

Manna: Food for the Journey

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A Program of the Center for Eucharistic Evangelizing
Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament

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Introduction

Manna is published by the Center for Eucharistic Evangelizing (CEE), a ministry office of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. The CEE has as its mission the creation and promotion of adult and youth formation programs and resources that assist Catholics in deepening their understanding and appreciation of the fullness of the Eucharistic mystery. The theology and spirituality of this program is inspired by Saint Peter Julian Eymard, the founder of the congregation.

Manna was conceived as a follow-up resource for the ongoing spiritual formation of women and men who have experienced the Life in the Eucharist program, and also for those who have made their Promise Commitment to become Associates of the Blessed Sacrament. It is designed to be used as a 12-session (monthly) course on the Eucharist or as part of a training or formation program for parish liturgical ministers.

Manna was created to assist Catholic parishioners in deepening their understanding and appreciation of the fullness of the Eucharistic mystery and to facilitate the formation of faith communities who desire to place the Eucharist at the center of their life and mission.

Format

Manna consists of twelve sessions. Each chapter has been assigned a particular month. The suggested monthly arrangement was done to keep the session topics in harmony with the liturgical year. However, the choice can be made to schedule a particular session during a different month to celebrate some parish event or commemoration.

The outline of each session follows the pattern used in all programs developed by the CEE:

- Introduction to the Theme
- Opening Prayer
- Reflection questions and discussion to tap into participants' experiences
- A Teaching
- Closing Prayer

The time allotted for each session will be determined by the local leadership team.

Live on the divine Eucharist, like the Hebrews did on the Manna. Your soul can be entirely dedicated to the divine Eucharist and very holy in the midst of your work and contacts with the world.

Father Peter Julian Eymard
To Mme. Isabelle Spazzier
Nov. 5, 1859

In a Profound Atmosphere of Prayer:

Eucharist and Solitude

William Fickel, SSS

August

Solitude carries the pure and simple soul to God.

To Mrs. Natalie Jordan

July 9, 1866

Preface

August 2 is the feast day of Saint Peter Julian Eymard, the founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. It is the most important celebration for all those who are members of the Eymardian Family: the religious priests and brothers, the Sister Servants, and the lay Associates of the Blessed Sacrament.

Introduction to the Theme

The purpose of Jesus' life was to reunite the members of the human family with one another and with the divine life of the Trinity. On the night before he died, Jesus entrusted to the church the Eucharist as the primary means of this unity with the teaching: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you" (John 14:10, 19-20).

The life God shares with us can be viewed as a stream of flowing water. The banks of the stream have been recognized in the church's tradition as being *mysteric*, which give prime importance to the sacraments and especially to the Eucharist. The other bank of the stream is the *mystic*, which gives prime importance to solitude and the interior life. These are not two different and alternative pathways to participation in the divine life of God, for they are closely bound and interdependent. Both sacraments and solitude complement the work of the Father that Jesus continues to accomplish through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The sacraments alone without solitude become empty ritual and the stream can become a dry bed without water. Solitude without sacraments may isolate a person from the life of the community. In the early church the Desert Fathers and Mothers recognized that the liturgical and sacramental life of the church played an essential part in sustaining their solitude. False hermits felt that only solitude was needed for union with God and that mystical experiences elevated them above the sacramental life of the church. While their experience was one they believed in, it led them into all kinds of aberrations and abuses for it lacked the workings of the Spirit.

There is no true mysticism without charity; and there is no charity without belonging to the "mystical body of Christ." Charity is the life of the body of Christ which is nourished on both the food of solitude and sacrament as a single expression of its prayer to the Father.

The gospels set forth this dual character of prayer when we find Jesus after feeding the multitudes going up on the mountain by himself to pray to the Father. The work that Jesus realized throughout his life was the work of the Father who sent him. To accomplish this work Jesus had to trust completely in the Father and surrender himself fully into the Father's will.

