

Eymard on Holy Communion

Some texts on the Eucharist from the final years of the life of Saint Peter Julian Eymard

Saint Peter Julian Eymard was all his life an ardent promoter of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, but as the years went by he re-centred his thinking, focussing attention increasingly on the primary importance of holy Communion. The centre of attention in his Eucharistic teaching had shifted. The celebration of the sacred mysteries, with a particular accent on sacramental communion, was now to become the point from which he would regard the mystery rather than, as formerly, the presence of Christ in the reserved Sacrament whether in the monstrance or the tabernacle.

In this way he moved Eucharistic devotion in the direction of what would be officially taught in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Adoration then became, not so much a purely personal devotion as a way of deepening in ourselves the effects of the sacrament we have celebrated and received in the midst of the community of the faithful.

What did Eymard really teach?

Unfortunately, this rich teaching is not adequately represented in the popular publications of his writings, known since the late nineteenth century as the “Series.” These widely-read editions do not, in fact, accurately represent Eymard’s mature teaching.

They also contain a number of ways of thinking about the mystery that are no longer accepted in sound Eucharistic theology, though common enough in his time. One example of these is the idea of the “Eucharistic virtues.” In this view, Jesus’ presence in the sacrament is thought of as constituting a particular state of being, distinct from those of both his former earthly life and his present glorious existence. On the basis of this view, Eymard likes to speak of “the Eucharistic Jesus,” as though he were somehow distinct from “the earthly Jesus” and “the heavenly Jesus.”

Jesus is imagined, according to this approach, as being a voluntary captive imprisoned in the species of the sacrament, deprived of dignity, his appearance concealed, the ability to act and interact curtailed by the lifeless and immobile condition of the form of the sacrament – an inert substance, bread. He is pictured as practicing, and so providing for us an example of various virtues such as patience, humility, poverty and penance, and the like. This kind of pious imagining is aimed at creating in the reader a feeling of pathos and sympathy for Jesus and so arousing his devotion. However popular such imaginings continue to be for some, they do not correspond to a correct teaching on the Eucharist.

For, inasmuch as he is now the glorious risen Lord, Jesus is not in any way constrained or conditioned – as Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out many centuries ago – by the Eucharistic species or “accidents” (as they are called in theology).

To return now to the texts published as Eymard’s “writings,” a word must be said about their true nature. Essentially, they consist of a rather artificial compilation of scattered materials drawn from a variety of documents left after his death. Intended for devotional reading in the second half of the nineteenth century, they are in no way a reliable source for understanding, in today’s church, the real depth and development of his teaching.

Much of this published material was never, in any case, preached or written in the form we

have it today in the booklets. The first editor, Fr Albert Tesnière, SSS, felt free to combine the texts he found in a variety of sources. These included, for example, personal notes from the Founder's journals or notes taken by others while Eymard was preaching. Tesnière collected all the pieces he could find and then combined them into units purporting to be a talk here, a sermon or conference there. One such unit might consist of an introduction from some notes from the year 1846, followed by another section from a hearer's notes taken while Eymard preached a sermon in 1860, and so on. Some of the source-material, furthermore, was scrappy indeed – scribbled jottings while travelling, for example – which the editor then wrote up into a more literary form and used as indicated.

The important thing is that such re-worked and mostly occasional texts hardly represent Eymard's real, pondered and mature thinking about the Eucharist.

More recent studies have brought to light the much richer and indeed quite remarkable teaching of his later years, not nearly as marked by the limitations of his time as the published texts are. We reproduce here are some of these texts, taken from a study published by Canadian Blessed Sacrament Father, Lauréat Saint-Pierre, in 1968.

Exploration of the implications of holy Communion

The principal focus of Eymard's mature teaching, as I remarked above, is on holy Communion, which – contrary to the custom of his time – he believed people should receive frequently.

[It is important] to receive [communion]; the more demanding is your life, the more you need to receive. We approach the sacrament, not because we are saints, but in order to become holy. The harder the soul has to work, the more it must eat.

Let us now peruse some examples of how Eymard preached in the final year or so of his life. We can begin with some extracts from his sermons for the 40-hours devotions in the chapel of the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament, a group that formed “a guard of honour” and wore a monstrance as a symbol.

The Saint focused his hearers' attention above all on the mass which leads to holy Communion and produces in us that loving knowledge called wisdom:

6 May, 1868. Our Lord's love is personal. He comes to you for your sake. The mass is for communion of the celebrant 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. In the light of such love, how sad to face the facts! Throughout the world, there are 250,000 masses daily without interruption, and at many of them there is no attendance. One becomes tangled in accessory devotions by which self-regard, pettiness, personal interests are served... How far are we from having faith in love...

