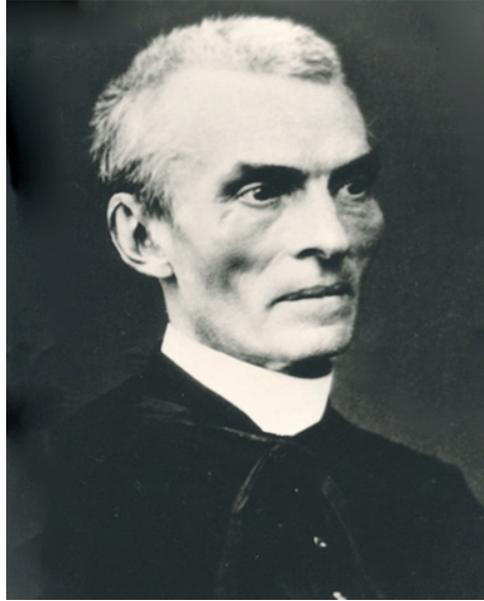


Life Story



St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868)

By Fr. André Guitton, SSS

1 – Childhood and Youth (1811-1834)

Peter Julian Eymard was born on February 4, 1811 at La Mure (Isère) in a simple family of craftsmen who are profoundly Christian. Very early in life, he manifests a lively piety towards the Blessed Sacrament and expresses his desire to be a priest on the occasion of his First Communion on March 16, 1823. But his father opposes his plans. In the shrine of Notre-Dame du Laus he finds a supporting comfort that allows him to persevere in his decision. While working in the family workshop, he secretly studies Latin to prepare himself for the seminary. Finally, in June 1828, his father allows him to enter the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Marseilles. After a few months, he is forced to leave the novitiate due to bad health. He returns to La Mure to be cured. His father dies on March 3, 1831. Peter Julian enters the major seminary of Grenoble, and three years later, on July 20, 1834, he is ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Philibert de Bruillard.

2 – Priest in the Diocese of Grenoble (1834-1839)

For five years, he exercises his ministry in the diocese, first as vicar in Chatte and then, starting in July 1837, as pastor in Monteynard near La Mure. He gives himself completely to his ministry and takes time to deepen his intellectual and pastoral formation. His sermons of those days show a careful preparation, and the *Vade mecum* that he begins in 1836 as a kind of side journal sets down a study program that he imposes on himself. His annual retreats give witness to his spiritual life – austere, tainted with Jansenism, and centered on the cross in a sorrowful way.

On this point, he received a special grace on the Calvaire de Saint-Romans during his years at Chatte. This announces and begins a change. It opens him to a spirituality marked by love. It is the grace of the Rocher de Saint-Romans.

Due to his pastoral zeal, Fr. Eymard renews his parish in a short time. However, he remains attracted to the religious life. After some procrastination, Bishop de Bruillard allows him to leave the diocese and enter the Society of Mary.

3 – Marist Priest (1839-1856)

1 – at Belley (1839-1844)

On August 20, 1839, Father Eymard begins his novitiate in Lyons. In November 1839, Fr. Jean-Claude Colin, superior general, entrusts him with the work of spiritual director in the college seminary of Belley. It is there that he makes religious profession on February 16, 1840. His ministry with the children and youth is very fruitful. Eymard left only a few documents from this period of his life: his personal retreat notes, and some instructions that are difficult to identify. He begins a correspondence with his sister, some confreres, and some family friends.

2 – at Lyons (1844-1851)

In November 1844, Fr. Colin calls him to Lyons to be provincial, with the function of assistant general. For seven years, he is part of the government of the Society of Mary, and from 1846 he is also visitor general. In December 1845, Fr. Colin entrusts him with the direction of the Third Order of Mary. Fr. Eymard commits himself to the development of this secular branch of the Marists with the zeal that he brings to everything he does. The Third Order would divide itself into different branches, according to the states of life: the virgins, Christian mothers, little girls, young people, married men, and even a group for priests. Outside of Lyons, there are affiliated groups, such as those in La Mure, Tarare, and other parishes. He is concerned with forming persons with follow-up teachings on the interior life, and accompanies a certain number through spiritual direction. For the women, he proposes “living like religious in the midst of the world”. Without any doubt, this was not the vision of Fr. Colin. Nevertheless, under the impetus of Fr. Eymard, the Third Order experiences a great expansion and receives the structure and essential elements of its rules.

