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Session 2009 - The Charism of st. Peter Julian, lived in a feminine way

Documents - Eymard Writings

Written by Sr. Catherine Marie Caron, SSS

I - Introduction

When I was asked to make a presentation on "The Charism of St. Peter Julian, lived in a feminine way", I must admit that I felt a little uneasy, since I had never thought about it in this way. But on second thought, we can only admit the vast Eymardian documentation on this subject.

Most of the letters that we have, for spiritual direction or others, are addressed to women. Is this because women are more inclined to keep letters than men? Perhaps, but I'm inclined to believe that, in spite of this possibility, the majority of the St. Peter Julian's letters were really addressed to women, lay or religious.

For example: Over a period of 16 years, we have a little more than 180 letters addressed to Fr. De Cuers. On the other hand, those addressed to Marguerite Guillot over a period of 23 years, number almost 400, and to his sisters, there are 145 letters over a period of 40 years. We can add to these, the numerous correspondence with the Dames Gour, the Dames Jordan, the Dames Bost, the countess d'Andigné, and with others. The correspondence with men is rather rare.

II - The documentation

Besides this extensive correspondence, the Eymardian collection includes all the documents written for the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. We find a real treasure there. There are more than 600 instructions, or conferences, according to the last search offered on the web-site.

There, as in his correspondence, we learn to appreciate Father Eymard as a spiritual master. For us Servants, we have always had access to some part or other of these instructions in various forms, as described by Sr. Suzanne Aylwin in her book, *Un imbrogljo séculaire*, since they underwent the hand of several copyists. The web-site offers them in the form that is closest as possible to the originals. The originals of these instructions are the fruit of the labor of love of the stenographer Sr. Marie du Saint Sacrament, (Caroline de Boisgrollier) who took notes while Father was speaking and had him review them later. The various copyists tried to be as faithful as possible to the originals, except Sr. Marie Louise Thillot, who, under the direction of Father Tesnière, tried to make them more formal, less spontaneous and much shorter, since, in general, she removed what was informal and intimate.

There are also the directory(ies), first the one linked with the draft of Constitutions. In this document, called "de St. Bonnet", Constitutions and Directory alternate number by number. Other interesting documents are the Spiritual Directory written for Superiors and the Personal Directory written for Marguerite. Although in all this documentation there are some outdated ones, yet we also find some rich documents to be remembered and some basic values to be reworded for today.

III - The feminine influences in the life of Father Eymard

The persons

From his tender childhood, Peter Julian is surrounded by his mother and two sisters. His father is the only male influence in his childhood. The rather severe character of his father becomes the image of God for him. After his experience of Saint Roman, he attaches his experience of God to his experience of the feminine: the goodness of God and his loving Providence.

Early on in his ministry, he establishes spiritual relationships. We can think of Natalie Jordan, with whom he kept a friendship all his life. In his correspondence, he teases her about her age, and calls her his twin soul.

With the Marists, his apostolate with the Third Order of Mary is so successful that it provokes jealousy, suspicion, and his departure from Lyons. He then continues his correspondence with a few long-time directees, especially Marguerite Guillot. Because of this separation, we have the treasure of his correspondence, where he guides her personal life as well as her role in the heart of the Third Order. We can see that he is well aware of God's action in souls and in human nature.

When Father Colin proposes a partnership with Mother Dubouché, he resists the idea of finding himself in second place or on an equal with her. He writes to Fr. De Cuers on March 31 (CO 553) and to Marguerite Guillot on July 8, 1856 (CO 607). He doesn't want to submit himself to the direction of this holy woman.

When the candidates from Lyons arrive in Paris for the foundation of the Eucharistic work, the closeness of the community of the sisters causes suspicious questions among the Marists, and one of them even denounces Eymard to Rome. He is then obliged to distance himself from the Servants, resulting in our foundation at Angers. What was his relationship with Mlle Michelle de Paris, who was proposing herself for a foundation in Jerusalem, without the encouragement of Fr. Eymard? This occasioned some calumnies in Rome, and perhaps contributed to the failure of the Cenacle foundation in Jerusalem? Was he forced to fight this calumny with all his might for the honor of the Society?

