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Session 2009 - "Areas of work... a synthesis"

Documents - Eymard Writings
Written by Fr. Manuel Barbiero, sss

When we organized this meeting, the title of my presentation was: "A Synthesis of the Spirituality". It's always difficult to present a synthesis...

A few years ago we complained at having nothing about the writings of Fr. Eymard, and the temptation to re-print the "Series" kept returning.

Now that we have gone from having nothing to having everything at our disposal, the result risks to be almost the same: we don't know what to do with all the material available to us.

In the past, when we spoke of the writings of Fr. Eymard, we got the impression of referring to a garden that was well dosed ("hortus conclusus", Ct 4:12) in the Archives of the General Curia of the SSS religious or of the Servants, reserved to a few experts.

The typical and complete edition on the Internet, with its research tools, along with the printed edition, constitute an important and indispensable first step. We are now fortunate to have at our disposal the material and extraordinary tools that past generations merely dreamed of having.

Some problems remain: the enormous amount of material at our disposal can be discouraging; the language (French) and the style (that of the 19th century); exploring how to use the web-site and the printed edition: what method can be used, and what are the keys to read these texts properly.

We need the patience and the courage to allow ourselves to be surprised and even shocked by Fr. Eymard. We have been warned of the danger regarding a predetermined outline and the risk of false expectations, and we have been invited to a liberated exploration.

1 - An identity that is evolving, on the way

If we accept the challenge to enter into contact with Fr. Eymard, we must be ready to remain always on a journey. Fr. Eymard constantly reworked his spiritual experience. We must learn to follow his evolution, his journeys, etc.

We must never read his writings quickly or superficially; we must always ask ourselves questions (good questions; for example, questions asked by Sr. Catherine Marie Caron) and ask Fr. Eymard himself some questions: why, when (the time in his life), to whom, what type of document (personal notes, preaching, correspondence, legal text), etc.

Today we speak of spirituality in terms of a spiritual journey, rather than a well established doctrine. We talk about spirituality in terms of spiritual experience, in other words, we want to highlight the action of the Spirit: how did Peter Julian allow himself to be led by the Spirit?

Already with this we have some areas of work to be done: what was the action and role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Fr. Eymard? How aware was he of this? What was the idea of Fr. Eymard concerning the Holy Spirit?

A second area of work to be done: the experience of transformation and unity lived during the Retreat of Rome in 1865, particularly the vow of personality, and the gift of self. After this experience, the change occurred rather on the interior level, but his preaching was affected, what he said was seen as coming from his life: the Eucharist had become a life, his life.

We can still understand better the inner dynamics that led and guided Fr. Eymard.

2 - The primacy of love and the gift of self

A little research, quickly done on the computerized edition of the Writings of Fr. Eymard, produced the following results: the word adoration/to adore comes back 2,585/594 = 3,179 times; the word gift/give recurs 975/2,843 = 3,819 times; the word love/to love recurs 17,001/1,998 = 18,999 times; the word Eucharist/Eucharistic comes back 3,652/2,378 = 6,030 times.

Evidently the word love/to love has the primacy in all the writings of Fr. Eymard, and we can even think so at the level of his spirituality and teaching.

Father Eymard calls his religious "disciples and apostles of love or of divine predilection". Love constitutes the distinctive mark of his institute: "The law and spirit of divine love shall be the inspiration and supreme law of their life, and the bond of union among them as members of the same body, so that, vivified by this love, having only one heart in his service, they will consecrate themselves..."

Love is proposed as the journey of life and formation: "The Holy Eucharist by itself inspires the greatest virtues. It perfects the soul in a short time; it is Christian education through love and through fear - it is the purifying fire (...)

The Eucharist is the greatest gift of our Lord, it is the permanent model for the gift of personality, and it is also the means; in fact, it communicates to us the life that the Son receives from the Father.

Love provokes a dynamism of growth ("always on a journey": "an exaggerated love", PR 124,1); love leads to the very gift of self, through the Eucharist, to "a mature age in Christ"; the gift of self is at the peak of the journey of human and spiritual maturity of Fr. Eymard. A journey that has come to the arrival point of a life capable of loving with and like Christ.

We find here the paschal dimension of the new man and the radical demand of a total gift. The authenticity of human life consists of loving and of giving oneself; in fact, the human person himself is a gift. Only a life that is given is really a life lived in its fullness.

3 - The major themes already seen, yet to be developed and renewed

A first theme concerns the centrality of the Eucharist and its various dimensions.

- The centrality of the celebration: "Convinced of this truth that the Sacrifice of the Holy Mass and Communion with the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ remains the vital source, and at the same time remains the summit of all religion, each one owes it to himself to orient his piety, his virtues, and his love towards it, and to take all possible means to attain this end: the worthy celebration and fruitful reception of these divine mysteries" (Constitutions of St. Bonnet 1863, RR 74t,6).

