

**United in the Spirit with
those who are Poor and Weak:
Eucharist and the Poor**

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*God becoming poor, in order to be the friend, the brother
of the poor; God making himself weak in order to console
the weak and abandoned; God accepting suffering,
in order to prove his love. He became a child, so that
man will no longer be afraid of God.*

Saint Peter Julian Eymard

Preface

After five years serving in rural and small towns in southeastern France as a diocesan priest, Father Peter Julian Eymard joined the Society of Mary (Marists) in 1839. In 1845 he was transferred to Lyons. There for the first time he experienced pastoral life in an urban setting. There he encountered for the first time the social and economic conditions faced by the poor and working class. There he ministered to unskilled workers weighed down by unjust economic laws, lack of decent employment, and living in miserable ghettos. There he began to visit the local jails as part of his regular ministry. There he gained a reputation as a “friend” of the working poor.

When Father Eymard founded the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament in Paris in 1856, he initiated a ministry of preparing young workers, including young adolescents (referred to as the “rag pickers”), for their first Holy Communion. This ministry took him into the horrible “red band” of slums which encircled the city, a place where neither police nor clergy would dare to set foot. Once again, he became known as the kindly friend of the working poor.

By his life and by his own ministry, Father Eymard left as part of his legacy a ministerial commitment to the poor. For him, the source of these terrible realities lay in the moral and spiritual deficiencies of the times. The *Rule of Life* for the Congregation states in No. 3, “Following in the footsteps of Father Eymard, our mission is to respond to the hungers of the human family with the riches of God’s love manifested in the Eucharist.” It goes on to say in this same section, “United in the Spirit with those who are poor and weak, we oppose everything which degrades human dignity and we proclaim a more just and brotherly world as we await the coming of the Lord.” By his life and by his teachings, Father Eymard was clearly on the side of the poor and the weak.

Introduction to the Theme

(The theme is introduced by the presenter telling the story of the female **Saint Uncumber**. Source: *A Pilgrim's Almanac*, by Edward Hayes, pages 100-102, copyright 1989. Permission for use from: Forest of Peace Books, Box 248, Easton, KA, 60620)

Sir Thomas More wrote fondly of the virtues of Saint Uncumber - but not of the dangers of following her example. Legend says that she was a very beautiful woman who wanted to live a single life but was surrounded by suitors. So she prayed with great devotion to God that she might grow a beard - and her prayer was answered!

But that didn't solve her problem of being pursued. One of her suitors didn't take kindly to the beard of the face on his beloved Uncumber. He was so enraged that he killed her. One moral of Saint Uncumber's story might be that we should choose carefully what we ask of God in prayer, lest the answered prayer have tragic consequences.

When it came to prayers of petition, Jesus admonished his followers to pray for the right things: "look to the lilies of the field . . . Your heavenly Father knows all that you need" (Matthew 7:22). If we are not to be concerned about tomorrow's material needs, for what should we pray?

At the Last Supper Jesus said, "It was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit. Your fruit must endure, so that all you ask my Father in my name will be given to you" (John 15:16). It seems then that we are to pray not for material necessities but for what is needed to be fruitful.

In the consumer society, which is constantly beset by the thirst for more and more possessions, it is easy to pray for those material things that we think will make us happy. Such predictions might include plans for a promotion, a scholarship, a new home, or an "easy out" from some difficult situation. But as Saint Uncumber's story proves, might not the granting of your fondest desire lead to something very undesirable?

Together with daily prayers for what we truly need, such as an increase in faith or love, we could also include prayers for those in our world who are afflicted by poverty, the lack of shelter, or not having a decent job. Yet how seldom do we pray for such gifts from God and how easily are the dire needs of the poor overshadowed by our immediate concerns and personal, material needs.

This reflection on Saint Uncumber's hairy prayer gives each of us an opportunity to examine the content of our daily prayers of petition. Let us not ask God for an easy way out of our difficulties, but rather for the strength of grace to resolve them according to God's will.

And in our prayers for those who are crushed by oppression or discrimination, who are easily forgotten by the well-fed and well-dressed of the world, let us do more than pray words. As the poor and hungry find a daily place in our hearts, their needs become a more vital part of our lives. Such prayer changes us and enables us to speak and act in a better way to those who are broken. Then our voices are added to theirs in a great chorus calling for justice.

Right prayer, then, is the womb of social change, since thoughts lead to words and words lead to action. Prayer can indeed be transforming when our daily devotions include petitions for the poor, since such prayers cannot help but find concrete expression in our lives. Daily social prayer leads to deeds of justice, as our prayers become manifest in such ways as voting or writing

letters to our representatives in government on behalf of the poor and helpless. It also can lead to generosity through financial gifts, as well as gifts of time and energy in such work as helping out in soup kitchens or shelters. And it can surely make us more responsive to those right around us in their times of need.

Surrounded by so much poverty and suffering in our society, so clearly seen on television and in newspapers, we often feel helpless to do anything. We seldom even know where to begin to effect change when we consider the complex structures and rigid systems that create the injustices of our society. But one place, if not the best place, to begin is in our prayer before the Eucharist.

