



General Leadership Team Proposes New Approach To Lay Associates



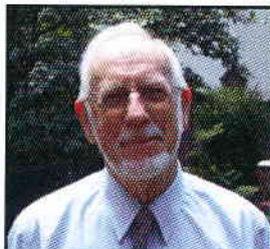
L-R: Fr Andrés Taborda, Fr Giulio Maccali, Fr Sebastian Luistro, Fr Fiorenzo Salvi, Fr Hans Van Schijndel, Fr Sebastião Machado

***Animated by the spirit
of St. Peter Julian Eymard,
we form
the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament,
an Association of faithful
closely linked with
the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament
and recognised by the Church.***

***We thus fulfil
our Christian vocation
and our call to holiness
by following the evangelical path
traced out by Father Eymard.***

Tony McSweeney explains the background of the new proposal.

“IN MEMORY OF ME” As Church in the Service of the World



***Following in the steps of Father Eymard,
we invite all those whom the Spirit directs to the Eucharist,
both priests and lay people,
to become associated with our family and share in its mission.***

***We offer them our continuing support
so that they may find in the Eucharist
the inspiration for their whole life and commitments.***

R.O.L. 43

Time and again in the history of the consecrated life, founders have sought to create movements of spirituality and apostolic engagement which would involve lay persons and priests as well as consecrated religious. Indeed, it happened a number of times that the founding of a religious institute was not part of their original plans; what they hoped primarily to do was to renew the church.

So far as our own Founder is concerned, we see that from the very beginning, his plans for a “eucharistic work” included the involvement of lay people. Doubtless this derived also from his early experience as a Marist with the Third Order of Mary, which had sharpened his perception of the spiritual needs of lay people. As he became increasingly conscious of his eucharistic mission, this conviction was further strengthened by his awareness that the eucharist belonged to the whole church and that the “eucharistic grace” was widely offered and could be lived under different forms.

A constant concern of the Founder

Two phases have been distinguished in this development.¹ Prior to 1859, Eymard envisaged three kinds of members for his institute: ordained religious, lay-brother religious, and associates who lived “in the world,” comprising both priests and lay persons who wished to be associated with the congregation spiritually, and in particular to take an active part in the “work” of perpetual adoration. In his letter to Archbishop Sibour² of 7th May 1856, for example, he spoke already of

the Associates in the world: that is, priests and lay people who would desire to share in the graces and merits of the Society, and who associate themselves actively to the Work of perpetual adoration.

As often happened in the case of other founders over the centuries, Rome then intervened obliging a clear separation between religious and laypersons. The occasion for this, in the present case, was the laudatory brief of the Holy See of 5th January 1859. Thereafter, Eymard sought some alternative form of involving laypersons, turning first to a diocesan union, which he set up in Marseilles on the 7th November of that same year with the name of the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament. Its aim was “to procure for our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament true adorers in spirit and truth, who animated by a great spirit of faith and love would adore, love and serve him in his adorable Sacrament and devote themselves to his greater glory” to which he added the phrase “in fraternal union with the Society of the Blessed Sacrament.”

Once again, he envisaged three categories of members. The first he called “simple” aggregate members who were expected to carry out their duties privately. The second group comprised those who take part in an organized system of adoration, under the direction of the parish priests or of the Superior of a Blessed Sacrament community or of an approved ‘work;’ this group constituted an “association.” The third group is the most interesting of all for us today.

The “Cenacle Model”

What is remarkable about the third group is that its life has a more communitarian dimension and is characterized as a “cenacle,” on the grounds that there is “a more eucharistic life.” The members gather “in a family community and form a little religious cenacle in the world,” Eymard wrote in 1859. Three years later his thought is more fully developed, though always in the same line. The third class is now called a “fraternity,” and he has in mind a small group of three to five members who, living in what he continues to call “a family community,” follow the spiritual rule of the congregation “and thus form a kind of small cenacle of eucharistic and religious life in the world.” Eymard insists on their secular character and does not require any form of vow. In no way did he envisage reproducing the model of a Third Order with which he was familiar from his years as a Marist in Lyons.

The unusual expression, “a family community,” appears to be an attempt to describe its character as a religious group with a fraternal character like that of a family. It may be a reminiscence of the household community of the New Testament (cf. Eph 2, 19 which in the Vulgate used by Eymard was translated as the *familia Dei*). His reference to the Constitutions of the congregation indicates its spiritual affiliation and

¹ See André GUITTON, “Aux origines de la fraternité eucharistique,” *Bulletin Eymard*, 11, 19. Guitton is drawing upon the research of Father Giuseppe Vassalli.