8 May, 1868. And they were open to God's teaching... Only the best masters are chosen for the education of a prince. When a prince is grown up and discerning, the king himself will teach him the art of governing, for he alone has experience. We are princes of Jesus Christ, of royal blood and race. To form us during childhood, our Lord entrusted us to apostles and ministers. They taught us about God and prepared us to meet him; but they could not make us feel him. Our Lord then came personally to us in our first communion in order to reveal himself to us. No words or books could do that. This is the glory of the Eucharist that it brings us in touch with God. To be complete, our education must come from Jesus. The soul had only notions of our Lord before receiving him; it knows him personally in holy Communion. To know our Lord truly, we must meet him in person. It is like learning about truth from Truth itself. Like the sun, our Lord is known experientially: not by reasonings, but by himself, by his own radiance. And that acquaintance urges our heart to discover the meaning of his

mysteries and to plumb the depth of his love and goodness. The experience of Jesus makes us love him. Mere knowledge would not be sufficient; it must rouse and motivate us. Adoration must not stop at the coverings, but penetrate to the heart of mysteries, that is, adoration must grow out of communion. How difficult it is to inspire someone with a love of the supernatural. In holy Communion, our Lord gives us the impression of love and thereby the motive and the heroism of love. All that comes only from communion: Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man, you will not have life in you. 'Life', that is love, generosity. We draw that life only from its source, our Lord.

He is here following St. Augustine who had used the images of nursing and nurturing in much the same way as we have just read. More particularly, the passage reveals an Eymard who could reproach himself "for not desiring holy communion enough" and who took the resolve to live closer to "the constituent and nutritive grace of that divine sacrament."

The tone of expression shows that the author was speaking from his own deep personal experience rather than from theory. The text provides a striking example of Eymard's conviction that "superiors who are founders have received a divine touch."

Drawing inspiration from the great figures of tradition

That which lends authority to his words and persuades the hearer, according to Lauréat Saint-Pierre, is not only the echo of his personal experience – important though it is – but also his deep assimilation of the great ancient writers, especially Saint Augustine in his classic work, *The City of God*.

All the elements of Augustine's notion of true sacrifice, down to the introduction and the conclusions, Saint-Pierre claims, are faithfully preserved in Eymard's thought. Especially remarkable is the accord between the Founder and the Bishop of Hippo on "the holy partnership" which is unifying and beatifying: "that in a holy partnership we may cling to God in order to be truly happy." Also remarkable is the view that "the whole redeemed City becomes "a universal sacrifice".

This "holy partnership," as the Founder calls it, is the principal fruit of sacramental communion:

28 March, 1867. The bread of the Eucharist is primarily food for the spirit. In holy Communion, we enjoy the Lord in and through himself. Our Lord called himself the bread come down from heaven, a bread of faith and of life. I maintain that, only in communion, do we find an intimate knowledge of our Lord. He said: he who loves me, keeps my word and I will disclose myself to him. That is to say, I will reveal myself to him through love. That intimate manifestation is obtained only in holy communion. That joy of the spirit, that contact with our Lord in communion gives us a taste of God. Taste and see, Scripture says. That taste for God is the family feeling; it brings us close to his heart. It is a knowledge by feeling and not by reasoning. In holy communion, we experience love, we know the heart of Jesus, we penetrate his secret.

4 April, 1867. The Eucharist is the bread of the spirit. It is also the bread of life, the bread of the heart, the bread of love. It is the gift of God himself. What greater proof of his love could God give us? It is the sacrament of sacraments, preeminent by reason of the love which inspired it. It is the heavenly food by which the soul batters on God. It is above all the testament of God through which we find (a) understanding of the law of love, (b) the special grace to love, (c) the practice of love.

For, what is love? It is giving. How do we recognize it? By what it gives. The Eucharist fulfils both conditions. Our Lord gives us all graces, he enriches us with every gift by giving

himself, the fountain of all holiness. In the Eucharist, we receive the fruits of all his mysteries, past, present, and to come. We are forced to recognize God's love in the perfect and complete gift of himself... We feel his love in holy communion. Was it not after the institution of the Eucharist that our Lord proclaimed his commandment to love? After giving himself to us, he could say: abide in my love; love me as your brother, love me strongly.

