



The Vineyard

Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament – Australia – Province of Holy Spirit

September 2008

“Paying a Visit”

John Kingston

Every now and then I'm reminded of the influence of French piety on that with which I was brought up as a child. “Paying a Visit” was the classic expression of private devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and something one would not pass an open church without doing. As a child we were encouraged to “duck in” (I won't blame the French for that, unless there is some connection with “ducking your head” in the extended sense of bowing to a respected personage) and “pay a visit”.

This one seems a direct translation of the French “rendre visite à” someone or somewhere of some importance. But, let's get back to three visits I paid in Paris shortly after having paid my respects to St-Pierre-Julien at La Mure d'Isère. In this, I'd like to offer some thoughts on three churches in Paris, and what goes on in them.

Kings and Abbots, Cafés, Philosophers and Monks

Built in the 11th century on the site of a 6th century abbey, St-Germaine-des-Prés is Paris' oldest church, serving a community whose origins date back to around 542. Time frames like this just stagger me. I've visited this church many times now, and still find it a particularly evocative place. It's nothing to look at from the outside, standing as a few remaining pieces of a jigsaw that's been swept away. You can see something of its patchwork history if you move away from the place a little after emerging from the metro entrance.

Along with various Merovingian kings, St-Germaine (496-576; an early bishop of Paris) was buried in the abbey, which originally owned most of the surrounding area (today's 6th and 7th arrondissements). His remains were interred in a chapel of (what was then) St. Vincent's church. In 754, after he was canonised, Germaine's remains were solemnly moved into the body of the church, in the presence of Pepin and his son, Charlemagne, then a child of seven. The church was reconsecrated as Saint-Germaine-des-Prés. Everybody's favourite philosopher, René Descartes, also is buried in the church; at least his heart is there. Whenever I stand and read the inscription noting the presence of his remains, I think of René sitting inside his oven and wonder if he is still doing some systematic doubting in the privacy of his tomb.

A great and powerful Benedictine Abbey developed on this site until it was suppressed following the Revolution (1789). Most of its buildings, including the library, were destroyed by fire in 1794 and, a little earlier, in a nearby monastery some 318 priests were hacked to death by a mob on 3 September, 1792. There was a pretty strong connection between Church, King and nobility, and this was not lost on the Revolutionaries. Perhaps symbolic of all this, (St) John Casimir, former king of Poland, was actually “abbé commendataire” of the community in 1669.

Another notable from the abbey, also buried in the church, is Jean Mabillon (1632 – 1707), Benedictine monk and scholar. This fellow is considered the founder of “paleography” (the ancient study of handwriting and the identification of the periods in which manuscripts were written) and “diplomats” (which seeks to validate or disconfirm the alleged origin and authenticity of written documents). He also worked on the Acta Sanctorum, OSB. (the third volume published in 1672). The critical methods of Mabillon were a source of scandal to some of his less scholarly fellow-monks. In 1677 a petition violently attacking his work was presented to the general chapter of the congregation. It demanded the suppression of his work as harmful to the interests of Benedictinism, and wanted an apology from its author.

This chapter from Mabillon's life reminds me of some of the struggles religious congregations went through when critical and historical methods were applied to their traditions and significant figures in them. In 1698 a storm was raised in Rome by the publication by Mabillon of a protest against the superstitious veneration of the relics of “unknown saints” from the catacombs. Although his name was linked by some to the Jansenists, Mabillon seems to have been something of an iconoclast.

On 27 December, 1707, having heard Mass at midnight and received Holy Communion, Mabillon died. He was buried in the Lady Chapel at St-Germaine. At the Revolution in 1789, when the Lady Chapel of St-Germaine was destroyed, his simple tomb was removed to the garden of the Musée des Petits-Augustins. At the Restoration (of the monarchy), however, it was carried back to St-Germaine, where it still remains behind the high altar.



As I went in the front entrance of the church, beneath the late 10th century bell tower there were six young women selling t-shirts to raise money for their trip to 2008's world youth congress in Sydney, during which top-guest will be Benôit XVI. I guess that can round off our little history of the former Benedictine Abbey. Usually I spend a little time in St-Germaine-des-Pres and indulge in that old Catholic practice of lighting a candle, thinking of my family members before a quite lovely marble statue of Our Lady of Consolation, from the 14th century.

