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Saint Peter Julian Eymard: When Eucharist Becomes Life



Introduction to the theme

We begin our course of study with a video by Father John Christman, SSS, entitled *Saint Peter Julian Eymard, A Eucharistic Journey*. The story of this saint and Apostle of the Eucharist begins and ends in La Mure, France, where Saint Peter Julian was born in 1811 and died in 1868. His is a story of a man who lived but 57 years who was on a lifelong journey of discovering in the Eucharist the answer to his and humanity's search for God's love. It is also a story of a saint, canonized in 1962 at the end of the first session of the Second Vatican Council in Rome, Italy.

Session One

Saint Peter Julian Eymard: When Eucharist Becomes Life

Opening Prayer - Prayer to Saint Peter Julian Eymard

Leader: Let us put ourselves quietly in the presence of the Lord.

Leader: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Saint Peter Julian,
the Lord has given you,
as he once did to Jacob, his servant,
an ever searching faith.
All your life long you have sought the way
to deepen your union with God
and to satisfy the hungers of humanity.
In the Eucharist you discovered the answer to your searching:
God's love was there for you and for all humanity.

Answering this gift of love,
you made the gift of yourself to God
and you have given of yourself to the service of his people
without counting.
Your life, modeled on that of the Cenacle,
where Mary and the apostles were united in prayer,
inspired your disciples to live in an atmosphere of prayer.
Their apostolic zeal caused them to build Christian communities,
where the Eucharist is the center and the source of life.

Saint Peter Julian,
accompany us on our journey of faith.
May our ardent prayer and our generous service
help us to contribute to the establishing of a world,
where there is justice and peace.
May our celebrations of the Eucharist
proclaim the liberating love of God
for the renewal of his church
and the coming of his kingdom.
Amen.

SAINT PETER JULIAN EYMARD – A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Peter Julian Eymard was born on the 4th of February, 1811, in the small town of La Mure d'Isère in southeast France, about 25 miles south of the city of Grenoble, in the midst of the French Alps. At the time of his birth, La Mure had fewer than 2000 inhabitants. He was born on the most important day of the work week, Monday, when the whole town gathered for the public market. Peter Julian's parents must have been delighted with the birth of this son. They had lost three children before he was born. Peter Julian's father had been a widower when he married Marie-Madeleine, with one surviving daughter, Marianne, out of seven children born to his first marriage. Peter Julian's parents later adopted another daughter, Nanette.

Peter Julian's father supported his family by sharpening tools and knives, and later was able to establish a walnut oil processing business, moving his family into the building next door to their original home. The family lived on the main street in La Mure, which is still today the most important town in the area, with hemp weaving, a nail factory, flour mills, marble works, and glove-making industries employing most of the townspeople while Peter Julian was growing up. The small house where Peter Julian was born is right next door to the house where he grew up and later died, and can still be visited today. La Mure was not especially affected by the French Revolution, but during the time of Napoleon Bonaparte was occupied by Italian and Austrian soldiers, and suffered from the effect of citizen revolts. It was a time of great tension and change.

Peter Julian's father was a very devout Catholic. He and his wife had their son baptized the day after his birth, February 5, 1811, in the church of La Mure, now renamed the Saint Peter Julian Eymard Chapel. Peter Julian always celebrated his baptismal day as more important than his birthday. As Peter Julian grew, he assisted as an altar server at the parish. In those days, the custom was for the altar servers to run through the town, ringing a bell to announce the upcoming Mass to the parishioners. Peter Julian felt a special affinity for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, visiting often without his family's knowledge, and in between the errands he ran for his father's oil business. He often played at being a priest with his sisters and childhood friends who were not allowed to go to confession or Communion because at that time, it was believed that children were too young for the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist. Only the most devout parishioners were allowed to receive the Eucharist in Holy Communion. Finally, at the age of 12 on March 16, 1823, Peter Julian made his First Communion on Passion Sunday.

He attended the local school and was a good student, but at the age of thirteen, his father decided to take Peter Julian out of school so that he could help in the oil business. The boy was crushed. He had already spoken to his father about his desire to study for the priesthood, but his father was totally against the idea. Peter Julian got permission to go on a retreat to the shrine of Notre Dame du Laus, about 30 miles away, and met there an Oblate of Mary Immaculate missionary, who encouraged the boy not to give up his hope of becoming a priest. Peter Julian worked steadily in his father's business, but also secretly began learning Latin.

By the time Peter Julian was almost 16, he applied for a scholarship to attend college, designed for the poor boys of the town. He was accepted, but was treated badly, and once again, found himself back working for his father. The next year, he was allowed to work for a priest in Grenoble, and while he was away from home, Peter Julian's mother died. He did not have the chance to say goodbye to her. At age 18, Peter Julian, over the objections of his father, was accepted as a novice for the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Marseilles. He soon became gravely ill and was sent home to die. His father and loving sisters nursed him back to health after many months. While he was recuperating, he learned to play the violin, which he enjoyed for the rest of his life. Not long after, his father died at the age of 65 in 1831. Peter Julian was just 20 years old. He was tall for the time in which he lived, five feet, ten inches, and weighed 150 pounds at the most.