Together let us look at how the Eucharist is the presence of God embracing the sufferings of the world and feeding the hungers of humanity. “For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Opening Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, through your goodness you fill the earth with abundance to satisfy our needs. Your word tells us that we are not to worry about our lives, and what we are to eat, or what we are to drink, or what we are to wear. Grant us a sure faith that you indeed fulfill all our needs with the love of a provident father. As a nurturing mother, you direct us to seek first life in your kingdom, a life of righteousness and justice, so that all these things will be given in overflowing measure.

We come before you as people with little faith. Yes, it is because we are poor in faith that we fail to share our food and funds so that the hungry and thirsty, the poor and the destitute, may have a little something to eat and drink. We confess that we have become a self-reliance-loving people who expect those less fortunate to make it on their own. Often we fail to heed Jesus’ words: “give them something to eat.” Like the disciples in Bethsaida, we today are aware that our actions certainly are insufficient to meet the needs of the nearly 800 million people who suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and who struggle for survival.

Lazarus is at our door in the person of the many who desire to eat the scraps that fall from our tables. We need to be reminded of the blessings promised to those who give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and who welcome the stranger and visit the sick and imprisoned. Whatever is done for the least sister or brother gives you honor.

Your divine presence in the Eucharist is an invitation for us to enter into loving communion with all who suffer from poverty, hunger, and oppression. You continue to embrace the pain in our world from your place on our altar. You nourish our weak faith and feed our hungers with your body and blood. In our breaking and sharing of the bread of Eucharist open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to hear your voice in the cry of the poor.

Work Exercise

1. Please call to mind experiences you have had with someone who was suffering from poverty, hunger, exile from home, oppression, imprisonment, or illness. Were you able to see this experience as a communion with God in the one who was suffering? How so?
2. What passage of the scriptures can you call to mind that speaks of the gospel as “good news for the poor?” Share the impact this passage has made on you?
3. How does your celebration of the Eucharist either address or fail to address the sharing of Christ’s life and our lives with those who are poor and weak? List three specific remedies you can think of to make the Eucharist a true communion with those who suffer.

The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.

Teaching

1. The Eucharist has been called the “bread of affliction,” both in reference to the sacrificial character of Jesus’ death on the cross, and also to reflect the Passover origin of the unleavened bread eaten by God’s people when they were oppressed and in exile. For the Hebrew people the breaking and sharing of unleavened bread was the way in which they remembered the strong hand of the Lord lifting them out of slavery. The living conditions of forced labor, domination, and persecution continue to find expression in the lives of the poor in our time. Think of the living situation of migrant workers, those in sweat shops, and the many who continue to be trapped in a slavery caused by an unjust economy that gives little regard to persons. The Pharaoh in our day may be found as the CEO of a multinational corporation that continues to gain huge profits in building modern day pyramids from the sweat and toil of the poor. The Passover eating of unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, was a reminder of the night God delivered his people from bondage to set them free.
2. The prophet Isaiah reminded the Hebrew people that God’s desire was not for their empty worship and hollow prayers, or in acts of penance that end in quarrels and fights. “This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry; sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own . . . If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation, and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted” (Isaiah 58:6-10).

Isaiah calls the people to a change of heart and behavior. His message is clear that God’s concern is with the poor and oppressed. The Lord offers hope and a safe haven for the people: “In my pastures the poor shall eat, and the needy lie down in safety” (Isaiah 14:30). Our faith in the Eucharist is the fulfillment of these ancient prophecies: “O Lord, you are my God, I will extol you and praise your name: for you have fulfilled your wonderful plans of old, faithful, and true. You are a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in distress . . . On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples. A feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy rich food and pure choice wines” (Isaiah 25:1,4,6,).

3. “Mary, mother of Jesus, voice of the poor and the lowly, welcomed the Word of God into her heart and put it into practice. She shared her life and prayer with the disciples actively working for the coming of the Kingdom. We will honor Mary as the poor one of Yahweh and the servant of the Lord” (*Rule of Life* #14).

The person (Mary) and the places (Nazareth and Bethlehem) which God chose to enter into our world through the incarnation speak of lowliness and humility. Mary expresses the power of God as the one who “casts down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly; who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53).

From the first moment of his birth, Jesus identifies himself with the poor and the hungry. Born in Bethlehem, the House of Bread, and laid in a manger, this child is “the true bread come down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33).

4. Jesus begins his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God with the words of Isaiah the prophet: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and to recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4:18).

Luke tells us that Jesus had just completed a 40-day fast, “and was hungry.” He was tempted to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger and was offered power and honors to alleviate his weakened condition. The “good news” that Jesus proclaims is addressed to the poor and the weak, the disabled and oppressed. They become a sign of the messianic age. Jesus responds to the messengers sent by the baptizer, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear; the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:22).