On the corner across the road from St-Germaine is Les Deux Magots, a famous hangout for some artistic, literary and philosophical figures in the 20s, 30s and 50s. A "magot" (which my spell-check wants to make "maggot") was a Chinese commercial agent, and there are two wooden statues of magot inside the café. A little down from this place is Café de Flore, regularly graced by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and lots of present-day would-be existentialist tourists who go for a splurge hoping the seats might still be warm.

Back in St-Germaine, I walked into a Spanish mass at which two children had been baptised. The priest was in full flight at a pace that suggested the sort of baptismal sermon he had given many times before. And, it went on, and on, and on. Towards the Communion, a young woman on guitar strummed into a setting of *The Sounds of Silence* and was joined by the congregation. No idea what the lyrics were, but I presume they weren't "Hello, darkness, my old friend...." One young couple a bit ahead of me in the church had been moved to embrace during the Preface, and maintained a "holy hug" with mutual back-rubbing throughout the early stages of the Eucharistic Prayer. Must be a Spanish custom, as I've not noticed the French doing it.

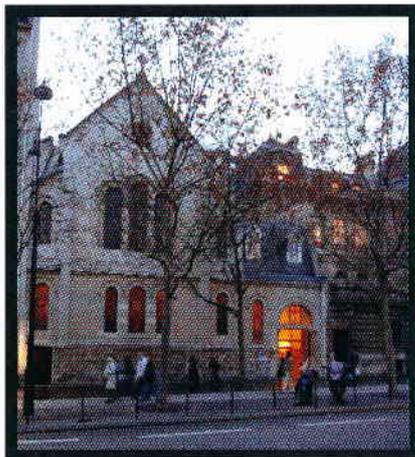
Once the mob dispersed, I had a quiet walk around the church and then lit my candle and sat for a while in quiet. Every time I have been here someone brings in a pot plant and puts it amongst the collection of other plants: potted, cut and plastic in front of Mary's fence of candles. Many I have seen sit and shed a tear. Tonight was no exception; it must be a French custom....

On <http://www.eglise-sgp.org/> you can find a link to a virtual tour of the church's floor plan.

The Search Concludes

Another afternoon, I headed for Paris in search of "le corps saint" de St-Pierre-Julien Eymard and found it in a small church about four spits away from l'Arc de Triomphe, in avenue de Friedland: one of the rays on the Étoile Charles de Gaulle, and just one from away from l'avenue des Champs Élysées. The very classy Napoléon Hotel is about two spits from the arch in the same avenue. You keep going past the hotel until you come to a large statue of Honoré de Balzac, and the church is across the road.

Through the front door, up the steps near the porter's office (who looked up from his book) I walked into the church. Immediately I was struck with a familiar feel of quiet and focus. A few people kneeling in silent prayer, lights trained on the altar and ambo; one's attention drawn to the Sacrament and the open scriptures.



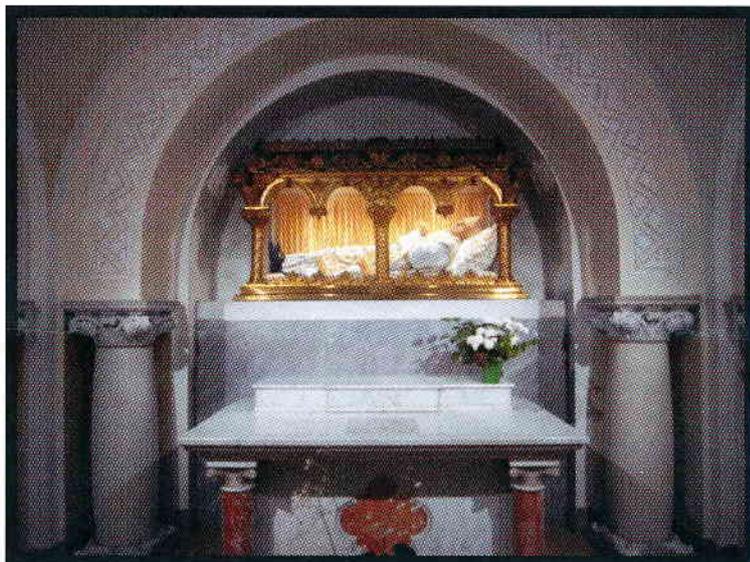
But, lo, bright light emanated from a small side chapel and I thought: Could this be a sign? Well, it was, but more of a sign-writer. On the walls were inscriptions of quotes from the sainted Eymard, and a worker touching them up with brush and grey paint; his powerful spotlight acting as a flame to my moth.

