

Saint Peter Julian's Commitment to Youth

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Teens and young adults have rekindled eucharistic fire within the province of St. Ann. George Dunne SSS, directing the youth of St. Stephen's parish in Winter Springs, Florida, has created a youth peer ministry based on the "Life In The Eucharist" program which has been redesigned by teens and for teens (for more on this program see Bread Broken & Shared, Sept/Oct 2007, page 12.). As he listened to Father George share his experience with these teenagers, who witness to the transforming power the Eucharist has had on them, Father Bill Fickel was reminded of Peter Julian Eymard and the beginnings of the Congregation back in 1856. He shares with us that experience in this present article.

When St. Eymard approached the Archbishop of Paris for his approval to establish the Congregation there was a misunderstanding as to its purpose. It was not until Peter Julian made it clear to Archbishop Sibour, *"We want to lead others to adore. We must take care of the First Communion of adults. We want to set fire to the four corners of France, beginning with the four corners of Paris, which need it so much."* The Archbishop's face lit up and he exclaimed, *"That's what's missing... That's what I desire most! The First Communion of adults."* [Troussier, pages 552-3]. Yes, from the very origin of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, we find both the call and the challenge to work with young people in preparation for the reception of the Sacraments.

It may not have been Fr. Eymard's first choice, but God often has plans for us that need to be discovered. Actually, Peter Julian had a natural attraction to working with young people as a Marist priest when he was director of Sainte-Marie at La Seyne-sur-Mer in the South of France. He writes: *"Here I am in the midst of children, and I bless God, since it is his will that sent me here, and that is what gives me strength and a bit of goodwill. I continue to be very happy. We have 135 students. They are very well behaved. We try to make them good Christians."* (Letters, vol 2, pg. 60). Were his years as director of young men preparing him for working with a different class of youngsters once he left the Marists and became founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament?

The Congregation had its beginnings in a poor section of Paris composed mostly of workers employed in shops and factories. Father Eymard found himself to be poor and living among the poor. His celebration of the Mass was extended in periods of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and transported into the streets of Paris. The street beggars of Paris were a far cry from the students

of La Seyne. Eymard described the situation outside his door. It seems to be a reflection of the thoughts that preoccupied his mind and heart in adoration.

"They are barely able to work! These poor children of Paris are hired in factories to earn a few cents. This helps to buy a little bread for the poor family, and to pay the rent for forty cents a week. If there are no jobs in factories the child takes a small sack and leaves home any time day or night to go scavenging the city. How many hundreds of children are like that in Paris! Like plants weakened from lack of air and soil, these poor children carry the signs of want etched on their faces.

If only some religious spirit could be found to compensate the misery of their bodily needs. But no! That's even more deplorable. The little worker never goes to church so as to know, to love and to serve God. His parents do not tell him about this. They are raised in the same way; or poverty has filled them with a de-humanizing shame. Paris has its own areas of foreign missions, its migrant population, and those without any religion except the cult of the dead.

No, there is nothing comparable to the poverty and indifference of this part of Paris! As a result, many young workers will grow up without making their First Communion. And a young man who has not made his First Communion is subject to get caught by the first evil influence that comes to him." (Guitton, pg. 143).

The fruit of prayer is service. In adoration God awakened in Father

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Eymard the need to make the love of Jesus known to the poor children in the streets. Prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament stirs the mind and heart to the reality of the world around us. Overwhelmed by the ignorance and lack of faith of so many poor street children, Father Eymard burned with desire to go out to them. He described the challenge he encountered with the "street urchins of Paris" who made fun of everything, but were sensitive to the charm of Eymard's authority and goodness. Father Eymard wrote this as a third person narrative. It is here written in the first person:

The scheduled meeting time comes and I am waiting for them. An hour later, I am still alone. These rough kids, however, are outside in the street. They don't dare enter. Discovering their whereabouts, I immediately go out and gently speak to them, encouraging them and finally convincing them to come inside.

A strange and humorous scene develops in the hall. The children look at me as though they had never seen a priest. Some even start acting foolishly. I sit in their midst, telling them how pleased I am to see them, how happy I would be to help them prepare for a good First Communion. While I am still speaking, the older ones begin to laugh out loud and run away. The others, influenced by their companions also run away as fast as they can, shouting and looking back to see if they are being followed.

Left alone, I wonder: "Now, what shall I do?" To do nothing would mean the end of this work; it would be useless to wait for them to return. I go down on my knees, offer myself to God and to the Blessed Virgin, and go out searching for them. I want to

catch up to them. As I approach them, they retreat further. I manage to reach a few of the younger ones. "Come, my children," I tell them, "I will not hurt you."

Cautiously, they come in. Others approach along the wall, peeking through the gate to see what would happen. I am waiting, and invite them to take their seats. There they are! All together again! This time, instead of going to the front of the room, I stand at the doorway to prevent another escape. I take two of those nearer to me by the arm, and I force them to kneel down with me,



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and in a commanding voice I say to all: "Kneel down!" They look at me, hesitate, and finally obey. Out loud I make the sign of the cross, and begin the Our Father. In the middle of the prayer, all the children start giggling and laughing. I stop without any sign of annoyance. I have already captured these little ones for God. Facing them I say, "You must be very happy since you are laughing so much! Okay, let's laugh together. I would like to know each of you better." (Guitton, pg 144).

"I would like to know each of you better," is a good way to speak of our ministry with teens and young adults. The Rule of Life of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament guides our evangelizing mission in the Church stating, "We journey with those who

are in search of meaning in their lives, and we help them recognize Christ, the living Word, so that, having been baptized and confirmed in the faith, they may become fully integrated into the Christian community through the Eucharist." (Rule of Life 39). There is excitement and hope in the Pentecost experience that has come upon teens and young adults who journey with us in our ministry. Our newsletter has already featured the good work being accomplished by the LITE Teens of St. Stephen's parish under the guidance of George Dunne SSS. Teens from St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Holiday, Florida are ready to make the journey to Sydney, Australia to participate in "World Youth Day." The Province of St. Ann has renewed its commitment to working with youth and young adults at its Amplified Provincial Council meeting recently. May Saint Peter Julian encourage us to share joy and laughter as gifts of the Holy Spirit alive in our youth. ✠



A Word of Thanks to our Partners in Ministry

Many of you discovered the envelope inserted in the middle of *Bread Broken & Shared* and sent a generous donation to the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. We are most grateful for making it possible for our priests and brothers to continue their ministry. Your gift, whether large or small, helps you to actually share in the ministry of the Congregation in the USA. You are remembered daily in the prayer intentions of the priests and brothers of the Congregation.