Moreover, communion gives us the grace to love. How can we recognize our Lord as a friend? Friendship, as you know, is based on equality and union. Both items are found in the Eucharist. God has come to dwell with us, to share with us life, goods, merits. He made the advances first, so that it is not boldness to call him a friend, but a privilege. After the Last Supper, he said: I shall not call you servants, but friends — not the glory of God, not the power of God, not the medicine of God, like the archangels, but friends... because all that the Father has taught me, I have told you. You now know the secret of the King.

9 May, 1867. Notice what Jesus says when he first announces the Eucharist: I am the bread of life: he who eats me will live for me and in me. The two lives are entwined: the divine life and the united life of the soul. A partnership is formed. Our Lord adds: he who eats me will never die, he will live forever. To receive communion is to be united to the risen Christ. Communion is a union of love. As union requires the sharing of sentiments, thoughts, joys, and sorrows, so communion leads necessarily to a sharing of life. Communion is a heavenly banquet, the marriage feast of the Lamb.

To communicate the rich insights he gained during the last weeks of a long Retreat he made in Rome in the year 1865, just three years prior to his death, Eymard drew boldly upon the resources of biblical language. We use these same terms today when the priest presents the consecrated host to us in preparation for communion, saying “Blessed are those called to the banquet of the Lamb.”

The Marriage Feast of the Lamb

Alluding, then, to the biblical imagery of the marriage feast of the Lamb, Eymard also refers to the spiritual espousals and the spiritual marriage mentioned by mystical authors. We might note in this respect his reference to the passage from the prophet Hosea: “I will betroth you to myself for ever” (2: 19).

27 June, 1867. The Eucharist gives us the power to love. That union is the crowning of the divine plan. We call it communion, co-union, the bond that comes closest to the Hypostatic Union... For, communion is the extension of the Incarnation. The end of Incarnation is communion. Dear faithful, you are the object of the sacrifice and of consecration. The soul of Jesus Christ seeks your soul He tells us: I will betroth you to myself for ever. The soul is fused into one with our Lord. The union of spirits is stronger than that of bodies. Jesus Christ leads us to abandon ourselves completely to him, to the total gift of self. The soul that receives our Lord should love him for his own sake. One must be able to give oneself without seeking any other advantage. Little does he love who is always trying to profit by it. To live by our Lord is basic; but to live for him is more perfect... Holy communion is also our Lord's way of obliging his Father towards us. If the Father rewarded us only according to our merits, it would be pitiful. But our Lord is in heaven with his risen humanity in order to proclaim his oneness with us. He is our brother so that the Father is bound to glorify us through his Son. We are united to the Son as the head and heart of the body of which we are members... And here is a final word about the Eucharist. Jesus came on earth to glorify his Father. Having returned to heaven, he did not want the Father to be deprived of the glory which he had given him during his incarnate life on earth. By uniting himself to all the faithful communicants, he could present them to the Father, all joined to him, and say: I have entered glory, but I have found a way of remaining united to Christians in order to honour you in and through them.

Thus, holy communion should be the centre of your spiritual life. Receive the sacrament in order to become holy...

18 June, 1868. A king made a wedding feast for his son... 1° In the Incarnation, our Lord espoused our human nature. It was the first nuptials of Jesus Christ. We became the spouses of our Lord: go tell my brothers... In our human nature, he redeemed us, and then he changed it into bread and wine to seal the union. The Eucharist is truly our nuptials with Jesus Christ, and it is a more intimate union than is marriage... We are infirm, limping, yet he covers us with a wedding gown, asking only that we approach the holy table. He could not honour us more. There is no greater honour for a commoner than to be invited to the king's table with the royal family. That is friendliness. It is unfortunate that all do not accept the invitation, but it is open to all who attend mass. 2° Our Lord has planned the occasion for you. Socially speaking, a couple is married and the other people are invited guests. Here, our Lord espouses the soul in communion.