This kind of suspicion was all the more regrettable, given the fact of his constant purity of intention so evident in his personal retreat notes, and the spirituality of his letters, and this expression addressed first to Mother Marguerite: "Between you and us there will always be the adorable Eucharist." This is his personal formula that he proposes to the Servants in the relationships with the SSS Fathers. We find it in the introductory letter to the first Constitutions of August 15, 1859 (CO 858):

St. Francis cared for St. Clair and his poor daughters, we will care for you, my daughters, in the divine charity and holiness of our Lord and Master, but between you and us, there will always be the adorable Eucharist.

His style of relationships

Did his sensitivity for the feminine world come from having observed the relationships between his sister Marianne and his adopted sister Nanette? From that, perhaps, came his talent in giving advice on the human relationships between Mme Gour and her father, her husband, and her daughter; between Mlle Gour towards her mother; between Mme Jordan towards her daughter Mathilde, between Mathilde towards her mother, and between the two Bost sisters, and many others. As an example, I quote her words to Stéphanie Gour, on January 14, 1859 (CO 792):

Do not worry about your [feelings of] hostility. They come from our selfish nature, but grace will conquer with charity. Behave toward her as you would if you were free.

These instructions are full of indications of the importance of the heart in the spiritual life, and prayer. He goes so far as saying:

You women, you live more from the heart than from the head, while we men, we live more from the head than from the heart (PS 211, May 4, 1860).

His understanding of the feminine was not perfect, however, and we might ask ourselves what blinded him when faced by the false mysticism of Sr. Benoite Richerd?

I know very little about the teachings of Father Eymard to the Fathers and Brothers. Are there differences of tone, perspective, and content? ... In his informal style of conversation with the Servants, we discover some spontaneous remarks: his personal opinion about this or that situation, about this or that religious group, but especially about the intimacy of a person who is confiding to him, who is transparent, and who reveals herself.

This is what his correspondences reveals to us. With Fr. Eymard, we find a delicate soul and a sensitivity that we generally attribute to the feminine character, but, of course, it is also found among men. In other words, he enjoys very refined spiritual experiences, with interior movements that are deeply perceived and explained. In the language of Jung, we might say that with Father Eymard the animus and the anima are well developed and well balanced. While he accuses himself, in certain circumstances, of being too military-like, too strict, or too blunt, on the other hand he shows a lot of goodness, compassion, tenderness, and sensitivity.

His letters are so lively, so affectionate towards his directees, that even today his readers are touched by the kindness that radiates from them. Some friends have told me: "Towards the end of my reading his letters, I felt sad as though mourning my friend who was about to die."

Spiritual Freedom

Father Eymard often insists on a great spiritual freedom. This is a very precious quality, even surprising, for the times in which he lived. He witnessed the harm that different confessors had caused to the soul of Marguerite, of Virginie Danion, and many others. He helps them notice that not all confessors are directors, and that they should make a distinction between confession and direction... to limit themselves, in confession, strictly to what is necessary, and to choose carefully those to whom they would confide for direction. He liberates penitents from confessors who do not respect their grace of attraction. (cf. PS 237, August 2, 1860).

If sometimes Father Eymard was accused of keeping Marguerite in a state of exaggerated obedience, I believe that a detailed reading of the letters and the facts reveal otherwise. There is no doubt that Marguerite herself had a great respect for Father Eymard, due to the rather special circumstances of their meeting, when he revealed to her the exact state of her soul, and that she herself had asked the Lord to give her a director, and feeling reassured in prayer that she would receive a new way of obedience.

It was through obedience itself that he was able to accompany Marguerite towards a growing spiritual freedom, liberating her from many prayers and penances, aiming at and obtaining the great goal of simplicity, the virtue practiced in an outstanding way by the two founders. He knew how to use images that were easy to understand, but deeply moving. Faced with the temptation of despair, he knew how to communicate to her the strength of soul - against temptations regarding chastity, he gives her the image of a storm that must be gone through, while keeping our head above the clouds where we find the beautiful sun.

Marguerite was naturally affectionate, as we discover in her letters to the superiors of her communities. Under the direction of St. Peter Julian she becomes more herself, capable of exercising her role as superior with self-confidence, of carrying the burden of serious illness and extremely painful suffering.