- A living faith in the Eucharist (St. Maurice 1868): the entire sacrament, and at the same time the demand to deepen our awareness of the mystery of Eucharist in all its dimensions: "We want to take the entire Eucharistic idea" (Letter to De Cuers, March 31, 1856, CO 553,1), "We take the entire holy Sacrament" (Letter to Danion, August 24, 1857, CO 690,1). This proposition is for all: religious men and women, priests, laypeople, etc.

- The social dimension: "in order that the Lord Jesus may be ever adored in his Sacrament and glorified socially in the whole world" (RR 82t,4); the Eucharist is the life of the individual and of society, it builds a Christian society (cf. "The Century of the Eucharist"); its goal is to have us become "a single body", since it contains a dynamism of reciprocal love and of communion; the Eucharist, "fire and flame", is the Cenacle opening on Pentecost: "We have only one idea, only one goal, only one end: the Eucharist! Happy are we if we can become special men, and bring back to the faith and love of the Eucharist men of our poor society who are indifferent and self-centered" (Letter to Mr Clappier, July 8, 1856, CO 609,1);

- the dimension of the Incarnation: for Fr. Eymard the Eucharist was the answer to the needs of the times. His spirituality is a spirituality that faces the problems of society and of the Church of his time (cf. the First Communion of adults and young girls);

- the aspect of interiority, using the verb "to abide in" (649 times); "union" and "life of union"; "Wish me the true Cenacle, and the interior Cenacle; then I will be satisfied" (Letter to Mme Jordan, January 8, 1864, CO 1334,1). The word "cenacle" appears 944 times in all his writings.

- Holy Communion and its importance; the communicant will live for and by Jesus Christ (N 6: 57), who will be living in him, writes Fr. Eymard: "That's what these words of Jesus mean Whoever eats me, will also live by me: 'by', or by me as principle, law, inspiration, or for me as goal, being pleasing to me, preferring me above all" (March 4th, 1865, NR 44,80). Fr. Eymard's vows of personality, on March 21st, is made during his thanksgiving after Mass (on March 3rd, Eymard had written: "During my thanksgiving, I had really given myself to the love of our Lord"; NR 44,78); in formulating this vow, there are two references to Communion (on March 13th Eymard had written: "During Holy Communion, I renewed my gift, my three vows", NR 44,99): "And it is to be present in me in this way that he gives himself in Holy Communion. As the living Father has sent me, and that I live by the Father, so also anyone who eats me will also live for me [In 6: 57].. In this way, through Communion you will live for me, because I will be living in you" (NR 44,119). The celebration of the Eucharist and Holy Communion are the source of this gift.

Other themes:

- adoration (cf. the presentation of Fr. André Guitton); adoration "the axle (pivot) of our life", the dialogue of love; the entire dimension of prayer, recollection, etc.

- the Word of God (I gave only one example). Another example: I checked to see if Fr. Eymard had used the account of the multiplication of the loaves of bread, and for that, the adorer begins by going to the heights of the mountain with the wings of an eagle, up to the Cenacle, where love has its home, its throne, its treasures, and its works. And there, like the royal eagle, the adorer contemplates this sun of love to have clear knowledge of its beauty and its power" (RA 18,2). I made a quick search on the internet and behold! I discovered that the word eagle recurs 115 times in all his writings... (but now we have to continue).

- the use of liturgical texts, source of his meditation and of new developments; the link between the Word and Eucharist (for example on January 25, 1865, at the beginning of the Great Retreat of Rome and on March 21, 1865, the feast of St. Benedict);

- Patrology: how did Fr. Eymard use his knowledge of the Fathers of the Church? One example: he quotes St. Ignatius of Antioch 24 times, and he returns to the text of the letter to the Romans (Ad Rom., 4,1): "I am the wheat of Christ", 16 times. This passage inspired him very much: on February 1, 1865 in a meditation entitled "Eucharistic Vocation", he writes: "These words of St. Ignatius the martyr touched me: I am the wheat of Christ. I added: May I be ground by mortification, may I be baked in the fire of love, so that I may become a pure bread" (Nr 44,14 and PS 535,5 - May 1, 1865);

- the Council of Trent;

- the Virgin Mary of Nazareth in the Cenacle.