Few studies describe in detail the part he had in the administration and animation of the Society of Mary. On the other hand, we can follow him more easily in his preaching. In Lyons, he preaches twice the Lenten series at La Charité. He also participates in the parish missions at Dionay in 1849, at Chalon-sur-Saône in 1850, and at Saint-Chamond in 1851. He also preaches a retreat to the students in the major seminary of Grenoble in 1850.

Within these years, two events will orient the spiritual life of Eymard in a decisive way:

– on May 25, 1845, while presiding the procession of Corpus Christi in the parish of St. Paul in Lyons, he receives the confirmation of an attraction to preach Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ Eucharistic, and he chooses St. Paul as his patron – this great lover of Jesus Christ.

– on January 21, 1851, while praying in Notre-Dame de Fourvière, he is deeply impressed by the lack of formation of laypeople and priests, and the little devotion that is shown to the Blessed Sacrament. Something must be done: a community of men... Later he considers this grace as a grace of vocation.

In the month of September 1851, Fr. Eymard leaves Lyons carrying with him this calling.

3 – at La Seyne-sur-Mer (1851-1855)

Named superior of the college of La Seyne-sur-Mer, he must rectify a difficult situation. Under his direction, the college soon experiences a singular development. His attraction for the Eucharist grows. He is involved in the Work of Nocturnal Adoration in Toulon, and animates the group of Young People of La Seyne, organized by Commander Raymond de Cuers. On April 18, 1853, during his thanksgiving after Mass, he receives a grace of strength and sweetness that makes him capable of undertaking and enduring everything to found an Order dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament. He is in contact with Fr. Hermann Cohen, Fr. Brunello from Marseilles, and de Cuers. He writes up a draft of Constitutions, and recruits some young men who share his ideal. Through Fr. Jandel, an intermediary in Rome, he submits his project to the Pope. But Fr. Julian Favre, the superior general, is opposed to a work that does not enter into the purpose of the Society of Mary. In September 1855, Eymard is exhausted and removed from the responsibility of the college. He goes to rest at the novitiate at Chaintré near Macon.

4 – at Chaintré (1855-1856)

While composing the Manual of the Third Order of Mary, he continues reflecting on his plan. Finally, he submits to whatever decision that Pius IX would give when Fr. Favre meets him in the spring of 1856. As things turned out during his audience with the Pope, the question of Eymard did not come up. As a result, on

April 22, 1856 when Fr. Eymard meets Fr. Favre at Chaintré to inquire about Rome's answer, he receives only the response of his superior – a refusal. Then, Eymard asks to be released from his vows. His request is made in a way that Fr. Favre agrees on the spot. This decision does not go without some complaints when he meets with his General Council. At the insistence of Eymard, Fr. Favre complies to execute his decision, and the former leaves Lyons to make a retreat of election in Paris.

In this long Marist period, we have a rather extensive documentation, especially concerning the Third Order of Mary and his personal retreats. His correspondence increases with his confrères and others, particularly with Marguerite Guillot, directress of the Third Order of virgins. We also have available a large number of sermons or instructions, classified under the title 'before 1856'. These are sometimes without dates, and so we cannot place them with absolute certainty to the time of his ministry at Grenoble, to his time with the Marists, or even to a later period.

4 – The Founder (1856-1868)

1 – From the Foundation to the Approbation (1856-1863)

Fr. Eymard arrives in Paris on April 30, 1856. For greater freedom he does not stay with the Marist community. On May 1st, he begins a retreat and confides his case to Archbishop Dominique Sibour, who entrusts his auxiliary and cousin, Bishop Léon Sibour, to study the documents. After several meetings, the answer of the Archbishop is negative: he believes the work is purely contemplative. Fr. Eymard replies, "We want to adore, but we also want others to adore". And he explains his project of the Work of the First Communion of adults in Paris. Archbishop Sibour is won over. In that very meeting, he receives Fr. Eymard and his companion, Fr. De Cuers, and gives them full authorization to begin the planned work.