² *The Life and Letters of Saint Peter Julian Eymard*, Vol. 2 The Transition Years 1853-1857. Translated and arranged chronologically by Sister Catherine Marie Caron, SSS. p. 209.

inspiration, while his use of the term “cenacle” reflects the model he liked to refer to when speaking of the communities of the congregation and of the Servants. A letter to Margaret Guillot of 20th September 1856 offers an example; by the expression “our cenacle” in the text that follows he had in mind the recently founded community of rue d’Enfer in Paris.

[W]e do not want to associate with any community already in existence, with its spirit and works. We want to form real adorers of Jesus eucharistic modeled on Our Lady in the Cenacle, adoring and living near the divine Tabernacle. We will begin by gathering around our Cenacle the few souls whom Jesus will choose in order to form them quietly, without glory, for the eucharistic life. Then, when they are ready, we will consult God to know where he wants this new Cenacle to be.³

Wherever Fr. Eymard set up a community, whether in Paris, Angers or Brussels, he made sure that the Aggregation was also got under way very shortly after, grouping people desirous of making a monthly hour of adoration and supporting the congregation’s apostolic mission. He associated existing centers of adoration with the congregation or he created new ones in many places, for example, in Tarare, Amplepuis, Angoulême, Tours, Rouen, Lisieux and Dreux, to name some of the centers where, in fact, there was no presence of the congregation.

The “Marseilles model” - a significant modification of the Founder’s idea

At first sight, the model that has come down to us, with its three classes, may appear to reproduce Eymard’s thinking, but there is a radical difference. While the first class is the same as that envisaged by the Founder, the second one has been modified; to it was assigned the function of covering the expenses for the candles of the exposition. The third, though retaining the name of “fraternity,” no longer has the character of a “cenacle” such as Eymard envisaged it. It is now simply a group that “lives according to the rules that are proper to it.”

Even more serious is the fact that the essential aim of the whole project has been modified. For what is central now is the “eucharistic service,” that is, the organization of the service of adoration in its continuity and solemnity. The three groups in the Marseilles model are distinguished from one another according to the degree of their involvement in this “service.” As Fr. André Guittou so aptly puts it, “Instead of opening up to Pentecost, the *cenacle* has been turned in on itself.”

As a historical fact, then, the “Marseilles model,” reproducing the thinking of De Cuers and Leroyer, replaced the one Eymard had in mind; it was in due course approved by the Holy See in 1875, some seven years after the Founder’s death. This was the model that was exported round the world by the congregation and, it must be said, with an appreciable degree of success. Though it *did not in fact reflect Eymard’s original inspiration*, it bore his name and became, in fact, the characteristic mode of associating people with the congregation’s life and mission.

No doubt it achieved much good, but it is important for us today to recognize that it did represent an impoverishment of Eymard’s original thought. Forgetful of Eymard’s oft-repeated statement that “the hearth has a flame,” it involved a narrowing of focus, being centered exclusively upon adoration as an end in itself to the neglect of any form of service to others or of missionary outreach.

Discerning the “eucharistic grace”

Our Rule, drawing inspiration from Eymard, affirms: “we invite all those whom the Spirit directs to the eucharist .. to become associated with our family and share in its mission.” By this phrase is excluded any form of “membership drive” aimed at the congregation’s self-aggrandizement. It is question rather of response to the action of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives. Eymard was convinced that what he called “the eucharistic grace” was a spiritual gift of attraction to the eucharist that was being given to many people of his time; he believed that his congregations were a providential means of providing people with the help they needed, specifically a careful, graded formation, that would bring their gift to its full potential.

There seems to be ample evidence that what was true in Eymard’s day is no less true in our own at the beginning of the Third Millennium. Where opportunities, in a style appropriate to our time, are being offered to them, many lay people respond; the success of the LITES experience⁴ would seem to validate

³ Idem, pp. 269-270.

⁴ LITES, or “Life in the Eucharist Seminar,” is a form of Eucharistic evangelization and faith formation created by Father Robert Rousseau in the United States that has spread to a number of parts of the world. It consists of a seminar of three or more

this claim. At the same time, it must be admitted that, in many parts of world, we have not as yet been notably successful in providing viable possibilities for lay association. The fact calls for serious reflection upon our part.

