

The excellent and ever new book of God's Love

Presentation and Comment

Introduction

I want to present you a suggested way to read some of Father Eymard's texts regarding creation, love for nature in parallel with some passages of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*.

In his message for the Day of Peace, on 1 January 2019, the Pope spoke about "three inseparable dimensions" of interior and communitarian peace:

'- peace with oneself, rejecting inflexibility, anger and impatience; in the words of Saint Francis de Sales, showing "a bit of sweetness towards oneself" in order to offer "a bit of sweetness to others";

'- peace with others: family members, friends, strangers, the poor and the suffering, being unafraid to encounter them and listen to what they have to say;

'- peace with all creation, rediscovering the grandeur of God's gift and our individual and shared responsibility as inhabitants of this world, citizens and builders of the future.'

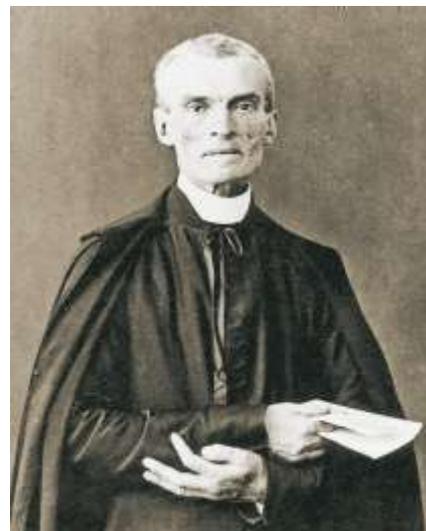
It is proposed to begin from Father Eymard to arrive then to our situation today.

The introductory prayer draws attention to creation as shown by Father Eymard, who summed up in a personalised way the canticle of the prophet Daniel.

Comment on Father Eymard's texts with the help of the Pope's Encyclical letter

The first text invites us to sharpen our sense of observation.

"When I was parish priest [at Monteynard] (...) I lived on a mountain overlooking what is said to be the most beautiful valley of France, the valley of the Grésivaudan of Grenoble, which I surveyed. The whole sky in autumn and at the beginning of spring was covered with fog, looking like a sea of ice over the mountain, the sun being magnificent, I saw it and said to myself: These people enshrouded in fogs don't imagine that here the earth is decked in flowers, lovely violets, which they don't enjoy; and the sky seemed to me more beautiful that day." (*Monthly Retreat*, 4 March 1861, PS 301,4)



This penetrating profound gaze, which cannot be blocked by the fog, is the gaze of the mystics.

The Pope, in his Encyclical Letter, tells us about the experience of St John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic. "The mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that "all things are God". Standing awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord: "Mountains have heights and they are plentiful, vast, beautiful, graceful, bright and fragrant. These mountains are what my Beloved is to me. Lonely valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady and flowing with fresh water; in the variety of their groves and in the sweet song of the birds, they afford abundant recreation and delight to the senses, and in their solitude and silence, they refresh us and give rest. These valleys are what my Beloved is to me." (n.134 – citing *The Spiritual Canticle*, XIV, 6-7)

1.- Observation

Father Eymard, when the assistant parish priest at the Chatte parish (it seems around 1836-1837), had the very vivid experience of discovering God's love through the contemplation of nature. He describes this experience for the first time in a letter written in July 1851:

“Many members [of the Third Order] are like my *good Dauphinoise* meditating the beauties of nature in the silence and peace of the valleys and hills. Do not forget my rock, my chapel, the beautiful view. Oh, what a wonderful hour I spent there a few years ago at the end of a beautiful day! My heart rejoiced in peace during a meditation I will never forget.” (*Letter to Madam Jordan, 7 July 1851, CO 263*)

This letter speaks of inner peace (a sensation of wellbeing), of silence, of beauty; but also of a rock, a promontory, a chapel and of a delightful hour. Father Eymard experienced, nearing the sunset of a beautiful day, maybe in spring or summer, something that was impossible to forget (as clear from repetition twice of the verb “forget”).