Thus, May 13, 1856 marks the birth of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. The following day, he is relieved of his Marist commitments. In the succeeding days, the relations with the Society of Mary become strained, but he always remains united with them at heart. He is convinced that Mary led him to the Eucharist.

The beginnings are more difficult than we can ever imagine. The archdiocese places at the work's disposition a property on 114 rue d'Enfer (today 88 avenue Denfert-Rochereau in the 14th district), but under precarious conditions. Unknown in Paris, Eymard has no contacts, no resources, and no vocations. While preparing things, he waits more than 6 months for recruits to form a community.

On January 6, 1857, he inaugurates the first adoration community with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament; the Society now has 4 members. It is in poverty and even destitution that life is organized. Gradually, the community grows. At the end of the year, the Archbishop puts the property up for sale. Eymard, lacking resources, cannot dream to acquire it; he is obliged to move. Finally, in the same district next to the Observatory, he finds two adjacent, but separate lots, 66 – 68 on rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques. Once the building on number 68 was prepared, the community transfers on Easter 1858. Eymard restores the building next door at number 66 and, in May 1858, he welcomes Marguerite Guillot and two companions to prepare the foundation of the women's branch.

With the help of laypeople, and members of the St. Vincent de Paul conference, he gathers young workers in the district who had not been catechized. With great patience, he prepares them for their First Communion. On August 15, 1858, he finds joy in giving Communion to 12 young people; the following day they receive Confirmation. Thus the Work of the First Communion of adults is born and grows, in one of the poorest areas of Paris, the barrière d'Arcueil. In December, 4 he goes to Rome with Fr. De Cuers, and, on January 5, 1859, Pius IX signs the laudatory brief of his Institute.

That same year, on November 8, 1859, Bishop de Mazenod calls Eymard to Marseilles to inaugurate a second community. He entrusts it to Fr. De Cuers. Rapidly the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament, that associates the faithful to the work of adoration, experiences a great expansion.

Three years later, on December 29, 1862, he founds a third community in Angers. From then on, Eymard does not delay in requesting Pius IX for the pontifical approval of his Institute. He goes to Rome for a second time. On June 3, 1863, he receives from Pius IX the decree of approbation, dated May 8th.

In the course of these years, Fr. Eymard does a lot of preaching to his religious, to the community of the future Servants of the Blessed Sacrament, and to the faithful in the chapel. He also goes to the churches of Paris, where his reputation grows. He works constantly at composing the Constitutions. Oftentimes he jots down mere drafts of chapters or numbers, according to an idea that is evolving and becoming clearer. His correspondence becomes more frequent either with his friends in Lyons, or with persons that he is directing.

2 – The Constitutions and the Cenacle (1863-1865)

An intermediate period follows, when Fr. Eymard consolidates his work. He reunites his religious in Paris in August 1863 for a special retreat. An initial group commits itself with canonical vows according to the Rule that was submitted to Rome for approval. In order to respond to the suggestions that he receives, he visits several religious Institutes to gather material to be used for a better edition. To do this, he leaves the capital at the beginning of October 1863 and, for an entire month, goes to the château de Saint-Bonnet in the mountains of Lyons. His friend Mr. Blanc de Saint-Bonnet welcomes him and Eymard works on a new edition of the Constitutions of his Institutes. These would be printed the following year for his Religious in April 1864, and for the Servants in the month of August.

It is at this time that the Servants are established as a canonical community at Angers, under the patronage of Bishop Guillaume Angebault. Marguerite Guillot, under the name of Mother Marguerite, is named the first Superior General. The foundation takes place on May 26, 1864. From the month of December 1863, Fr. Eymard commits himself totally to realize a project that is close to his heart; namely, the acquisition of the Cenacle in Jerusalem, in order to make of it a place of magnificent worship towards the Eucharist. He makes many inquiries with interested parties, and even approaches Pius IX. On two occasions he sends Fr. De Cuers to shed light on the possibilities. The project runs into insurmountable obstacles that Fr. Eymard had not foreseen. He goes to Rome on November 10, 1864 to plead his case. His interventions with the Congregation of the Propaganda lead to nothing. Since the question had to be decided by a general Congregation of the cardinals, it was delayed until after the celebrations of Christmas, and constantly reset to a later general assembly.

