

Solemnity of the Feast of St Peter Julian Eymard, Priest

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Anthony F. McSweeney SSS

1. The Man

“He was a tall thin man.. and he was certainly a saint, with the sweetest patience in all his dealings with the members of the College... He was a man also of the deepest spiritual knowledge, with a recollection and a spirit of piety which shone in all his actions.”

These words are from the Memoirs of Father Julian Tenison Woods, scientist and collaborator with Saint Mary MacKillop. Woods had been helped spiritually by Eymard when teaching English in the 1850s at the Marist College in Toulon in France where Eymard was the director.

“Though rather shy and reserved,” Woods went on, “his conversation was charming and instructive.... He was .. retiring with a deep hidden devotion, a spiritual life with the spirit of the Blessed Eucharist..”

2. Eucharist

Eymard became fascinated at a quite early age by the Eucharist. For long it was his dream to set up “thrones” for Eucharistic adoration across Europe, indeed throughout the world. However, an important shift in his thinking took place in the latter years of his life. Granted deep spiritual insights into sacramental Communion, he came to see with great penetration that, received during the celebration of the sacred mysteries, Communion was the means whereby the Lord wanted the Eucharist to achieve its purpose. This increasingly became the focus of his ministry.

He was especially fascinated by the words of today’s Gospel: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

He was wont to recall again and again many of the great traditional images: the heavenly banquet and the manna, the wedding feast of the Lamb, the invitation to take our place at the King’s table. He loved to assure the ragged street urchins he evangelized in Paris that they were princes called to sit at the table of the King.

He spoke of Christ becoming incarnate once again in us and making us “consorts of the divine nature.” “The Holy Spirit makes us other Christs,” he assured his hearers, “the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus in a single body.”

In his final years he spoke especially of the divine *formative activity* in the communicant.

3. Christ ‘formed’ within us

“Jesus forms himself in us, like a mother,” he declared, using an image quite untypical of his time. He can turn this around too, saying, “*we are like a mother begetting Jesus in ourselves.*”

In his preaching of the final years, he returns again and again to this formative activity. “Our Lord’s love is personal,” Eymard said on another occasion. “He comes to you for your sake. The Mass is for communion of the priest and the people, and our Lord gives himself wholly to each one. He is like a mother: he has given us new birth, he nurses us and *watches over our education.*”

Here we have one of Eymard’s most original contributions to our understanding of the Eucharist.

He sees this “formation” as operating on different levels in the person of the communicant.

A. At a deep spiritual level.

At a level we cannot directly experience, Christ is making us into his ecclesial body. At this Marriage Feast of the Lamb, the Lord is betrothing us to himself; the divine is acting in the depths of our soul, divinizing us, making us communicants of the divine nature. Healing our deep wounds and impressing his love upon our hearts by Communion, he extends through us and across time his incarnate presence in the world – all in order to empower us, in our turn, to love as he has loved.

For that reason this educative work, if it is to be real for us, must be carried on also on the level of our conscious awareness.

B. On the psychological level

Here, on the level of our self-awareness, he taught that there are two distinct attitudes we must cultivate: one is active, involving spiritual “work,” the other is receptive.

Referring to the active side, he urges us to be eager to know the Lord, to want to learn the truth from him who is truth, to penetrate into the meaning of his mysteries. He encouraged his hearers to plumb the depths of Christ’s love and goodness, reflecting upon what communion means, on the love from which it arose, and pondering what it cost Jesus to give himself for us. He was particularly insistent that we make our communion a dialogue, engaging in an intimate sharing of our life with the Lord Jesus – our experiences, our feelings, our joys and our sorrows.

It is this spiritual “work,” I believe, that gives us access to the deep spiritual energy within.

For that reason our own efforts must give way to the gift we are given. Here is where the receptive side comes into play, for Eymard wants us to become open to what *the Lord* is doing within us. He invites us to move from our ideas, from a purely notional approach, to an attitude of receptivity, attentive to the Lord who, Eymard assures us, will “reveal,” will “disclose” himself to the communicant (these are his own words) in order to awaken in him or her an answering love.

He calls this “personal knowing” or “knowledge by feeling, not by reasoning,” where what he has in mind are not superficial sentiments of devotion so much as our deepest aspirations and longings. To encourage us here Eymard multiplies the images that speak of intimate relationship, calling Christ a companion, a friend, a brother, a mother, a lover, the betrothed.

4. A challenge to grow

As I attend to his teaching, I may well become aware that it is all very far from my own so much poorer experience! His ardent words awaken me to my own spiritual mediocrity. How many times have I taken communion in a perfunctory way – my attention distracted, my ardour dulled by habit and routine!

Communion is life, as Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel; and for us human beings, life is relationship: loving and being loved – reaching out in compassion – sharing our deepest joys and sorrows – entering into the intimate knowing of friendship and love.

So let us thank the Lord for saints like Peter Julian Eymard. They serve as benchmarks for us, revealing to us what God’s grace is capable of achieving in the human soul – and in *my* soul!

May Peter Julian Eymard’s example awaken our deepest desires!

May it kindle our most ardent aspirations as we today approach this holy table. For here is the proof of how infinitely precious we are; here is the call to become, breathtakingly, more deeply – and together – one with the divine!