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Session 2009 - Fr. Eymard and the Lay Associates

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The Apostolates of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation
First Communion of adults and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament

When Fr. Eymard founded the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament in Paris on May 13, 1856, he established the foundation of a new religious institute of men. He was thinking of a woman's branch as well, the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament, and also to associate the lay-faithful to his work.

To limit ourselves to his ministry with the 'lay associates' - this expression is an anachronism since it did not exist in those days -- , I propose that we take a brief look at the past,

- first, by recalling his ministry as a Marist with the Third Order of Mary,
- then trying to understand what he intended at the beginning of the foundation,
- finally, by recalling the structures and the spirit of the apostolate for the lay-faithful: the First Communion of adults, and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament.

1. Father Eymard, director of the Third Order of Mary, Lyons 1845-1851

While he was assistant to Fr. Colin, Superior General of the Society of Mary, Fr. Eymard was named, on December 10, 1845, Director of the Third Order of Mary (T.O.M.). He was then 34 years old, a priest for 11 years, and 6 years a Marist. He would hold this position for 6 years.

The T.O.M. is the secular branch of the Marists. Originally foreseen by Fr. Colin, in fact it was vegetating: it numbered barely a dozen people, most of them women, the group of Christian Virgins. Very quickly, Fr. Eymard would form this nucleus, and breathe into it a dynamism that would make it grow. He gave it a structure, creating new branches, such as that of the Christian Mothers, the Married Men, the Youth, the Little Daughters of Mary, and, at least as a plan, even a branch for the Priests. He had the gift of being an animator, a director, and an organizer.

In the printed edition of Eymard's Complete Works, the guideline texts of the T.O.M. (rule, statutes, regulations...), printed under the code RT 1-30, there are 200 pages in vol. VIII (p. 17-218). As for the instructions that he gave (PT), we have 189 documents covering 440 pages in volume XI. These simple statistics show the importance that he gave to this ministry. We should add here the many letters of direction exchanged with Tertiaries who confided in him, and who remained faithful to him.

What is important to underline here is the solid formation that he gives to this group of lay-faithful - a large number of women, but also some men. He forms them in Christian virtues, particularly to the interior life, to the need for private and vocal prayer. The ideal he proposes is a model of sanctity inspired from the religious life lived in the world, like Mary at Nazareth, with the characteristic of humility and the hidden life esteemed by Fr. Colin. In the context of the 19th Century, the religious life was considered the perfection of the Christian life - even in 1950, religious life was defined as 'a state of perfection'. That's why it was necessary to come close to this ideal, as much as possible.

In this perspective, he suggests the 'Houses of Nazareth', where the lay-faithful would live together as much as possible, and live a structured form of life: the Guillot family in Lyons lived this ideal. We have a witness of this in the Printed Edition under the word Maison de Nazareth (PT 201-214 in OC, vol. XI, p. 423-459).

2. At the beginnings of the Society of the Blessed Sacrament (1856-1859)

Even before the foundation of the Society of the Blessed Sacrament, Fr. Eymard composed drafts of his Constitutions: we have the text he placed in the sanctuary of Notre-Dame du Laus on May 23, 1855 (RR 2). But we have to wait for the foundation itself, in order to see the form of his Institute.

Two points can be seen during the early stage of foundation:

- In the first drafts of his Constitutions, Fr. Eymard foresees 3 kinds of members:

The Society admits in the Cenacle all those whom Jesus Christ calls to his Holy Service, attracted by the grace of adoration. It includes three kinds of members:

- 1° Religious priests, who alone can be named to important responsibilities in the Society.
2° Religious lay brothers, who can be named to secondary responsibilities.
3° The associates in the world, namely: priests and laypeople who desire to share the graces and merits of the Society, and commit themselves actively to the work of perpetual adoration (RR 7). (Only men are included here, as this is made explicit in the text of Leudeville: The secular brothers, linked to the Society by the spiritual ties of the Eucharistic Aggregation (RR 14)).

Canonically this 3rd class was not possible, and so he later deleted their mention, as possible members of the community. But it is significant that, at the very beginning, he associates priests or laypeople to the mission of his Institute, aware that these can share in the charism.

- The second point concerns the foundation of the Servants. Already in the month of September 1856, he thinks 'about the women', as he writes to Marguerite Guillot in his letter of September 20, 1856, as an established fact:

As for the women, it is settled. That is, we don't want to associate ourselves with any community already in existence, with its spirit and works. We want to form real adorers of Jesus Eucharistic modeled on Our Lady in the Cenacle, adoring and living near the divine Tabernacle. We will begin by gathering around our Cenacle the few souls whom Jesus will choose in order to form them quietly, without glory, for the Eucharistic life. Then, when they are ready, we will consult God to know where he wants this new Cenacle to be (CO 624).