4 - The images used, the symbols, the style

In the language of Fr. Eymard, his use of images, symbols, and comparisons is something I always appreciated. By using the research of the internet, for example, I discovered that in all his writings, Fr. Eymard used the image of the ocean hundreds of times. Knowing how much he loved his Dauphiné and its mountains, that he never crossed the oceans (he merely prepared the departure of missionaries for Oceania), and that the times he took the boat to go to Rome he got sea-sick... yet the abundant quotations aroused my curiosity. How did he use the image of the ocean, and is there a message for us? This is how I prepared an article for the revue Partage: I entitled this article "As a fish in the ocean and how an ocean is formed from many rivers".

A few days ago, I had the chance to see a stuffed royal eagle. It made me think of a famous passage in the Directory of the Aggregation where he writes: "Before acting, the disciple of love begins by evaluating and loving. Love follows upon knowledge, and for that, the adorer begins by going to the heights of the mountain with the wings of an eagle, up to the Cenacle, where love has its home, its throne, its treasures, and its works. And there, like the royal eagle, the adorer contemplates this sun of love to have clear knowledge of its beauty and its power" (RA 18,2). I made a quick search on the internet and behold! I discovered that the word eagle recurs 115 times in all his writings... (but now we have to continue).

Other possible research:

- The house of Bethany (40 times); with the house of Nazareth and the Cenacle.

- The heart (heart: 8,283; heart N: 526; hearts: 563; hearts N: 60); the heart is the center of man (heart and center appear together 420 times) and it is the foundation; it also expresses the totality of the person.

- The Kingdom (kingdom: 1,030; royaume (empire): 450): "May your Kingdom come", the proclamation of the gospel and the coming of the empire (kingdom). The eager striving for the Kingdom was the eager striving of Fr. Eymard. He wrote to Mme Nathalie Jordan: "How I would like to establish the beautiful reign of Jesus Christ on earth!" (January 1, 1855, CO 479,1). The first biographer of Fr. Eymard wrote that Father found a good formula to express the ideal that grace had formed in him: he wrote at the top of his letters these words that became his motto: "A.R.T." ("Adveniat Regnum tuum"), "May your Kingdom come". And again: "May the Eucharistic kingdom of our Lord come, and may we be his first disciples and ardent apostles" (letter to Leroyer, January 10, 1864, CO 1336,1).

- His Christology (Jesus Christ: 10,791; Jésus: 8,606; Jesus: 100; Christ: 149; Christ N: 715); and the Trinity (Blaise from Congo Brazza made his doctoral thesis on this).

- Fire and flame (fire: 1,326; flame: 325), the hearth (273): "A purely contemplative life cannot be fully Eucharistic; the hearth has its flame" (Letter to De Cuers, May 1, 1861, CO 1030,1); "We must absolutely come to that; otherwise, you would only be like wood that is put close enough to the fireplace to be dried; it may smoke, cry, shout, be warm; it will never burn if it isn't in the fireplace, assimilated by its power. Please, you know that in order to light a candle we must take fire from the flame itself and not from the draft." (Letter to Mme Jordan, January 8, 1864, CO 1334,1)

- The figure of the "mother", image of tenderness and gracefulness.

5 - His friendship with women

We have the possibility to know Fr. Eymard with all his characteristics, including his most intimate qualities, like his friendship, and his affectivity.

As an adolescent, Peter Julian undertook the struggle for chastity with vigor and strength. He confided: "From age ten to twenty, I would not have wanted to touch, nor even to see a woman face to face for all the gold in the world!" (cf. A. Guitton, Pierre-Julien Eymard, p. 25).

As a young assistant in Chatte (1834-1837), in meditations suggested by the Jesuit Fr. Benoît, (September 1835), Peter Julian left his resolutions, written in Latin on September 6, 1835, that tell us the difficulties he was encountering. This led to a pact that he signed with his blood in the church of Grenoble on September 8, 1835.

"Resolutions (...) What shall I do? To open my heart to no one, except to God alone... I will show charity and respect towards my Father, modesty towards women, goodness towards men, humility towards everyone. The violent can gain [the kingdom]... (...) How glorious is the chastity of the priest, may it be uniquely always perfect. Happy will I be, if I can keep my heart free, -- may it be bound only to Jesus, my God, -- may it be pure of all (ordinate) affection, -- may it always have the right intention, -- so that it may be chaste in its love. O Jesus, receive my soul, my body, my heart, and my whole being. I want to search for you with a pure intention, to proclaim your Gospel with a pure zeal to obtain your pure glory, to show your intimacy in the Blessed Sacrament, and your life in me" (NR 8,12).