Or was the real power in the ornately decorated glass box in which lay a figure in full priestly vestments, white satin pillow propping him into semi-recumbence, head tilted upwards and slightly towards me. For all that my eyes were inviting me to, my mind shot back to Viet Nam in 1986 and the first time I saw the chemically-saturated remains of Ho Chi Minh, exuding a light ochre glow. I remembered hearing one of the Vietnamese comrades lament the expensive maintenance of Uncle Ho's increasingly tenuous remains as counter to Ho's preference: being cremated and sprinkled throughout the country. Then there was Good Pope John XXIII in St Peter's, but crowds prevented me getting close to him; although, again, I sensed the glow.

And here I was staring Pierre-Julien Eymard in the face, his gaze appropriately averted heavenward. And, yet, was I? I sensed no glow beyond a workman's spot light reflected off the glass ch[^]asse. What I was looking at was much shorter than I had anticipated, and looked little like the face I had often seen in contemporary photographs. Was this no more than a shop mannequin dressed in vestments, with a vaguely Eymard look-alike head atop it? Whatever, the hands were clasped together in prayerful pleading, and the face had a piously worried look, staring into the celestial distance. The buckled shoes looked pretty authentic and the vestments were "old style" Roman sandwich-board, complete with maniple; but I wasn't convinced.

And so this is where the remains of St-Pierre-Julien Eymard are. Is this where he would want to have been? I suspect it would have been of little consequence to him, although the proximity of the exposed Sacrament, to which the head is turned, must have some appropriateness. I thought of his sisters back in La Mure, not that they would be terribly worried about being separated. Is this not what happens to people who rise above the crowd and become public property? Is this not the denied freedom of those who are taken and made into heroes for the use of others?

A small plaque informs that the reliquary (ch[^]asse) once held the remains of John Vianney, Cur[^]e d'Ars, and now those of Peter Julian. But, again, my response was more interest than inspiration. The whole display is put into some context by the quotes on the walls of the side chapel.



Rien, pour moi, personne,
rien, par moi.
Modele: Incarnation du Verbe.

Comme si le Sauveur me disait:
par la communion,
tu vivras pour moi,
car je serai vivant en toi.

Tellement, que ce sera moi qui vivrai
Et d[^]esirerai tout en toi.
Tu seras tout rev[^]tu de moi,
Tu seras le corps de mon c[^]oeur.

Ce n'est plus moi qui vis,
mais le Christ qui vit en moi
(Gal 2,20)

21 Mars 1865

Comme le Bon Dieu m'a aim[^]e !

La plus grande gr[^]ace de ma vie
a [^]et[^]e un foi vive au tr[^]es saint Sacrement
d[^]es mon enfance.

Notre Seigneur m'a appel[^]e
[^]a son service eucharistique
malgr[^]e mon indignit[^]e.

Il m'a conduit de la mort,
et par la mort,
[^]a la vie.

Tout ce qu'on disait impossible,
est arriv[^]e facilement,
et [^]a l'heure de Dieu.

A Dieu seul, amour et gloire!

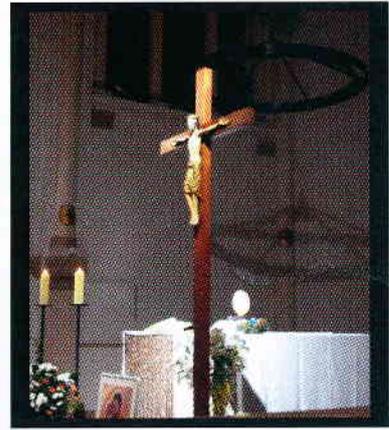
28 Avril 1868

I know we all have been through those times of carrying on about the 19th century pious destruction of the self, and the Founder's « absque sui proprio », but I found these words both moving and refreshing. They are the words of a man in the final years and months of his life. They are the words of a man who has worked tirelessly and quite possibly been regarded by many as a fanatic, by others as a saint. They are the words of a man possessed by a vision, but who has become public property and has been used as a weapon in arguments by religious people. Still, the words have a simplicity and a directness and, most of all, a humility that is quite inspiring.