5. The gospel narrative of the multiplication of the loaves and fish epitomizes the understanding of the Eucharist in the early church. Jesus takes the little bit of food that is available and looking up to his father, blesses it, breaks it, and distributes it to satisfy the hunger of all present. (Then) Pope John Paul II in writing on “The Great Tragedy of Hunger” states: “The crowds of starving people - children, women, the elderly, immigrants, refugees, the unemployed - raise to us their cry of suffering. They implore us, hoping to be heard. How can we not open our ears and our hearts, and start to make available those five loaves and two fish which God has put into our hands? If each one of us contributes something, we can all do something for them. Of course this will require sacrifices, which call for a deep inner conversion” (*Origins* vol. 25, no. 35).
6. Pope John Paul II, in preparation for the third millennium, writes: “The year 2000 will be intensely eucharistic: in the sacrament of the Eucharist the savior, who took flesh in Mary’s womb 20 centuries ago, continues to offer himself to humanity as the source of divine life.” Recalling the words of scripture that Jesus came to “preach the good news to the poor”

(Matthew 11:5, Luke 7:22), the Holy Father asks, “How can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the church’s preferential option for the poor and the outcast? Indeed, it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the jubilee. In the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations” (see “As the Third Millennium Draws Near,” Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, *Origins*, vol. 24, no. 24).

7. As the world becomes smaller through mass communication, it is impossible not to hear the cries of the multitudes who live in destitution. However, the media glut of information also has a numbing effect: the pain of poverty remains remote and distant, the problems of “others.” We become like insensitive spectators to what we read in newspapers.

Can we become accustomed to live with injustice without experiencing any sense of responsibility to correct it? And in such a situation, how can we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the mystery of communion with God and oneness with our sisters and brothers, and yet fail to respond to their needs?

The Eucharist unites the human family and calls us to live without the barriers that prevent an equitable distribution of the world’s goods. Pope John Paul II affirms: “Thus, part of the teaching and most ancient practice of the church is her conviction that she is obliged by her vocation - she herself, her ministers and each of her members - to relieve the misery of the suffering, both so far and near, not only out of her abundance but also out of her necessities” (*Concern for the Social Order*).

8. Like the early church, our church today is a place of prejudice toward the poor and afflicted. In many places the poor crowd the doors of churches begging, but are not made welcomed within. Paul spoke of the abuse in the church of Corinth: “When you meet in one place it is not to eat the Lord’s supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed?” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

The letter of James also condemns the preference that the church affords the wealthy and asks the Christians to show no partiality. “Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? But you dishonored the poor person” (James 2:5).

9. In preparation for the new millennium Pope John Paul II has called Catholics to a profound conversion of heart and to acts of penance for the church's failures in the past. Catholics must take the lead in changing the sinful structures in society that create poverty. As people of the Gospel of Jesus, we are called to repent of the devastation of the Earth's natural resources, of lifestyles sustained by overconsumption of goods. We need to confess our compliance with and participation in market dynamics that exclude the weak and the poor.

There should be acts of contrition for organizing in ways that eliminate jobs and consolidate the wealth of the world for fewer people, in the pursuit of ever greater economic profits rather than in service of peoples and communities. There should be penance for the reliance on arms and violence and trafficking in arms that create military spending that steals the basic necessities of survival from generations of people living in devastating poverty.

10. Some 2,000 years ago, the Word of God became flesh and dwells among us to this day. By becoming one of us and by walking with us, Jesus reveals to us the Father's love of the poor and forsaken members of the human family. But the world did not welcome him. The powerful of the world rejected him, tortured him, and crucified him. And yet by his broken body and his blood that was shed in sacrifice, Jesus reveals to us that we are infinitely loved by God.

Jesus continues to walk on earth today both in the lives of those who suffer rejection and persecution, and with those in the church who live the good news proclaimed to the poor. Jesus wants us to be his hands, his eyes, his voice, his face, his heart, to reveal to the poor and all people of the world that they are precious to God. He sends us with the power of the Holy Spirit to be with the poor, not just to come and see them now and again, not just to see what their problems are and to improve their conditions, not to give them a handout, but to live a real covenant relationship with them.

The Eucharist sacraments these hidden presences of Christ. It challenges us to believe that the eternal and almighty God is to be found in the little ones, in the powerless, the crushed and suffering people of the world, and that to live with them is to live with God.

Closing Prayer

(In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament if possible)

Song

“The Cry of the Poor” by John Foley, S.J., Music Issue of Today's Missal - Oregon Catholic Press.

Reading: Luke 14:12-15

Jesus said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your sisters and brothers, or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

One of his fellow guests on hearing this said to him, “Blessed is the one who will dine in the kingdom of God?”

Period of Silence

Intercessory Prayer

Incensing of the Blessed Sacrament and the assembled community (If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament)

Benediction

Reposition

Eucharistic Litany

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord,
my faith in you sustains me.
You comfort me in sorrow.
You hold me when I am afraid.
You put your hand upon my pain.
For those who do not know you,
I give you my suffering.

Use me to tell the poor you love them.
Use me to tell the weary you will give them rest.
Use me to light the darkness of despair.
Use me to breathe a gentle word of peace.
Use me to reach to the least of your children
with the good news of God’s love.

Then will I truly share the joy of my faith in you
with all the world. Amen.

Dismissal with some sign of peace