It is a lasting contract between two free agents to form a single moral person. Our Lord will never break the bond; he unites himself in love and in truth. It is up to the soul to honour the contract faithfully and generously. No one should say, "Fine for now, but I may have second thoughts." 3° The alliance requires of the spouse the surrender of her personality and a change of name. In communion, the soul submits herself to our Lord, to his will, devotes herself to him, seeks to please him, to follow him closely. The soul can say, Christ lives in me. 4° The union is very close. No earthly union can compare to that of Jesus Christ and the soul in communion. The degree of union varies with the fervour of the recipient, but we become « consorts of the divine nature », concorporeal and consanguineous with our Lord. He could have given us the grace of forgiveness and of salvation, but he foresaw that generous souls would want to cling to him and he promised: I will betroth you to myself for ever. One communion could suffice for that; but we are so remiss and so cold that our Lord repeatedly gives himself to us to confirm our first alliance, purify it, and make it stronger. What must we conclude from those considerations? Honour Jesus as your spouse. Will not a spouse who has failed, who has strayed, yet is loved in spite of it all, not love in return? We must respond to the love, the generosity, the bounty of our Lord by giving him back all our love as though it came from him. If we thought of him more, we would be in love.

The conclusions to each instruction, each of which brought to a close some eight days of instruction, clearly establish Eymard, according to Saint-Pierre, as an accomplished spiritual master. As in the meditations of his long Retreat of Rome in 1865, both conclusions see in the Word Incarnate the model of union with God and in "the gift of self," that living without self-ownership which Eymard also called "the gift of the personality," the consequence of the wedding banquet.

Mary Queen of the Cenacle

We find a further confirmation of this mastery of the ancient sources in his reflections of this latter period of his life on Mary, Queen of the Cenacle. He stresses the interiority of the Cenacle experience, of life lived in conscious awareness of the presence of the kingdom of God. He is fascinated by the growth of Jesus Christ in us. Mary's role as spouse and mother is presented to partakers of the broken bread as the model of true worship, of adoration in spirit and in truth.

25 March, 1867. In the Incarnation, our Lord becomes our kinsman. He is the child of Mary, our sister, and he became our blood relative in order to raise us to divine kinship. Thus, brotherhood is the stamp of Christianity. Today's feast is all interior, it is a feast of communion. In communion, we incarnate Jesus Christ in us. Communion is the goal of the Incarnation. By receiving worthily, we enter into God's plan to complete it. Mary did not

want to be alone in carrying Jesus. May the Lord find in us a fitting dwelling as he did in Mary.

14 June, 1867. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... What happened in Mary at the Incarnation also happens to us in holy communion. To make us other Christs, the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus in a single body. The more perfect assumes the less perfect, and thereby we become changed in God. The Holy Spirit forms the Lord Jesus in our body by placing in us an earnest of the resurrection which will make us like the risen Christ. In our soul, the Spirit forms Jesus through union of interests. Allow the Holy Spirit to transform you into our Lord who seeks only to give himself and, for that, likes a large and well-aired Cenacle.

26 March, 1868. And the Word was made... bread. We receive Jesus Christ. In that way, the Eucharist is the extension of the Incarnation: and he dwelt among us... We need not envy our Blessed Mother. Our Lord gave himself to us to satisfy his love. And if you love our Lord in return, as Mary did, you become like a mother, begetting Jesus in you and able to engender him in others.

Behind his language we sense, resonating like an echo, the very words of Saint Paul and of Augustine. In his letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians, for example, Paul spoke not only “of building up the body of Christ... unto the perfect man,” but even used the language of expectancy: “until Christ is formed in you.”

Christ forming himself in the communicant

In point of fact, the Founder explicitly draws on the words of Saint Paul, applying them to the effects in the communicant of the reception of the Eucharistic bread, through which he believes God purifies and perfects the believer.

5 July, 1967. In holy communion, we receive Jesus Christ... He comes in us to form his virtues in us, to fashion us to his own likeness, to change us into his image. He accomplishes this education to his resemblance in us, so that he grows in us as well as we grow in his likeness “until we reach the state of the perfect man” as St. Paul says.

6 December, 1867. Our Lord does not form us so much as he forms himself in us. He comes in us in communion to grow in us and foster his union with us. I have a guest in me whom I must feast by serving him with the virtues which he likes. He will live in you and you will prolong his earthly life in you: “my children, I am in travail with you until Jesus Christ is formed in you” (Gal., 4:19), that is, until our Lord is conceived, born, and grows in you.

8 May, 1868. Our Lord unites himself to the faithful, forms a partnership with them through his presence, leads them to action. He is always active, he is still virtuous in his members: he is poor, chaste, obedient in us. We complete him, we fulfil him, we prolong him on earth. “Until Christ is formed in you,” as St. Paul said. He lives in you. As proof, he asked Paul: “Why do you persecute me?” We are his members, he truly lives in us. And our actions are his as well as ours. That is our model of love. Never cease to maintain that union from which you will draw the greatest fruits and give God most glory.”

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