"Pact": "With the help of God and of Mary, in this retreat I saw that the cause of all my sins and omissions, in a word my dominant passion was constant pride looking for recognition and carnal affection. I° concerning B. - from that relationship, since we cannot serve two masters, God will me -- no peace, no holy joy, no fruitfulness for souls. God paralyzed my ministry. Now then is the favorable time to return sincerely to Jesus Christ. That's why (I take the following): Resolutions -- All my efforts will be to keep my heart free of all affection, especially for B. and for all. -- To love others in God and for their salvation. That's everything... I will tell myself that God suffices for me, and Mary. -- To be polite, honest, and charitable, but always in God. -- After this, there will be no more of those interior communications, no more of those demonstrations of carnal friendship" (NR 8,13).

But, between Fr. Eymard and Mme Nathalie Jordan, we see a free and transparent friendship. Eymard is called a "Dauphine brother" and Nathalie a "soul sister", who were going through the same states of soul during the same periods of time.

"Very dear Madame in our Lord, I greet you from my coach, you and your beloved family; sorry that I don't have a day to spare on my way down to go to see you at Calet (...) If I have a day when I return, I will give you half; I would like to see Chatte again, I miss it; and then your blessed boulder of Calvary. I am praying for your coconns; I hope you will have nice ones. May the good Lord hear me. You must be like busy Martha, do try to wed these two dear sisters of Bethany a little more; if Martha's place is more meritorious, Mary's is more delightful. [cf. Lk 10: 38-42] Your dear nieces must be with you, happy to be with their dear aunt. So I bless my Trinitarian family wholeheartedly. (...) Goodbye, dear Madame, don't forget that I am getting older and I am not getting better. I don't know how to belong fully to God in the midst of winds and waves." (letter to Mme Jordan, on the train, June 4, 1864, CO 1401,1). "Dear Madame in the Lord, you know that suffering either puts us to sleep or makes us beastly or takes all our attention; that describes me a little. However, the sick priest is healed and more peaceful now, so I am picking up all my pen for Calet where my old friends are. I would surely have been happy to see you; you and all your daughters; but the coach of divine Providence didn't decide to stop there. (...) The more I pray for solitude, the more my boat is tossed and burned. I must accept these thousand and one things, which like a swarm of hornets come to disturb me. Paris is like a whirlwind! Long for me!" (letter to Mme Jordan, Paris, August 9, 1864, CO 1436,1). "Madame and dear daughter in our Lord, friends are often the last to whom I write: don't be upset with me. (...) You really pleased me in your last letters! At last! At last! You are walking in the interior kingdom which I have been longing for you for such a long time. You love silence, solitude of soul; that is the sanctuary of God where he gives his oracles of love; love it very much and there you will learn quickly and easily how to know God in his light, enjoy him in the essence of his goodness, imitate him in his spirit of love. We are always beginners in this school of love, because we are always learning something new; we enter more deeply into the depths of the knowledge of God and his virtue. Oh! Please believe me, let your prayer be made up of silence, contemplation, union with our Lord; that is the only true center of life. The rest is a painful and difficult work of the soul; it means working too much. Here, it is God working in the heavenly dew penetrates her gently. But also you are the, you must hurry to God by the shortest way, quickly and like your efforts." (letter to Mme Jordan, Paris, September 30, 1864, CO 1453,1). "Dear Madame in our Lord, all your people are going to leave for China; that makes me feel badly for them and for you. Fortunately we bring the good Lord in our heart. (...) But, you are staying here with us: you may say, it's almost as if China were separating us! Well, even so! There are no distances for souls; or better, friendship is even greater and broader. I am going retreats to our religious men and women here in the city, so you can see that I am always a little bit on the battlefield in order to leave behind, not all of my wretchedness, but at least a few strands. It does me good to speak about our Love. It seems to me that when I am saying it, I love him more, perhaps it's only the fever of activity. When shall I go to give a retreat of the Blessed Sacrament in your Lyons? And at Ainay? How sad! Poor Lyons! I am very happy here; I'm not receiving any [visitors], I am a bit alone, I can find myself again at the feet of God. I am like someone who is out of breath, now breathing in peace: to be quiet at God's feet is to find him. Don't you sometimes feel the well-being of spiritual breathing, gently, affectionately at God's feet, in the sight of his beautiful Heaven, there on my rock of Calet?" (letter to Mme Jordan, Angers, October 13, 1864, CO 1463,1).

Annie Coppens-Baeten, in her book "When the Cedars Speak, an account of spirituality", writes at length about the friendship between Fr. Eymard and Mme Jordan. She concludes this section by saying: "The longevity of the cedar in the corner of Le Calet is a symbol of the life of Peter Julian Eymard. Standing in the middle of the view from Saint Romans, it is the secret witness of the friendship that influenced the ideal of Father and even showed him the way. This friendship of crystal pure water flourished for more than 25 years, and reached its highest point between 1864 and 1868, the final years of Father's life. It's richness is equaled only by the beauty of the panorama" (p. 106)

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