Together let us reflect on how the Eucharist in our life unites us to the outpouring love of God, and through the celebration of the Eucharist invites us to interiorize this love with periods of solitude. In both celebration and contemplation, the gift of the Spirit enables our own death to self or gift of self in an outpouring of love from our hearts so that we can continue the work of Jesus in union with the Father.

Opening Prayer:

Creative word, spoken out of darkness and chaos,
your spirit hovered over the abyss,

while a mighty wind swept over the waters.
You give form and life to all that lives.

One with God from the beginning of time,
you are the light that dispels darkness and
enlightens everyone with the power to
become children of God.

We acknowledge you as the word become flesh
who has made your dwelling among us and within us.

Of old you spoke in the wilderness,
and you led your chosen people from slavery,
through the desert wasteland, into the land of promise.
You fed them in their hunger with manna;
yet they continued to grumble against you.

Help us to bring to silence our complaining,
guide us to a place of solitude and refreshment.
From the inner depths may we again hear the echo of Jesus' promise:

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger,
and whoever believes in me will never thirst again.”

No one can come to you of their own will,
it is you Father who gives the gift of everlasting life.
As the prophets have written: “They shall all be taught by God.”

Help us to learn the lessons hidden within the mystery of the Eucharist.
May the sacrament we celebrate and share enable us to listen in solitude
to the voice of God and come to the dwelling place where all is one
in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen

Song

“Speak, Lord”, by Marianne Uszler, Music Issue of Today's Missal – Oregon Catholic Press

Work Exercise:

1. Call to mind experiences of solitude you have had in your life. Try to recapture in your imagination a particular place or setting; go there and allow the feelings and memories to become vivid. What image best expresses your experience of solitude?

good.” The dinner guests all became very silent, aware that they had overlooked the essence of the meal.

How easily we neglect to truly taste our food, all of which is an opportunity for communication with God. Instead, we often get caught up in the mundane or in disagreements which distracts us from enjoying the gift of what we are eating. Solitude is lost in the noise and hectic pace of daily life. Meals are meant to be both a sharing of food and of life. Time is not given to savor the bread of companionship and love. Meals that begin with some shared silence and prayer might help us to know the full meaning of “Taste and see that God is good.”

Would also that our time of communion at the Eucharist allowed for a true tasting of Christ. At times the communion line can appear so routine, with people falling in line so they won't be climbed over by others in the pew. Other communicants seem in a hurry to get out of the church - just one more occasion of eating on the run. Would that time could be created for a reverential reception of holy communion. Then those who come forward to receive the bread of life might be able to taste and see that, indeed, God is good. In both liturgy and life, we need to take time to truly taste our bread. (*A Pilgrim's Almanac*, by Edward Hayes, p. 132)

2.

This parable of the rabbi describes what took place at the Last Supper when Jesus was gathered with his chosen friends. In Luke's gospel we find the disciples' response to the bread broken and shared and the cup from which they drank as the sign of the new covenant in his blood. Luke explains, “They began to debate among themselves . . . an argument broke out among them about them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:23-24).

The disciples just did not “get it.” They ate and drank but they failed to taste and see. How often is the Eucharist celebrated and received without any real awareness of the “mysteric” because our lives lack sufficient solitude? When our lives are lived at a hurried pace and filled with noise, often our meals and relationships with family and friends may miss what is most important to nourish our inner hunger for communion. The result is loneliness which is the opposite of solitude.

3.

Paul reminds us that the early Christians experienced the eucharistic table ending in divisions that fractured the community. Some of the members were left to go hungry while others got drunk. “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on oneself” (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). The church in Corinth celebrated the Eucharist with great external flair, but the inner change of heart and transformation of the inner self was lacking.

Solitude is sometimes considered an opposition to community. Being alone and removing oneself from social preoccupation, withdrawing from sociable interaction with others, seems to be the antithesis of community. However, solitude can be a place of deep communion and actually serves as a corrective to a self-absorbed life that seeks personal pleasure, or power to the detriment of the community. The inner silence will begin to manifest the outward opposition that fractures the unity of real community.

