

## The Siege of the Cenacle

- Fr. Tony McSweeney, SSS

St Peter Julian Eymard had a dream beset by immense difficulties – acquiring the Jerusalem Cenacle for the Church! For centuries the building constructed by the Crusaders on the site of the Last Supper had been a mosque. Under Ottoman rule at the time, the Holy Land was a place of political contention by great powers, including Britain, France, Turkey and Russia, while the Franciscan Order had the exclusive right to establish communities there.

Having founded his religious Congregation dedicated to the Eucharist, he embarked on what his first companion, former naval commander Raymond de Cuers, called “the siege of the Cenacle”.

With Pope Pius IX’s encouragement and confident of the support of the Prefect of Propaganda Fidei, Eymard travelled to Rome in late 1864 hoping to secure approval for his project. After numerous delays by Propaganda he decided to transfer from the French Seminary to the Redemptorist monastery in the city to make a spiritual retreat.

It was the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul and Eymard applied to himself Jesus’ words to the Apostle, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” After years of intense activity, he was feeling both “empty of God” and “famished for God;” it was time “to work on my soul”.

Suspecting that his failing fervour was due to his own egocentric needs for recognition, approval and admiration infiltrating his religious activities, he asked himself how he could allow God to direct his life.



In his diary entries we can hear two opposed “voices” contending for his attention. One reflected the spirituality of his time, known as “voluntarism,” urging repressive control by force of will, leading him to envisage a “revolution . . . sheer power that resorts to fire and chains, and brings on the death of the ‘old self.’”

But there was another and gentler “voice” coming from a deeper place within him, no less powerful for all its mildness. It invited him to cultivate attention to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in him, encouraging him to read the word of God prayerfully and to open his mind and heart to Christ’s action within him.

Seeking to discern which of these two voices to follow, he was unexpectedly jolted by a message informing him of uncooperative behaviour by Father De Cuers coupled with harsh criticisms of Eymard himself.

“O God!,” Eymard wrote, “What a storm assailed me for an hour! What thoughts crossed my imagination! My mind was troubled and harsh; my will had almost reached boiling point.”

Despite repeated attempts to quell the tumult, his hurt and angry reactions kept resurfacing, forcing him to look back over his life to identify the source of such “holy indignation”. Doubling down on his feelings by greater willpower proved useless, suggesting to him that a “change of command” was needed – humble acceptance and openness to the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

Here his constant reading of Saint Paul combined with his attention to the significance of the Cenacle led him to see that if Christ chose to communicate himself wholly to the communicant in the Eucharist, Eymard must himself become a hospitable place, a “Cenacle” for the interior Master, eager to make his home in us through holy Communion so as to fashion us in his own likeness.

Allowing Christ to transform his thinking and reshape his mind and affections, his attitudes and behaviour, meant letting go of his egocentric self and its demands. It is consenting to the urging of the Spirit rather than seeking to force oneself into some kind of spiritual mould.



*“The Eucharist is the life of the people”*

St. Peter Julian Eymard

If Rome’s refusal terminated his Cenacle dream, a deep shift in his understanding had been emerging. More than a presence to be adored, the Eucharist was a sharing in Christ’s banquet – communion or shared union with Christ and with one another!

“Only in communion,” he wrote, “do we find an intimate knowledge of our Lord. . . . Contact with our Lord in communion gives us a taste of God; 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.”

Apparent failure had become unexpected victory. Refocusing his mission, it also prepared him for the painful time that lay ahead.

As with so many saints, misfortune and suffering would dog Eymard’s final years. An unjustified loss of reputation, virtual repudiation by De Cuers, criticism by his religious brothers together with respiratory complaints, shingles and migraine accompanied a prolonged state of spiritual desolation.

“And yet,” he could write in his diary, “life follows death. It is the way of the Society and my own.” Despite his sufferings, his letters of spiritual direction and his preaching became richer than ever abounding with exhortations to joyfulness. His very life had become Eucharist as Christ transformed his wounded self into a new and tasty bread for others!