In this, I am not wanting to slip into a false yearning for the good old days. Actually, I believe that with about twenty year's distance I can see these words more for what they are. They now strike me much less in the context of a fervent and sometimes angry reaction against such as them, they are now outside the constricting world they once represented, they can be free of the mutual suspicion and criticism we indulged in.

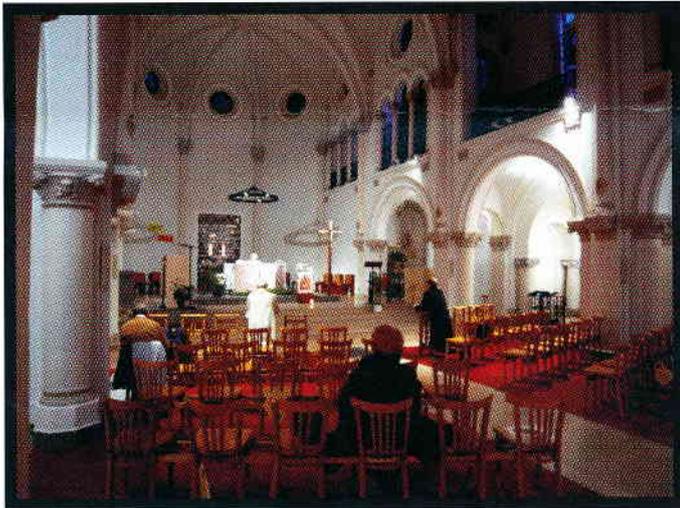
How much they stand out boldly in the context of my current world of corporatised private education. How much they stand out from the demanding and superficial egos of so many people who dominate the world today. How much they spark a sense of yearning but also of recognition of what we have seen and admired in some.

Recently I showed my Year 8 class a Japanese dvd called "Ping Pong". Suffice it to say it is the story of friends, heroes and competition. A remark is made about the effect of playing outside the crazed mindset of egos that must win at all costs. "He is playing," says one of the characters, "against someone who is playing for the sheer fun of it. To face such an opponent is.....fantastic." It is something like that "sheer fun" and total absorption that I sense in these words of Peter-Julien. The individual remains but also disappears into another reality which is transforming. They invite you to enter that world of total absorption.



The world of the triumphant airheads (thanks to Shelley Gare's book title) has nothing to say to and simply does not understand this sort of stuff. I am reminded of what was said to me many years ago by one of the regulars at St Francis': I come here, and I come to the Eucharist because here I get different messages; I see things and I hear things I see and hear nowhere else in my life.

In the context of these few thoughts, it is true also that I got messages in this church that I did not get elsewhere, fascinating and all that the other places are, uncrowded and all as this place might have been. Could be that the absent ones, like their idols, "have eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear...", or is that just a bit of self-justification on the part of those who suddenly find themselves irrelevant? Seems to me also, the seed dies in the hope of rising again, perhaps at another time and perhaps another place.



Ever So Stepford

Over the river from Notre Dame, and up behind Paris' City Hall you'll St-Gervais-St-Protais, another church that traces its history back to the 6th century. The two gentlemen after whom the place is named were Roman soldiers martyred under Nero. Behind the enormous Classical façade is a lovely old Gothic church which houses what I saw somewhere referred to as "Paris's oldest organ". I visited here for prayer and Mass. The sacrament is exposed in the Lady Chapel, behind the main altar in a rather darkened space, and the liturgy is "full blown".

St-Gervais-St-Protais has a long association with church music; Francois Couperin (1668-1733) wrote some to be used here. These days, the church is in the care of les Fraternities Monastiques de Jerusalem (<http://jerusalem.cef.fr/>), a religious congregation of men and women founded only as recently as 1975 by a French priest who had spent some years as a hermit in Africa. This fellow is still alive, I think, and lives in this community. The liturgy in churches run by this congregation is renowned for its excellence. One of the things I really like about the group is that they have moved into old monasteries and rescued them from the fate of being merely tourist attractions. These days they live and pray on le Mont St-Michel and at the Abbey of Vézelay. The Fraternity's presence adds a living dimension to these abbeys and is a strong link with their history and original purpose. Of course, that purpose has to be understood as pointing to a simplicity of life independent of all the hoary old political and historical questions about church wealth, feudalism, Crusades, and whatever else.