Before reflecting upon this fact, however, it may be wise first to look attentively at what the Rule proposes. Two aims are indicated, namely, "to become associated with our family" and to "share its mission;" these aims are identical with those proposed by our Founder. The Rule does not however, specify the form that such association might take; it limits itself simply to the offer of "support" of a continuous kind with a view to assisting people to draw inspiration from the eucharist for their lives and their "commitments."

The sense of caution behind the very general character evident in this number of our Rule reflects the experience of the post-conciliar years. It became obvious, in the light of the vast changes of life style in society and in the Christian community in all its aspects, that the associative style that had been so successful in the period prior to the Second Vatican Council was no longer adapted to the new circumstances.

A classic example of the kind of adaptation needing to be undertaken is provided by the Jesuits' "Sodalities of Our Lady" now transformed into "Communities of Christian Life." The underlying inspiration remains essentially the same, namely to introduce people to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, but even here new developments have modified the way the Exercises themselves are proposed; they are no longer offered necessarily in the form of an intensive retreat, for example, but rather can be spread over a longer period of time, as in the model of the Spiritual Exercises in daily life. At the same time, the general framework of the sodality has been transposed from a devotional pattern to one that reflects the ecclesiology of Vatican II with its sacramental and communitarian character and in the light of a renewed awareness of the social implications of the Gospel flowing from the orientations taken by the 1974-1975 General Congregation of the Society.

The difficulty of finding a model suited to our time

Returning to our own situation, we have seen that the former style of the Eucharistic Fraternity, not to speak of the People's or the Priests' Eucharistic Leagues, is plainly unable to respond to the needs of our present time. A number of attempts have been made to renew these forms of association but they have not, to the best of my knowledge, achieved much success. It is instructive to ask ourselves why. It seems to me that one of the reasons has been our own lack of creativity. For it requires particular gifts to create something new and we cannot blame our men who have made sincere efforts if they have not had the requisite gifts. But there is perhaps more to be said.

Reflecting upon some of these efforts, especially in the light of the experience of LITES, it seems to me, that our methods may also have been inadequate. In some cases we have tried to re-write the statutes of the Eucharistic Fraternity or of the Priests' Eucharistic League and renew the associations with the small groups of people who still belonged to it; with all respect to these people, that seems to be a project doomed from the beginning. Eymard too realized this. One cannot realistically hope to create something new with the people already involved in a pious association. He wrote to Virginie Danion that "nothing is to be gained by associating with such people; the cost is too high. What we need is new men, people who want only Jesus Christ and his glory, and not their own personal likings or attractions (self-love), or zeal (natural restlessness)."⁵

LITES, on the other hand has attracted people who never had been, nor probably would ever have been, attracted to something like the Fraternity. What has motivated them is the desire rather to share with others the discovery of the eucharist and of its relevance for their lives that they had experienced at a seminar. Entering into the training process they began, together with others, to deepen their knowledge of the sacrament and of the Eymardian charism, under the guidance of a member or members of the congregation. This in turn both deepened their motivation and drew them to desire to be associated more

days dealing with five aspects of the Eucharist conducted largely by laypersons. The teaching is communicated largely in story form and a central place is allotted to the sharing of the experience of the sacrament. Participants who wish to apply for the follow-up training can then become members of a LITES team and be presenters in future seminars.

⁵ Guitton, (English) p. 291.

closely with the congregation and its mission. From this experience, it is to be hoped, some new form of association may arise. Other forms of lay collaboration in our ministry, such as the parish mission project in Italy,⁶ would seem to have a similar potential to draw lay people into ever-closer association with the congregation.

The challenge for us will be to know how to encourage such developments and provide the kind of flexible structures of participation that correspond to the real needs within an unfolding experience that we cannot plot out in advance. We do not know as yet how it will evolve.

But do we really want associates?

Though our Founder, as we have seen, deeply desired some form of lay association, and our Rule is proposing it afresh as one of the congregation's tasks, we are also forced to ask ourselves whether the members of the congregation really want it. For in our congregation, as in many others, there are signs that a significant number of religious feel threatened by this kind of development. Let me recount a typical example from an older religious Order dedicated to the poor and the sick.

The institute in question was proprietor of a medieval castle situated in mountainous terrain some distance from nearby towns and villages that had been the scene of an extraordinary event of great significance in the story of the founding of the Order. After many, many years of neglect, it was decided to attempt to make it a more religiously meaningful place and two priests were assigned to the project. However, they failed dismally to make anything of it, contenting themselves in the end with helping out with occasional ministry in the local diocese.