Written in 1851 this letter is addressed to Madam Natalie Jordan. It is only to this lady that Eymard would speak about this experience that marked his life.

The last letter, in which he recalls again this experience, was written on 27 August 1867, a year before his death.

We may wonder why he shared with Madam Jordan this experience that lasted for a long time, 1851-1867.

A first reason is given by the fact that Madam Jordan lived, especially during the beautiful season, at her stately home at Calet in the municipality of Saint-Romans.

“There you are, all alone at Calet, where stands my contemplative rock (an allusion to the calvary of Saint-Romans at which he received a grace that can be called mystical) and where you remain also with Our Lord. May you be gladly and joyously immersed in the peace and stunning nature. May you know how to see God who makes everything beautiful and turns the most desolate deserts into delightful places. Think of touching the sky with your hands and that your heart must live there.” (*29 May 1859, CO 832*)

Another reason may be found in human friendship, in the great spiritual affinity and affective maturity that grew more and more between them. Madam Jordan was able to understand, better than others, what Father Eymard experienced and he, because of their shared communication, was able to deepen his experience in a better way.

2.- Sentiments

Another letter:

“So you are at Calet in this charming countryside where there's my mystical rock at which I contemplated the sky that is so pure and lovely! It is one of those nights that I shall never forget. Avail yourself of this gentle silence of solitude to get close to God, to taste God, to lose yourself somewhat in the harmony of his heart.” (*Letter to Madam Jordan, 5 May 1864, CO 1380*)

The rock is that at Saint-Romans, where, at the top, there is a Calvary. The rock, or promontory, is transformed, becoming the “mystical rock”. The lived experience in the sweet silence of solitude enables Father Eymard to enter into a very deep communion with God.

He speaks about a God who is very near, who can be savoured, hence of an experience of the senses, palpable, something that can be touched. This is the grace that pertains to mystics. Eymard tells us of a God who has a harmonious heart where every colour or every note of beauty of the world could be discovered, but also all dimensions of goodness, where everything finds its place, everything is in order and is pleasant. There, in this heart, one can be at ease.



This deep relationship between creation and God is frequently underlined in Pope Francis' Encyclical letter:

The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: "From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine". The bishops of Japan, for their part, made a thought-provoking observation: "To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God's love and hope." This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice." (n.85)

What is our relationship with nature? Responses, sentiments, questions ...

3.- *Reading in depth*

The reading of the lived experienced is deepened and is translated in a contemplative prayer, in calmness, bringing peace.

"Aspire in your prayers to be nourished rather by God than to purify and humiliate yourself; and for this nourish your soul by the personified truth in God's divine goodness towards you, by his tenderness, by his personal love; here is the secret of real prayer, it consists in seeing God's action and thought in his love for us! So the astonished soul is impelled to cry: 'How good you are, O my God! What shall I do for you? What could please you?' This is the flame in the hearth. But to reach this prayer of life it is necessary to work a lot on forgetting oneself, not to seek anything in prayer; above all it is necessary to simplify the mind's activity by simply and calmly looking at the truths of God. The secret of this simple look is to see things first of all from the aspect of God's goodness towards humankind, the purpose for this grace, what it cost Our Lord, its reality, its continuity for us. When the soul has the joy of discovering this aspect of goodness, prayer becomes a rather delightful contemplation during which the hour passes quickly. Ah! dear daughter, how I wish and desire that you often thus taste God! This is for long time; this is my rock of Saint-Romans. [...] (*Letter to Madam Jordan, 27 August 1867, CO 2011*)

Meditation, Prayer, contemplation represent the appropriate time to "be nourished by God...", to nourish our soul "with the truth that manifests itself in the kindness of God towards you, with his tenderness, with his personal love."

“One must, first of all”, Father Eymard wrote, “simplify the work of the mind, bringing a simple and calm gaze on God’s truths.” Prayer is the place to discover how good God is, his love for us. A love that is present (today, for me) and permanent. Then prayer is transformed in a “delightful contemplation.” This type of prayer calls for a response, a commitment: “What can I do for you, Lord?”