We can also point out that she felt sufficiently free to express her disagreement with him, as, for example, regarding the situation of Nemours. However, she knew how to accept the opinion of Father Eymard, although eventually he himself had to admit his mistake.

IV - Are the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament simply the SSS Fathers in the feminine?

What are the similarities and the differences between the two congregations that Eymard founded? The Conference of October 17, 1864 (PS 516,1) is particularly interesting:

Here then is your rule; it is based on ours. Since you come from the same trunk, you must be based on the same rule. You don't have all the rules that we have; you don't have the priesthood, and you don't have what relates to studies. You are concerned with adoration; there you are the same as us. Besides you have manual work and the retreats of pious women. We also have retreats, but for the work we cannot have that. There is a chapter about worship. In your rule there are nuances needed for your position, but the principles are the same; there are some evaluations, we don't have that. But Part II is better than ours; it is clearer. It is the same rule, but the composition is not the same.

But, in apparent contradiction, he will also say:

It is never allowed to accept some exterior apostolate. [...] Notice, my sisters, that the contemplative life is more perfect than the apostolate. If you want to take part in good works, then leave (allez donc courir).

He ends by saying:

You understand that we do not give you the same commands as we have. For the priests, we are for the apostolate, and you for the service (of adoration) [...] And so, on your letter-heads, you must not place Adveniat regnum tuum, but All for the Service of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

The paradigm of the Cenacle

The ambiguities of these statements and others, find some clarification in the paradigm of the Cenacle that Father Eymard used frequently to communicate his vision for the life-style of the Servants. His spirituality had been strongly marked by a Marian devotion, a fact that certainly nourished the feminine dimension, intuition. He saw us as continuing the mission of Mary in the Cenacle (Mission of adoration) - supporting in prayer the apostolate of the apostles - Mary welcomes the Word in her heart, meditates on it, turns it over, becoming in a word the 'woman of the Eucharist' as John Paul II would call her.

In his letters inviting Mother Marguerite to Paris for the foundation, Father Eymard deliberately used the image of the Cenacle as a paradigm (that is, a comparison full of a symbolism that clarifies a reality).

On June 11, 1857 (CO 674,2), he writes:

As for you, I firmly believe that one day you will be in the Cenacle [...] It's necessary to wait until we are a bit more established and settled, and to know whether [Church] favor this plan; it is like the Cenacle where the Apostles, the disciples, the holy women and Mary were praying together in the first church near the first Eucharistic Tabernacle.

But nine years later, when the sisters were at Angers, he wrote to her on March 18, 1866 (CO 1768):

Personally, I wouldn't like a common church between you and us; it would amount to cancelling you out. Then, prudence warns against it. Our Lord would also be losing a throne that way.

In his letter presenting the first constitutions to the Servants for the Assumption 1859 (CO 858), a month after their vows of foundation, he was also saying:

I give you these rules, dear Sisters, like a gift from Mary, your kind Mother, on this beautiful day when she goes up to heaven and leaves the divine tabernacle, but she wishes to give you her place of love in the Cenacle, so that you may take her place close to her Jesus, to the God of the Eucharist.

This is how he presented a life style centered on adoration and prayer, but in company with Mary and the apostles. What concerns us, is that in his first vision he does not plan any identification between the Fathers and Servants, but rather a complementarity. I believe that is his basic principle. He had always understood this complementary aspect between the masculine and the feminine.

Our research could also lead us to study the evolution of his thought in the texts of the Constitutions, or in the different foundations made during his lifetime.

In Paris, the Sisters shared in the apostolate of the preparation of some poor little girls for their First Communion.

In Angers, they no longer did any catechetical work, but they welcomed the Adoration Women and presided over their meetings; they also received some for retreats.

In Nemours, a secondary building was foreseen to welcome associates, but this never materialized.

Doesn't this diversity help us to distinguish the essential from the accidental?

Baptismal Priesthood

On the spiritual level, how can we be "fully Eucharistic" without being priests? Father Eymard was aware of the priesthood of the baptized. He formulates this ideal on several occasions, especially around the dates of the Sisters' profession: August 2, 1860, June 24, 1861, and July 31, 1861.

Here is part of the clearest text, that of July 31, 1861 (PS 356,4):

We priests [...] at the consecration change the order of things, we make the living bread; this doesn't demand much from us, except for a few words, and thus becoming offerers of sacrifice.