4.

Solitude begins with a time and a place for God alone. Anchored in the belief that God is both present and active in our lives, we need to set aside a time and space to give God our undivided attention. And even though we have a deep desire for solitude, we also may experience a certain apprehension as we approach being alone with the self. Solitude is *attentiveness* to God's presence and action within oneself. At first the emptiness may feel like a waste of time, or the solitude may be experienced as a bombardment of thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from the unconscious, or a feeling of one's own inner poverty and sinfulness. In solitude, we forget the condition of the self and trust the self as it is into the arms of God.

5.

Thomas Merton writes in *Learning to Love* about how everything in modern life is made into a "problem." He speaks about the anxiety of our times, both from external forces as well as that which we create within ourselves. Achieving "sanctity," he believes, begins with facing our anxiety and with God's help, freeing ourselves from it while in the midst of it.

The Eucharist embraces life as a mystery to be lived rather than a problem to be solved. Silent prayer before the Eucharist can be an experience of letting go of all fears, anxieties, and concerns. It is not the time to worry or try to find solutions or figure out problems; it is rather a time to place all one's faith and trust in the power and love of God. "Do not be afraid any longer . . . for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom . . . For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Luke 12:32, 34).

6

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton shares his experience about solitude. He says that when he made solitude a problem, there was no solitude. When he filled the time with words or got lost in pursuing concepts of God, the solitude that feeds the spirit was elusive. When, however, he managed to not make solitude a problem, he discovered that he "already possessed it." Respect the silence, he urges us. Don't try to control or fill the silence with so many words, he cautions. For in the "friendly communion of silence" we will be able to see reality as it is. He believes that silence is related to love. And thus to God.

7.

In another one of Merton's short books, *The Sign of Jonas*, he tells us how in solitude he found a "gentleness" to love his brothers in community, no matter their flaws and shortcomings. He claims that the more solitude he experiences the more affectionate he feels towards others. For in our relationships with one another the "false self" becomes an obstacle to a deeper level of communion. In solitude the false self is put to death in order that the true self in the likeness of Christ may become the place of communion with all our brothers and sisters.

8.

Merton claims that it is necessary that we find the silence of God not only in ourselves but also in one another. Unless some other person speaks to us in words that spring from God and communicate with the silence of God in our souls, we remain isolated in our own silence, from which God tends to withdraw. For inner silence depends on a continual seeking, a continual crying

in the night, a repeated bending over the abyss. If we cling to a silence we think we have found forever, we stop seeking God and the silence goes dead within us.

A solitude in which God is no longer sought ceases to speak to us of God. A solitude from which God does not seem to be absent dangerously threatens God's continued presence. For God is found when he is sought after but when he is no longer sought in silence, God escapes us. The voice of God is heard only when we listen in hope to hear his word, and if, thinking our hope to be fulfilled, we cease to listen, God ceases to speak. His silence ceases to be vivid and becomes dead, even though we recharge it with the echo of our own noise.

Solitude is not a passive withdrawal from life. It is rather a passionate quest for the deepest level of communion with the core of all that lives. It means going to a place of desire within the heart to love all and to receive all love.

9.

There is a cosmic aspect to the Eucharist as Jesus takes the fruit of the earth and transforms it into divine presence as his own flesh and blood. The mystical experience is thought to transcend the limits imposed by nature in order to allow the soul to fly to God unencumbered. However, the grandeur of nature and all creation have become through the Eucharist and the action of Christ a place of communion and real solitude. Merton saw that the interior life needed moments of exterior relaxation and enjoyment. He recommended to the monks that they needed to work in the garden, take a walk in the woods or near water. He urged them to be out in nature, and not to spend all their time in the cloister. He felt that the woods and nature should be part of their practice of solitude. (Taken from *Contemplation in a World of Action*)

10.