He left his father's business to his sister Marianne, and applied to the diocesan seminary of Grenoble to study for

the priesthood at last. Father Peter Julian Eymard was ordained on July 20, 1834, and celebrated his first Mass at the shrine of Notre Dame de L'Osier (Our Lady of the Willow). His first assignment was in the village of Chatte, as curate to the parish priest. He continued to have health problems, probably tuberculosis, and was reassigned to the much smaller parish of Monteyard, which had only about 450 parishioners. He became well loved there, devoting all his time and even his grocery money to care for the people of the village. In 1839, as he had longed desired, Father Eymard was able to join the Society of Mary in Lyons, which had just been established. The parishioners of Monteyard were so unhappy that Father Eymard had left them to join the religious order that representatives of the village went to the Marist novitiate to try to persuade him to return. His sisters were also distressed, because they feared for his health. It took him quite awhile to make them understand that this was the path to which God was calling him. By 1844, in spite of continued health problems, Father Eymard was appointed provincial superior of the order. He traveled frequently to the Marist communities in France, and was in constant demand for Lenten retreats. During the French Revolution in 1848, religious organizations became the target of workers' riots, but Father Eymard was known as a friend of the workers, so he was able to escape unharmed from the violence.

In 1851, just before his fortieth birthday, Father Eymard had a special religious experience at the shrine of Our Lady of Fourvière in Lyons. Shortly after, he described his idea of how the great love of the Eucharist could help the poverty-stricken and society in general, and of the need to establish a religious order devoted to the Eucharist which could be the means to fulfill the spiritual needs of both clergy and the laity. In the fall of that year, he was reassigned to the Marist College on the French Riviera, at La Seyne du Mer. He stayed at the college through 1855, but increasingly felt impelled to develop an order devoted to the Blessed Sacrament. The Society of Mary rejected his idea, in spite of the fact that the pope had given his tentative approval of the new order. Finally, Father Eymard had to choose to follow his spiritual call and was forced to leave the Society of Mary in order to devote himself to the work of establishing a new congregation focused on the Eucharist.

By the spring of 1856, Father Eymard had approval from the archbishop of Paris to set up the new congregation; its aim to bring the blessings of the Eucharist to people who had never had the opportunity to learn and to adore Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. The new congregation would not only be adorers of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, but would work to evangelize the poor of Paris, particularly to bring the joy of First Communion to adults who had never had the opportunity to receive the Eucharist.

After many financial struggles over the next few years, several men had joined Father Eymard in the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. He also formed a group of devoted women into a religious community called the Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament in Angers. Some of these women had worked previously with Father Eymard in the Third Order of Mary, the lay women's order attached to the Marists and had assisted the congregation in its work in Paris.

By 1856, the congregation numbered twelve, with seven priests and five brothers. Father Eymard left for Rome that December, to obtain formal recognition from Pope Pius IX for the new congregation. The next religious foundation was set up in Marseilles, and it was here that the first lay members were brought into the new organization called the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament. Here, too, the first devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament was begun. Another community was founded in 1862 in Angers, and an attempt was made to set up a foundation of the congregation in Jerusalem, but that was blocked by the Franciscan Order which had control over the Christian sites in the Holy Land. Father Eymard had made another trip to Rome, and soon was traveling throughout France and Belgium, where a foundation opened in Brussels in 1866. His health continued to worsen.

In spite of shingles, gout, migraines and frequent fevers, Father Eymard continued to give retreats and do the essential work of governing the congregation. He finally returned to La Mure in July 1868, and died there on August 1. Miracles began to occur almost as soon as he was buried near the parish church. The congregation

decided to move Father Eymard's body to Paris in 1877, over the bitter outcry of the residents of La Mure, who were unhappy at the loss of "their saint." Father Eymard was beatified by Pope Pius XI July 12, 1925, and was canonized as the first saint of the Second Vatican Council on December 9, 1962, by Pope John XXIII. The two religious congregations he established are now found throughout the world, from Australia to Brazil, from Sri Lanka to the United States.

Written by Ethel and Tony Lapitan

Exercise for Conversation

Following the showing of the video, *Saint Peter Julian Eymard, A Eucharistic Journey*, take five minutes or so to answer the following questions:

- *What did you learn – or learn again – about Saint Peter Julian Eymard?*

- *What struck you or touched you about Saint Peter Julian, the man, his life, his times?*

- *Do you have a favorite story to share about Saint Peter Julian – from previous readings or discussions, this video or anything else you remember learning about him?*

The time to think about and answer these questions is followed by a small group sharing and where applicable a large group sharing that follows the sharing in the smaller groups.

Closing Prayer

Apostles of the Eucharist Prayer

God of life and of light,
your love for us surpasses all our hopes and desires.

Renew our resolve to gather as your people and
to celebrate your faithful love for us
manifested in Jesus' gift of the Eucharist.
Feed us at the Table where we long for your presence
more than for life itself.

May we cherish the gifts of bread and wine
and share these blessings with our brothers and sisters.

Send us now, as witnesses of your Gospel
into a world of fragile peace and broken promises,
so that, formed into the likeness of your Son, Jesus,
we may worship you in spirit and truth and
proclaim your mighty deeds throughout the world.

Amen.

*Saint Peter Julian,
Apostle of the Eucharist,
pray for us!*

Note: All participants should now have copies of the three source books. In preparation for the next gathering, please read the first two chapters of "*May God Be Praised!*" and Chapter I of Father Camiré's *The Eucharist and Saint Peter Julian Eymard*.