Well, I made my way in and took my place amidst the already quite large crowd gathering. Over in a chapel on the south side was a group of about twenty people who looked like they belonged and were there for a reason. In the sanctuary of the church there were the usual fifty or sixty members of the community in their choir habits; kneeling, sitting, squatting on their prayer stools, or in profound bows in a position one might call "bottoms up". Choir habits for this group consist of large, shoulder-to-floor cream capes with monastic hoods. Apart from this, the women wear a white scarf-veil and an almost-denim blue habit with scapular. The men have a brown Benedictine-style outfit. A cynic might say that a special work of the group is to swish around in full-cut flowing garb.

The group on the south side was getting restless and started moving as an untidily pious unit, with varying expressions of reverence towards the Sacrament, to the north side where a smallish organ had been turned on.

They were a visiting choir and had come to enhance tonight's worship. This they did with a few carols and Latin favourites; there were a few warblers and a couple of faltering moments, but they did not disgrace themselves by any means.

One of the characteristics of worship here is the use of music and the expression of prayer in physical gesture. A high-point in all this is that of raised hands during the "lentissimo" singing of the Notre Père. You can sense people getting ready for it. There are also various profundities of bow that go on during doxologies and in moments of reverence.

In terms of images in the church, the most prominent are three Orthodox-style icons. This, for me, relates back to a fascination many of us had back in the 1970s and 1980s although, it must be admitted, these are beautiful images. There is, however, a level at which they push us back through the modern and pious, through the modern and "social realist", into the Byzantine. Here (watch out for flying generalisations among the buttresses), religious images are of distanced and imperious figures. There is little, for example, of the later developing maternal and playful relationship we see when the child dandles on a thrust-out gothic hip, or the child reaches out to touch his mother's face. Certainly, there is nothing of the sentimentality of later images.

The Byzantine has also started to be expressed (since my last visit) in an occasional sign-of-the-cross that becomes a bending-down-to-touch-the-floor. This goes on three times during the singing of an Orthodox-style trisagion: praise of the Holy One, Holy and Strong One, Holy and Immortal One. It's a beautiful piece, but I can do without the floor-touching.

Again, prayers such as these are big moments for some of the regulars, and you can pick the visitors. A youngish woman in front of me made a discreet move out of the rows of stools into the aisle of the church each time one of these moments was approaching. This, actually, was quite considerate and gave her room for expansive physical expression as she bowed and prostrated. Within the community, also, there was a great variety of "levels" and styles; and I guess all that is not a problem. Perhaps I tend to be a bit on the reserved side in this sort of thing, and easily start thinking I am surrounded by odd-bods. This, of course, despite the basically positive idea I have of what these people are doing and of the liturgy in this place.



It's that enduring tension between religion and incarnational Christianity. There are ways in which I am caught in between. I really like to join in Vespers here; there's the large (and relatively grey / bald free community), there's the expanse of a darkening cathedral, the presence of a crowd of people, some simple but lovely musical settings, AND doing it in French. Hate to admit it, but this for me functions in something of the way Latin used do. I understand enough of it to know the general flow, and be carried along by it without getting caught up in details. It seems to me something like Vespers can afford to err on the side of pure praise and reflection, without the need to be "relevant". The Eucharist on the other hand, I think, does not have the same latitude. What I understood of the sermon tonight gave me a sense that it was all a bit "other worldly" and "conceptual", without having much relationship to anything outside the church, and that is a pity.

Necrology

October

| | | |
|----|----------------------------------|------|
| 9 | Br Francis Ryan (Br Benedict) | 1981 |
| 15 | Br Michael Doyle (Br Paul) | 1970 |

November

| | | |
|----|--|------|
| 3 | Fr William Fox | 1955 |
| | Fr Thomas McNevin | 1980 |
| 11 | Br Michael Scanlon (Br Bernard) | 1998 |
| 26 | Br William Kelleher (Br Peter Julian) | 1973 |

December

| | | |
|----|-------------------|------|
| 8 | Fr Pat Fitzgerald | 1994 |
| 19 | Fr John Flynn | 1977 |
| 21 | Fr Peter Kockx | 1953 |

January 2009

| | | |
|----|------------------|------|
| 4 | Fr Jan Beurskens | 1973 |
| 12 | Fr Pat Downey | 2000 |