At this point appeared a woman, a psychotherapist, who, in the course of her work, had come to know the Order and had become fascinated by its saintly founder and his work. Learning of the situation, she approached the provincial council offering to live in the castle and attempt a new project. Having little alternative, the major superiors agreed, especially because she struck them as a very capable person and, what is more, had expressed the wish to make the project an explicit expression of the Order's mission. Within a surprisingly short time she had turned the situation completely around, making the castle a thriving center for wholistic Christian healing, a vibrant expression of the Founder's charism in the society of our own day.

The two priests, however, rather than welcome this development, showed her increasing bitterness and hostility, doing their utmost to discredit her efforts and destroy her work; one day they even turned up with a truck to remove as much of the furniture as they were able to! The tragedy is that they refused absolutely to believe that God might be offering them, through this laywoman, a priceless opportunity to renew and enrich their Order's charismatic mission. For them, the woman was a usurper to be driven out of what they considered their exclusive domain.

Need to overcome our fears and welcome new life

I could cite less dramatic examples from our own congregation of hostility and obstruction in regard to the eagerness of lay people to contribute to our mission. We hear the complaint that the lay people want to "take over" our work or our facilities, that they are invading our space, and the like. At times we can sense the fear that the enthusiasm and generosity of lay associates will put us to shame or make demands on us we would prefer not to have, threatening our sense of uniqueness and value or our comfort, challenging us to face our lack of commitment, and putting in question our sense of ownership and control. We seem to assume that we alone are the exclusive custodians of the congregation's mission and we jealously defend our privileged status.

Such reactions provoked by the phenomenon of lay association seem to be not uncommon in communities of consecrated life in our day. They are clearly signs of a pathological tendency in our apprehension of our vocation that calls for healing. They reveal specifically something of our insecurity and our sense of inadequacy and guilt, and the neurotic need to cling to symbols of power and superior status. The tragedy is that we are at times quite willing to allow our charism to wither and die rather than let someone else give it new life for us and with us. Where we ourselves have failed, or have not been willing to invest our time, talents, and energy, we are determined that no one else be allowed to succeed.

⁶ A particularly successful program of conducting in-depth parish missions has been developed in Italy, in which there is a significant collaboration of lay people.

For fear of being shown up in some way, we deny ourselves the possibility of revitalizing our mission, and we deprive ourselves of enjoying the benefit of considerable personal and spiritual enrichment.

Reflection on this regrettable rejection of the opportunity of new life may serve to introduce a consideration of the ecclesiological transformation that is currently under way in our church and that underlies the worldwide movement of lay association with religious communities. If, as I believe, this movement represents a significant "sign of the times" and a wonderful opportunity for new and rich developments of our eucharistic charism, it is all the more important for our younger religious to understand the factors that are at work in this development and the theological principles that are at stake.

For, while the psychological dynamics responsible for the rejection of lay participation on the part of many religious are, no doubt, to be located in the area of a sense of personal inadequacy, the ecclesiological and theological principles to which they turn, ideologically, to defend their entrenched refusal are seriously out of date. They are hanging on to attitudes and models that have characterized relations between religious and lay folk for many centuries of the church's history, but it is precisely these very same attitudes and principles which Vatican II has decisively repudiated.

Tony McSweeney SSS

(In his commentary on the Rule of Life Tony McSweeney intends exploring the theological basis for the Congregation's involvement with lay associates. We hope to print extracts from his study at a later date. Editor)

News from the Melbourne LITE Team



The Melbourne LITE team began 2007 with a well attended seminar at our city church of St. Francis and we were very pleased to pick up three new team members. We put on LITE also in the parishes of Bennetswood and Donvale and began to relax. Then we got a late request to present at Airport West in December – not a good month, but you can't refuse a request. The Parish Priest there is Franco Cavarra who wanted the program before the end of the year because he was heading to Sydney in early 2008 to prepare the Stations of the Cross for World Youth Day. (He directed opera before joining the priesthood).

However, 2008 has been quiet. We presented at Bayswater in April but we haven't been able to get any other parish commitments for last year. Many parishes have focussed all their energies on World Youth Day. I've also found that several parish priests are so pressured they just don't have the time to even consider our request or read the brochure. A sad reflection on the state of the Church at the present time! However, we have four bookings for 2009.

Frank O'Dea SSS