- He would have to wait until he moved to his new residence in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques, with its two adjacent houses, before inviting, on May 24, 1858, the first future Servants to join him in this established community. They are not yet 'religious', because as such they would be under the authority of the Archbishop of Paris - not yet a good idea. But Father guided their formation and even dreamed of a 'double community', as had existed in the past: a common church for worship, with two distinct and separate monasteries. His utopia: the 'Cenacle', as existed in Jerusalem, where Mary and the holy women within the first community listened to the preaching of the Apostles, shared in the Breaking of the Bread, the prayers, and the communion / sharing. - For many reasons, the experience would be short-lived. When he returned from Rome in June 1863, he quickly looked for a bishop who would welcome the community of Servants: it would be Bishop Angebaud, in Angers, where the Servants would establish themselves autonomously on May 26, 1864.

These reminders show how Fr. Eymard was thinking of the laity at the very beginning of the Congregation, even before any particular apostolate was specified for them. What is clear is that the Eucharist is at the center of the life of the Church, offered to all, adored by all, and shared by all. There is a universal vision, even before an apostolate would be codified.

3. Some Works (Apostolates) for the lay-faithful

3.1 - The Work of the First Communion of Adults in Paris

This is the first work of the young Society; it was even the condition for its very existence. When Fr. Eymard announced to Bishop Sibour that his work was not purely contemplative, but also apostolic, and when he proposed that he intended to create the Work of the First Communion of adults, the Archbishop then enthusiastically gave his consent. While this is mentioned in all the texts of the Constitutions even before its foundation, in fact, it was organized and developed only in March 1858, when the community moved to rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques. Fr. Eymard then would have the needed space to welcome and catechize the youth.

The Complete Writings publish 3 texts on this work: two notices, one printed in 1860 (RA 30), the other a manuscript of 1862 (RA 31), and the 3rd document is a Regulation (RA 32).

The objective of this work is to search out in Paris those adults who did not make their First Communion, to instruct them, and prepare them to receive worthily this great sacrament, as well as Confirmation. - Besides this, there was a plan to preserve and strengthen them in the right path by an on-going catechesis.

It is opportune to notice who are the ones giving this catechesis: It is given by members of the Society of the Most Blessed Sacrament, with the help of the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and some pious laypeople who want to dedicate themselves to this Work. The catechists teach the students the catechism of the diocese.

Among these pious laypeople, we find the name of Louis Perret, a Lyons architect, who gave his personal and financial assistance from the beginning of the work. Likewise, Marguerite Guillot and her companions worked for the care of the formation of the girls. To support and extend this Work, the dedication of active members was not enough; there had to be benefactors. By their financial assistance, they saw to the expenses for clothing and other things needed for the life of the work. Among these women benefactors, we can name Madame d'Andigné and her sister Madame de Fraguier, who went begging from house to house in the parish of Saint-Thomas d'Aquin. The first celebration took place on August 15, 1859, with the initial group of 12 First Communicants. Fr. Eymard was filled with joy. He wrote to Fr. De Cuers on August 17th (CO 859): The First Communion of our 12 little disciples was very edifying and moving.

In all, there were more than 800 boys who were catechized by Fr. Eymard between 1858 and 1868, not counting the girls (we don't have a list of the girls).

This first work - Father called it a princely work - has symbolic value. He involves the laypeople in a work of catechesis and formation in the context of our baptismal initiation. His work has a social implication: it 'humanizes' these young people and inserts them into society. It reveals the transforming power of the Eucharist and its missionary dimension. (cf. his letter to Mme de Fraguier on February 18, 1866, CO 1742).

3.2 - The Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament

The idea of the Eucharistic Aggregation is linked to the very foundation of the Congregation. When he first met Pius IX on December 20, 1858, he obtained from the Pope some indulgences for the lay associates. Shortly after that, in April 1859, in a leaflet that he printed about the Society of the Most Blessed Sacrament, he mentions the Aggregation, with its double purpose:

- to take part in the exercise of adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament,
- to share, according to their zeal, in the service (expenses) of the worship of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

From that time on, he sends invitation letters to persons that he is directing to become associates to our small Society

In fact, the Aggregation took shape with the opening of the 2nd community in Marseilles. Fr. de Cuers, sent ahead as a forerunner, prepared everything during the year 1859. The inauguration by Bishop de Mazenod was held on November 9, 1859. Fr. Eymard was present, accompanied by Fr. Leroyer and Fr. Golliet, who were both assigned to the new community. Here is what we read in the Diary of the House of Marseilles:

3 - Rev. Fr. Eymard, Superior of the Society, left Paris on the 9th [2nd], at 2 o'clock in the night accompanied by Frs. Leroyer and Golliet, novice priests, and arrived at the house about 7:30 in the evening.. Fr. de Cuers went to meet them at the train station. After a short time, Rev. Fr. Eymard gave the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin, filled with people who rejoiced at the arrival of the Fathers.

