

History

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Saint Peter-Julian Eymard and his work in the world

The publication of the writings of Father Eymard, which can be now consulted on the internet site www.eynard.org (<http://www.eynard.org/>), enables a better knowledge of his physiognomy and an assessment of the importance of his work in his day. The printed edition, a monumental work – planned to be in 16 volumes – will offer to researchers a vast documentation, almost complete. These works will foster a better understanding of his thinking, his evolution and particularly the intuitions that guided his life as a founder.

His story unfolds also through the works that he founded and that transmit his message across all the continents. This route can only be succinct. How describe, in effect, in a few pages the history of hundreds of communities over a century and a half of existence? So, let us briefly recall the history of the Institutes that he founded, that of the male Religious and that of the female Servants of the Blessed Sacrament.

To promote the Kingdom of God through the Eucharist

This is the ideal that he proposed to his disciples, priests, male and female religious and lay people. His motto is: *Your Kingdom come!* Without a doubt this is the common good of the whole Church and of many Congregations in the 19th century. What is original in his proposal is his approach: through the Eucharist and the growth of the Church to bring about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Facing the spiritual needs of his day, he discovered he had to return to the source of faith, the person of Christ Jesus, present and revealed in a special way in the Eucharist. The Curé of Ars had not acted otherwise in rekindling the Christian faith and religious practice in his parish. And Eymard himself, during his two years as a parish priest in Monteynard, had already experienced this.

The particular graces that he received – May 25th 1845 at Saint-Paul in Lyons, January 21st 1851 at the Sanctuary of Fourvière and April 18th at La Seyne-sur-Mer, led him to become the founder of the religious Institute dedicated to the Eucharist: in it he would find his inspiration, his way of life, his perfection. In the correspondence with Virginie Danion he best expresses the synthesis where the Eucharistic mystery is the principle, centre and theme of all Christian life: “*The divine Eucharist,*” he wrote, “*is great enough, powerful enough to suffice; everything must spring from it and return to it; its spirit must be ONE and spring from this divine heart. Its rule, its works, its means, everything is in the adorable Host. Would to God that we should be holy enough and set on fire with love to see it and read it in Jesus Christ Eucharistic!*” (September 27th 1857).

Shortly before, he had told the same correspondent about the double end of his Institute, both contemplative and apostolic: “*We do not want only to adore, serve and love Jesus-Eucharist, but also to make him known, adored, served and loved by all hearts*” (August 24th 1857).

The Religious of the Blessed Sacrament

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament we have recalled the modest and difficult beginnings of the first foundation on May 13th 1856 in Paris, Rue d’Enfer, at the present 14th arrondissement, the poorest area of the capital. In the month of March 1858 the community was established at Rue du Fauburg Saint-Jacques. It is here where Father Eymard inaugurated, with the laity, the Work of the First Communion to Adults. Then he opened new cenacles, in 1859 at Marseilles, in 1862 at Angers, in 1866 in Brussels and at Saint Maurice (Essonne), and finally a second community in Brussels. At his death, on August 1st 1868, the Congregation had six communities and fifty religious.

The succession was difficult. The limited number of religious, the difficulty about discerning the charism of the Founder, an attempt to affiliate the Society to a monastic order, the anticlericalism of the 1880's which contributed to the closure of the communities of Angers and Arras: so many trials seemed like a crisis of growth, which ended at the General Chapter of 1887, when the society finally found its stability and committed itself towards the future. New communities were founded: 1886 in Rome, 1890 in Montreal, 1899 at Bolzano in the Tyrol, and others in France. This boom was short lived. The anti-congregational laws of 1903 caused all the communities of France to close and the regrouping of most of French religious in Belgium, where the houses of formation were re-established.

In the course of this agitated period, some Eucharistic works flourished: such as the First Communion of Adults, the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament, the Work of priest-adorers, participation in International Eucharistic Congresses. Father Tesnière published writings under the name of Father Eymard. Some periodicals spread his thought and promoted adoration and frequent communion. Shrines were centres of adoration, catechesis, welcome and initiation to the Eucharist.

An Expansion in Europe and beyond

In reality, these dramatic events brought about an international boom, hardly imaginable some years previously. In the span of a decade, communities were opened well beyond France: in Turin and New York (1900), in Holland (1902), Buenos Aires, Argentina (1903), Tolosa, Spain, and Santiago, Chile (1908).

The First World War marked a halt. In 1919 the community of Paris was re-established, then others in France: Trévoux, Marseilles, Angers, Brusque. The expansion continued as well in various countries where the Congregation was already present and beyond. In 1919 a community was also opened at Le Noirmont in Switzerland, others in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Beyond the frontiers of Europe in 1926 there was a foundation made in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1927 at Montevideo, Uruguay, and in 1929 at Melbourne.

In 1925 the Beatification of Father Eymard constituted an important event. 1931 marked a stage in the organisation of the Congregation: the General Chapter decided to create four Provinces in order to ensure better animation of the communities and to enabled the new entities thus to set up appropriate autonomy. The Congregation counted then about 550 religious. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, there were about 950 religious.

The expansion in the young Churches of Africa and Asia

In 1948 one of the first communities was established in Africa at Maputo (once called Lourenço Marquès) in Mozambique. This was followed a little later by Burundi. Successively communities were opened in Brazzaville, Congo (1957), Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (1958) and the following year at Dakar, Senegal. Decades had to pass before young Africans entered the Congregation. Today, with communities in the Cameroons and Uganda, Africa has houses of inter-African formation, a novitiate at Kouidiadiène, Senegal, and a scholasticate at Kinshasa.

Asia has known a similar development since its first community founded in 1955 in Manila (Philippines) and the same year at Colombo (Sri Lanka). In 1964 a community was established at Bombay (India). Finally, in 1970 a group of Vietnamese religious founded a community in Saigon (Vietnam). This was an act of faith in this period of war, which became a challenge in 1975 when there was only one religious remaining, Father Dominique Hien. Today, Vietnam has more than 90 religious spread out in twelve communities.

As of 2012, the members of the Congregation number 909: 691 religious – 7 bishops, 605 clerics and 79 brothers – 160 scholastics and 58 novices. Secularisation has strongly left its mark on the life of the Church in our Western context and caused the closures of communities, apart from the aging of personnel. Growth today is happening above all in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The renewal of the Institute is involved in the 'New Evangelisation' of our old lands of Christianity: the Eucharist is the source and centre of this.

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