The Pope tells us that: “Creation is of the order of love. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things (...). Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection.” (n.77)

The Pope invites us to acquire an attitude of gratitude and gratuity, namely to recognize the world as “God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.” (n.220)

The Pope asks us to live in “loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.” (n.220)

He asks us also to cultivate an attitude of contemplation. The “contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us.” (n.85)

Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. (...). Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them (...). An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence “must not be contrived but found, uncovered.” (n.225)

4.- Action

One last letter:

“I have envied you because of your beautiful and attractive mountains, these ladders of the sky, which is more beautiful from the top of mountains; the soul is closer to God there. You have read very good books; there is an excellent and ever new one: the one that God has written on all plants, on all grains of sand, in you, it is the book of divine love. Therefore honour this beautiful book and add to it some pages of admiration and appreciation! Read all the books in this one and interpret them all in its light, and you will have the key to knowing creatures and God himself. If you only knew how much God loves you!” (*Letter to Madam Jourdan, 19 July 1860, CO 971*)

Father Eymard uses the image of the book to speak about nature, an “excellent and always new book”, the book of God’s love.

Together with the book of the Holy Scriptures, nature is another book that contains in itself a “Revelation.” The Pope invites us to open it and to read it. Nature is like a “magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness”. (n.12)

“God has written a precious book, ‘whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe.’” (n. 85)

Sometimes we use things from nature, that creation offers us as a simple object, sometimes we throw it away, but in reality “the material universe is a language from God’s love”, a call to relationship, to a development of life with all its fragility. “Nature is full of words of love.” (n.225)

This book of love is written in nature, but also in each one of us, as Father Eymard tells us. “*Everything is connected!*” is the Pope’s refrain that occurs many times in the Encyclical letter. Our way of inhabiting the world touches also our relationship with nature and with other creatures but also our way of relating to our sisters and brothers, with ourselves and with God (Saint Francis “lived with simplicity and in a marvellous harmony with God, with other people, with nature and with himself.” n.10)

What do we need to do?

“Honour this beautiful book and add to it some pages of admiration and appreciation! Read all the books in this one and interpret them all in its light.”

To do honour to this book, to respect it, to appreciate its value it and to add some pages of admiration and appreciation.

This is our commitment for today and for the future. We can ask ourselves what world do we want to hand on to future generations (n.67; 159;160).

“The earth is not an inheritance received from our Parents, but a loan to give back to our children” (Indian proverb taken by Saint-Exupéry).

It is good always to be clear about the sense of “cultivate” and “guard.” (n.67)

In the texts presented above, Father Eymard does not mention the neighbour. The only reference is found in the text proposed as a prayer:

“I can remember all human creatures. *He gave commandment to each of them concerning his neighbour.*” [cf. Sir 17:12]



What are the actions to be taken to preserve nature?

For the Pope it is clear that one cannot separate love for nature, love for the poor and inner peace from praising the Creator of everything (n.10-12). When people open themselves generously to the others, to the contemplation of the world's beauty, to the praise of the Creator, they become enabled to commit themselves with joy to make the earth better for all (n.204).

The Gospel and Christian life give us precise directives on how to live what the Pope calls "an ecological conversion." (n.211)

"By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems and in offering ourselves to God "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable (Rm 12:1)." (n.220)

An ecological conversion presupposes a development of new convictions, attitudes and ways of life, a formation, for example: "In the family we learn to ask without demanding, to say "thank you" as an expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggressiveness and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm." (n.213)

Social responsibility (n.206; cf. n.50: rubbish, consumerism and waste, the risk of a superficial ecology, n.59).

Small daily actions that create a lifestyle. (n.211)

Cultivation of a joyous and freeing sobriety. (n.222-223)

Conclusion: allow everyone to express himself freely.

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PS: translation of the texts of Eymard by Fr Michael Gaudoin-Parker.