9 - During the last few days, we finished preparing the main chapel, and on Wednesday the 9th, the anniversary of the dedication of the church of the Holy Savior, at 8 o'clock in the morning, Bishop de Mazenod, of Marseilles, came to say the Holy Mass in the main chapel in the presence of many faithful. After the Holy Mass, he made the first solemn exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

After his thanksgiving, the Bishop accepted to have breakfast with the community, and visited the entire house. His Excellency showed everyone a very paternal kindness.

During the following 8 days, Rev. Fr. Eymard preached an octave along with Frs. Leroyer and Golliet. The exercises took place in the morning and evening. The attendance of the faithful was consoling.

17 - On the 17th, Rev. Fr. Eymard accepted the first names for the Aggregation which was well received. [4] Towards the end of the month, a little dinner was given for the friends of the house, among others there were M. Brunello, priest, and the Guérin, both father and son.

At the end of the octave preached by Fr. Eymard, Bishop de Mazenod canonically erected the Aggregation in his diocese on November 17, 1859, and insisted to inscribe his own name at the top of the register. Hundreds of faithful followed, and eventually thousands were inscribed. From then on, the Aggregation would spread to all the communities of the Religious and Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. Through the zeal of Fr. Leroyer, it was the community of Marseilles that would develop the Aggregation in a special way.

Fr. Eymard will try to organize the Aggregation with a Directory, and determine its spirit through his preaching and writings. We can note briefly that he distinguishes two kinds of Aggregations:

- simple or personal, for those individuals who are inscribed in the work and commit themselves to make one hour of adoration every month, according to the recommended method of the Four Ends of the Sacrifice: adoration, thanksgiving, asking pardon, and petition,
- and as an Aggregation, set up as a fraternity in a parish, when there are a dozen persons. Later, the Aggregation would admit a 3rd class: Associates who want to live a more Eucharistic life by living together in community in a family and forming in the world something like little religious cenacles. We find here 'the houses of Bethany' or the 'houses of the Cenacle', similar to the 'houses of Nazareth' found in the Marist Third Order of Mary.

- Later on, the Eucharistic Weeks was linked to the Aggregation, caring particularly for the candles during exposition.

Among the works suggested for the Associates, we can note:

- The principal Eucharistic works are:
1° Teaching Christian doctrine to poor children, and to adults who did not make their First Communion.
2° Dedicating oneself to the work of Holy Viaticum, by helping the sick to be ready to receive the last Sacraments. Preparing a little altar for the Holy Viaticum, especially among the sick poor, and organizing an escort or at least accompanying the priest as much as possible.
3° Giving practical assistance to support the adoration, by the cleanliness and decency of the linens and sacred ornamentation, by a worthy decoration of the altar where the Blessed Sacrament is kept, by maintaining the sanctuary lamp in poor churches, as well as the candles during the exposition (RA 7).

Concerning the spirit - the spirituality - of the Aggregation, Father remarks:

- The Spirit of the Aggregation
1° The love of Our Lord Jesus Christ in his divine Sacrament must be the rule and goal of the life of adorers, and form the character of their holiness.
2° They shall have a tender devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, since this mystery has an intimate and special link with the august mystery of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
3° They shall love the holy roman Church as the worthy Spouse of the Savior, and their mother in faith. They shall profess a complete filial loyalty to the Sovereign Pontiff, and a religious respect for Bishops and Priests, through whom Jesus Christ gives himself perpetually to men in the sacrament of his love.
4° They shall make truth and charity the constant and inflexible law of their conduct with their neighbor, for Jesus Christ said: "I am the truth" [Jn 14: 6]. "God is love", says St. John [1 Jn 4: 16] (RA 7).

Fr. Eymard developed these 4 points in several texts in his Directory of the Aggregation. For example, in RA 17, he develops only the first point, beginning with

- divine love, as the first principle of life,
- then the holy Eucharist, as the center of life,
- the Eucharist, the goal of a Christian,
-the goal of his gifts,
-the goal of his Christian piety,
-the goal of Christian and religious virtues,
- the Eucharist, perfection of virtues,
- the Eucharist, goal of Christian zeal,
- the Eucharist, the noble passion of the heart.

We have there a draft of the spirituality that he proposes for the Aggregation: centered on the Eucharist that is the source, the summit and the goal of all Christian life, and of all the life and mission of the Church.

In Conclusion

Fr. Eymard was concerned about offering to lay people (and to priests) a form of spirituality that, through the works he undertook, was inspired by the Eucharist and made it the center of that spirituality.

- by linking it to the Society of the Blessed Sacrament as its secular branch,
- by linking it to the worship of the Eucharist by adoration, as its spiritual prayer in the Church,
- by linking it to the works of the Society: such as the First Communion of adults,
- by proposing a way of sanctification according to the means of each one in their state of life.

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