Solitude creates communion within and enables one to live in greater harmony with all life. To be like Christ it is not enough to eat his body and drink his blood. Saint Peter Julian realized that in a like manner we are required to pour out our lives with the same love and offer the gift of oneself as Jesus did. During his long retreat in Rome in 1865, he wrote in his journal on February 23:

But what must I do primarily? Work on my soul, on my inner life, on myself first of all. (Paraphrasing John 14:10) Christ who dwells in me does his works. But how shall I succeed in making him dwell in me? By dwelling in him; our Lord will dwell in me in proportion to my dwelling in him. This dwelling results from the repeated gift of self, from a homage activated by acts of virtue, fortified and sustained in love but an effective love, not a self-gratifying love.

Saint Augustine said of Mary that it would have been worth nothing for Mary to have carried Jesus in her womb if she had not also carried him with love in her heart. Mary was full of Jesus not only in her body but in her spirit, too. Saint Luke tells us: "Mary kept all things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19). In this she is the most perfect model of eucharistic contemplation. She exemplifies what every person who receives the Eucharist must be like. Mary surrendered her life completely

to the Father's will and has actualized the promise of Jesus: "I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you" (John 14:20).

Additional Resources

Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master, edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Paulist Press, New York, 1992.

Seeds of Hope, A Henri Nouwen Reader, edited by Robert Durbach. Bantam Books, New York, 1989.

Prayer of the Heart, by George A. Maloney. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981.

Closing prayer in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament

Opening song: "Speak, Lord", by Marianne Uszler, Music Issue of Today's Missal -Oregon Catholic Press.

Opening prayer: Psalm 62

My soul waits, waits in silence upon God,
for God alone is my salvation, my rock,
my safety, my refuge: I rest secure.

How long will some of you attack tearing others down
as if walls or fences on the verge of collapse?

You scheme to topple them, so smug in your lies;
your lips are all blessing, but hatred fills your heart.

Wait, my soul, in silence wait upon God,
for God alone is my salvation, my rock,
my safety, my refuge: I rest secure.

God is my glory and safety, my stronghold, my haven.
People, give your hearts to God, trust always! God is our haven.

Mortals are but a breath, nothing more than a mirage;
Set them on the scales, they prove lighter than mist.

Wait, my soul, in silence wait upon God,
for God alone is my salvation, my rock, my safety, my refuge: I rest secure.

Period of silence

First reading

Taken from the July 9, 1866 letter of Father Peter Julian Eymard to Mrs. Natalie Jordan

Solitude carries the pure and simple soul toward God. Well, you have such a beautiful solitude at Calet, between Heaven and earth, where you can pray, listen to God, contemplate Heaven.

The silence in the countryside recollects the soul naturally, and when we know how to read in every pure creature the good which God has placed in it for human beings and for his own glory. Oh! What beautiful aspirations we can send back to God, the author of every good!

However it is in church, perhaps very often alone in calm and silence, that the soul must pray, and converse with our Lord!

Period of silence

Gospel reading (John 15:9-17)

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Period of silence

Incensing of the Blessed Sacrament and the assembled community

Song and benediction

Closing prayer

(From 1 John 2:24-5, 3:1, 4: 7-16)

Presider:

Let what you heard from the beginning remain in you.
If what you heard from the beginning remains in you,
then you will remain in the Son and in the Father.
This is the promise God made to us: nothing less than
eternal union in everlasting life.

Assembly:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us, calling us the children of God.
This is who we are, God's very own.
The reason the world does not acknowledge us is that it did not acknowledge God.

Let us love one another, because love is of God;
everyone who loves is begotten of God and acknowledges God.
In this way the love of God was revealed to us:
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.

In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that God has love us
and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.
If God so loved us, we also must love one another.
No one has ever seen God.
Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us,
and God's love is brought to perfection in us.

This is how we know that we remain in God and God in us,
God has given us his Spirit.
Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God,
God remains in us and we in God.
We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.

Dismissal with the kiss/sign of peace

