India. On arrival in Bombay, I introduced him to the Cardinal. Joey's tour of the country particularly in Madras, Bangalore, Ernakulam and Cochin was really spectacular. I can recall many instant healings worked while Joey blessed the people one by one with his relic medal. Finally, the unexpected happened, The City's Municipal Corporation held a dinner in his honor, which was attended by over 1,000 people."

Again on November 5, 1977, Joey was invited for a second time to India. At Don Bosco's Grounds an altar was erected for Mass. Cardinal

Below, with Joey Lomangino and Marie FitzPatrick, author of this article, at the New York Center in 1985.

Gracias, on climbing up to the platform said: "This is the second largest gathering I have had since my elevation to the Cardinalate."

### The First International Congress on Garabandal

"My next encounter with Joey Lomangino was at the International Garabandal

Marian Congress held at Lourdes on August 18, 1978, attended by over 300 delegates from 26 countries. It was then that Joey invited me to go to the United States to be a guest speaker at Garabandal Centers across the country."

Reports on the Congress have this to say about Father's presentation at that event: "When the lively Father Benac came forward the listeners saluted his courage and determination as he packed volumes into the scarce 15 minutes allotted to him. He concluded his presentation by exhorting all the delegates to unite with Joey Lomangino to be sure the Message reaches into every corner of the earth—immediately!"

After Mass at the Grotto, a memorandum was prepared to be presented to the Bishop of Santander and Father Benac was entrusted to deliver it. When he read the note to the Bishop and came to the request... "that he (the Bishop) invite all the living witnesses of Garabandal to bring their testimonies for his archives before it is too late, which would be an irreparable loss in our opinion," the Bishop just smiled. "We are praying



## FATHER BENAC

Father Benac, third from the right next to Joey and Marilynn Lomangino, with other guests at the 1978 Lourdes Congress.

for you that the Holy Spirit may enlighten, guide, and give you strength to bring to a happy end these mysteries of Garabandal."

### Tours

Since 1974, Father Benac has recorded visits to over 100 countries on every continent of the world seeking benefactors to help him support and repair the National Sodality House which he maintains and supervises in Bombay. His very convincing appeals had brought him to the attention of Pope Pius XII who referred to him as "Our Lady's Beggar."

Father also uses these opportunities to speak about Our Lady's gracious visits to Garabandal giving the world her Messages of love, mercy and hope. He may describe the thrilling experience he shared with a group of English pilgrims on June 13, 1978, at the Pines when the Miracle of the Sun was spectacularly repeated for them. He may relate some of the many unusual and unbelievable happenings he experienced as he carried Our Lady's Messages throughout the world; of the incredible cures that happened before his eyes when using the Garabandal "relic," five of which have been declared as actual miracles; meetings with many people at the heart of the Garabandal apostolate; and of his hopes for the future. He is likely to conclude with a statement that reveals the strength of his inner conviction and the liveliness of his faith in what Our Lady is doing for the world. "Garabandal for me is the final dramatic confrontation between Satan and the Woman of the Apocalypse." When Father Benac toured the United States in 1979, he visited 16 major Garabandal Centers and left people eager to carry forward Our Lady's Message. He met with an equally enthusiastic reception when he went "Down Under" to Australia and New Zealand visiting 17 Centers. In October, 1981, speaking in Dublin, Ireland, at one of the 20 Centers he visited, he electrified an audience of 6,000. The Christian Brothers who were host to Father that evening, "were fascinated by the energy and



vitality of this 'young' elderly man whose infectious enthusiasm for Our Lady's cause was so obvious." Reports like this are the usual manifestations of his visits from many of the Centers around the world.

On his tours, he also had met with and interviewed three of the seers and their husbands (living in the United States); members of the original commission; Dr. Ricardo Puncernau, eminent psychiatrist from Barcelona; numerous Garabandal promoters, priests and writers; and had a number of audiences with His Excellency Juan Antonio del Val Gallo, who was Bishop of Santander for some 20 years.

In December, 1980, the BBC telecast on the "Everyman" Series, the documentary "Garabandal—After the Visions" which was highly successful and won an award for religious programming. In October of 1981, Father Benac had the occasion to interview the producer of the program, Bill Nicholson: "[I asked him] why he produced such a program for a non-Catholic country, a non-Marian country and himself not a practicing Catholic. He explained how at first he had refused but after hearing from an earlier documentary produced by Dick Everson of Minneapolis (Minnesota, U.S.A.), the Messages delivered by Our Lady, he said to himself, 'These messages are meant not only for Christians but for the whole world. I will gamble with my reputation and the BBC's money and will make it!' To my question as to how many copyrights to TV stations had been sold, he answered, 'In less than two months 64 had been sold.' Asking him further, 'In such a case, how many people have received

Our Lady's Messages?' He answered, 'One hundred and fifty million.' Our Lady's desire will be fulfilled."

### Health Problems

Soon after returning from Spain and perhaps due to the exertion during the many months there, Father Benac developed a cardiac condition on New Years Day, 1993. This necessitated hospitalization and he was confined to the intensive care unit for a few days. He returned back to the Sodality House and was advised to go slowly. He has now fully recuperated and is back directing his apostolate.

### His Wishes

Father Benac has two wishes he continually petitions for: "I asked Saint Francis Xavier for the privilege of being able to work actively until the end of my life and, so far, he has obtained that from Our Lord for me."

His other wish is that, "I die in India." How could the Lord refuse such a request from a loyal and compassionate son who has spent the greater part of his life caring for the spiritual and material needs of His indigent children.

Father Benac concludes, "As for a message to all promoters of Our Lady's entreaties, let this be my prayer for all: Privileged as we have been to be chosen by Our Lady to be her world heralds, let us through prayer and by offering sacrifices ask that the rainbow of her promised AVISO and MIRACLE may shine soon in the sky for all to believe and bring peace to the world. Let us make many sacrifices; think of the Passion of Jesus and let us confide to Our Mother all our hopes." □

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