But for you, what are you doing? Your body represents the bread - you must be the priest and the victim: the priest is your soul, and the victim is your body. How does this miracle happen? Every day, you must do this by your love. I cannot do this for you. I can only help you, but you must transform yourselves. Your body must become the body of our Lord through his virtues; your soul must become his soul through his love... that your whole being must become our Lord through his divine and human life in you. How will you do this? You have the grace and power for this, since you are religious - it's your everyday work...

You must be priest and victim of your own offering by the total gift of yourselves. Fundamentally, isn't this the essence of all priesthood? To become pure hosts, holy and agreeable to God, as St. Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans (Rm 12: 1).

Some feminine images that illustrate the mind of St. Peter Julian Eymard

A maternal God

The spontaneous use by Father Eymard of certain images with a feminine characteristic is striking. While he considers God as a tender Father, merciful, good and compassionate, he also presents him with some feminine qualities. In a letter to Mr. Creuset, on May 24, 1852 (CO 358), he says:

It's hard for our poor human nature to depend on divine Providence from day to day; but since this maternal Providence will be there tomorrow and until death, let us surrender to it; the goodness of God is infinite.

On June 20, 1856 (CO 594), four years later, a month after the foundation of the SSS Fathers, he writes to Marguerite Guillot:

I would never have experienced poverty or God's motherly care except for this new situation I am in. We began like someone out in the desert, with a pair of sheets, a chair, and one spoon, not two. It's wonderful. We are beginning to make our chapel more suitable. We are spending all that we have on it. The Eucharistic King deserves it.

In August 1860 (PS 237), he uses the image of the maternal God in this way:

The devil is very good at making us lose [...] confidence in the goodness and mercy of God; we must be in God as a child relates to its mother, seeing only her goodness.

He even attributes this feminine dimension to Jesus. In October 1860 (PS 264), he tells his Sisters:

Go to our Lord as a child to its mother.

Jesus the mother! Think about it!

Holy Communion

There are some texts where he compares Holy Communion to a child taking the milk of its mother. We find them in his instructions of June 14, 1858, July 30, 1859, and September 17, 1862. Let's take that of 1862 as being more detailed:

When a mother educates her child, she begins by nourishing him/her with her milk, thereby communicating her virtues and vices, her character and her life [...]. Likewise, through the Eucharist, Jesus communicates to us his life - and the life of Jesus on earth was a life of love. He used to say that the greatest commandment is this: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole mind, and your whole soul, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself; all the law and the prophets are included in these two commandments [cf. Mt 22: 37-40]. As a mother awakens the love of her child by her own initial love, so does the soul learn to love God by the love that she receives.

The Society as a Nourishing Mother

In his conference, he will speak of the Society as a nourishing mother: The nature of the Society, and what we owe it, October 1, 1860 (PS 264):

Take careful notice that the Society forms you, but you are the only one to benefit from this royal and divine education, you alone harvest the fruits; her pleasure is to have one more Servant of the Blessed Sacrament - she increases her expenses and sacrifices and she receives nothing in return - she is a nourishing mother, constantly giving of herself.

In the Directory written for Superiors on December 15, 1862, he dedicates an entire chapter on the bond of unity that should exist between the Mother-Society and the Servants. (He is referring to the Society of the Fathers! Imagine! The Fathers are our mothers!)

These quotations and many others allow us to see that the image of "mother" was an inspiration for Father Eymard. It is a motif that touched his idea of God, of Jesus, of the Eucharist, and of the Congregation.

Conclusion

In Father Eymard, we find a personality that easily integrates the masculine and feminine aspects of a person. He is at ease in his relationships, as much with women and with men. He recognizes the complementary qualities of the two sexes. For him, what is important is the person in relationship with God.

In order to grasp the nuances even more, wouldn't it be interesting to make a comparative study between the texts meant for the Servants and those meant for the Fathers and Brothers: in the Constitutions, Directories, Spiritual Instructions, Letters? We could discover anew the harmony and balance of his rich personality. Father Eymard fascinates and inspires us. He is an inexhaustible mine.

I hope that I gave you a few new insights on the feminine dimension of his work, and the desire to know it even more.

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