Tired of waiting, but without leaving Rome, Fr. Eymard retires to the Redemptorists, villa Caserta, near Saint-Mary Major. On January 25, 1865, he begins a retreat. Keeping one eye on his case, he spends nine weeks under the vision of God. The notes that he takes day after day reveal his state of soul, his hopes, his desires, his sufferings and his trials. During this time of purely searching for God and His Will, he discovers that what is important is not the success of the Society by me, or even the Cenacle, but another reality: the stripping of his entire being, of his self. Nevertheless, he dares to believe in the success of his project.

On March 21, 1865, the feast of St. Benedict, at the heart of his trials and during his thanksgiving, he receives the unique favor of 'the gift of his personality' and he commits himself to it by vow. He summarizes this event with these simple words: Nothing for me as a person – with a prayer for the grace that is essential to this gift: nothing BY me. The Model of this gift: the Incarnation of the Word. The text that follows is drawn from M. Olier's *Catéchisme de la vie intérieure*. Fr. Eymard had undergone a major mystical experience that transformed him radically, and made him ready to face any decision, even one contrary to his desire.

This decision is made known to him at the end of the month: it is negative. Apparently, it was a total failure. Fr. Eymard leaves Rome on March 30, 1865 in a spirit of abandonment, with a unique treasure: the 'Interior Cenacle', that pure love which took place in the Incarnation when Jesus sacrificed his human self.

3 – The Growth of the Work and the Death of Fr. Eymard (1865-1868)

The life of Fr. Eymard is marked in a definite way by this grace of the total gift of self. With his teachings and his intense activities, he becomes the apostle of the Cenacle, as Fr. Saint Pierre remarks. He opens two religious communities in succession in Brussels: one in 1866, the other in 1867. In 1866, he also acquires a property in Saint-Maurice-Montcouronne (Essonne) and transfers the novitiate there from its former place at the motherhouse in Paris. This same year he founds a second community of Servants in Nemours (Seine-et-Marne).

With the same zeal, Fr. Eymard continues preaching in his communities and outside. To the very end, he works at perfecting the text of the Constitutions of his religious. Then, trials begin to pour down on him. Fr. De Cuers, his companion from the very beginning, attracted by an entirely contemplative life, requests to leave the Society; Fr. Eymard keeps hold of him by allowing him to follow his attraction outside, while remaining in contact with him. Badly started, the community of Nemours is obliged to close. It is a financial and moral catastrophe for the Servants, and doubles in a personal failure for Eymard that causes a loss of all credibility with the bishops. He has health problems. Above all, he passes through a time of spiritual dryness, a 'dark night' where he finds no consolation except in his fidelity as a day laborer carrying out work that becomes heavier and heavier. His last retreat at Saint-Maurice, from April 27 to May 2, 1868, echoes this mystical trial.

His preaching and correspondence contain signs of the richness of his interior life. He wants to be the knight of pure love. Fr. Eymard is captured by the Eucharistic mystery: he celebrates it, he contemplates it, and he preaches it with a fire that touches hearts.

On July 17, 1868, under doctor's orders, he leaves Paris to rest in his native Matheysine region, where his sisters are waiting for him. When he arrives in La Mure on the night of July 21st, he is an exhausted man returning to his family home: crushed by a cerebral blood clot, he has only a few days to live. In the early afternoon of Saturday, August 1, 1868, Peter Julian Eymard renders his soul to God, far from his brothers. The veneration of the townsfolk is manifested spontaneously: the saint is dead.

After the ordinary process of investigation in Grenoble and in Paris, started in 1898, Fr. Eymard is beatified by Pius XI on July 12, 1925. On December 9, 1962, at the end of the first session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII proclaims him a saint. On December 9, 1995, Pope John Paul II inserts his name in the universal calendar of the Church, and fixes his liturgical feast on August 2, recognizing him as "an outstanding apostle of the Eucharist".

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