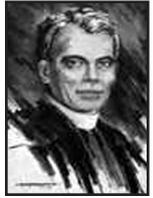


“The essential thing is to strengthen our trust in God, feed upon his truth, dedicate ourselves to his glory as our sovereign love, love him in everything, everywhere, and above everything!” (To Countess D'Andigne, January, 1865)



We notice Fr. Eymard's penchant for going straight to the heart of the question Love. He sees too very wisely that the first step in the process of growing in love is developing a deep and personal trust in the other. And this can happen only when one comes to know the other sufficiently well from the inside, from close quarters, as it were. It is only when we feed on the truth that we would really come to trust the Lord. And the truth is simply what Jesus himself has told us in the Gospels, that 'God loves us so much that he sent his son Jesus to be our Saviour, not to condemn us, but so that anyone who believes in him might be saved!' (Jn. 3:16). When we feed on this fundamental truth we realize that Jesus was not sent in order to catch us out in our wrongdoing, somewhat like what Saul did regarding the early Christians. Rather, when he does catch us out in our failings, Jesus lovingly invites and encourages us to return to the Father's healing love. The woman taken in adultery is a good example on this point.

discovers more and more of the unbelievable nature of God's love. From then on our relationship with God becomes truly adventurous, providing one surprise after another

and in comparison with his love all the rest simply pales into nothingness. Further, rather than make us love others less, this experience teaches us to love God in all things and persons while loving him above all things and persons.

However, we also note what the price of such deep intimacy with God is the complete dying to one's Self. Where this is done consciously and generously, particularly when the cost is steep and demanding, it speeds up the process of being enthralled by God's love. Undoubtedly, Fr. Eymard himself would have been totally generous in this self-gift not just in symbolic form during the Eucharist, but in actual living. Nothing was too great or difficult for him when it came to doing God's will. And that is perhaps the reason why his 'ascent of Mt. Carmel' was so steady and consistent and successful too. His shining example beckons each of us to do the same in our relationship with God. Although he never enjoined 'the vow of personality' on his followers, yet there is no doubt that he would recommend it highly to anyone who feels drawn to it as the best means to scale the heights of true covenantal love.

Once we become convinced of this unflinching love which always wants what is best for us, then we choose to be dedicated to his glory out of love. That is the result of tasting God's love. It is so fascinating that one is simply drawn deeper and deeper into it. And interestingly enough, it is then that one

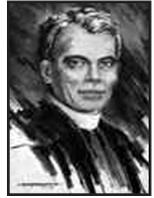
“The inner gift of self is the real gift, because then our Lord becomes our Saviour . . . by giving us his own form of life.”

(To Mme Lepage, February, 1865)

For Fr. Eymard the 'Gift of Self' did not mean a mere offering of oneself to God for his service. For when one offers a gift to another, it could be something the receiver really wishes to have, or possibly something he doesn't even care for. Also, the giver might not necessarily value the gift all that much and that is why he gives it away! 'Obedience' is different from 'offering' in that the receiver clearly specifies what he would like the donor to give. The donor then freely chooses to fulfill the wish of the receiver, precisely because that is what he wills or wishes to possess! Again, this act of obedient surrender generally is something painful or difficult for the giver that is why it falls under the category of obedience! This little difference of meaning is what most Christians seem to miss and that is why the love relationship between them and Jesus often does not gain in depth and intensity. In general, we tend to offer more than to sacrifice!

Of course, there is also the other aspect viz. that the intense fear of losing oneself often unconsciously prevents a person from seeing the different machinations of the Self clinging on for dear life, but at the same time acting as a deadweight obstructing all growth. Jesus had warned us, 'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth' (Mt 6:24). And

so, it is important to see the tremendous importance and value of a real wholehearted gift of oneself to the Lord.



Perhaps the most practical way to achieve this is to take each challenge as it comes, one at a time. Taking hold of it, one needs to look squarely at it, recognizing all that is involved in the challenge. If then we can calmly place the problem and our reactions to it into the loving hands of the Father, we would definitely find it relatively easy to make a total surrender. Should one sense a nagging fear lurking somewhere in one's mind/heart that would need to be brought to our conscious awareness. Together with that if we could recall the love that God has already shown towards us so often in the past, that would further smother whatever fear might come up - and encourage us to surrender totally. We could also add in our prayer something like this: 'Lord, I wish to surrender completely, help my hesitating and faltering will.' This prayer is somewhat like the prayer of the father of the epileptic boy: 'Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief!' (Mk. 9:24).

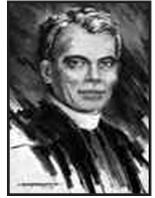
No sooner are we totally devoid of the Self at least in intention, than Jesus replaces the insidious Self with his very own life - he becomes the soul of our soul and the life of our life. From then on it would be a slow yet steady growth in all ways into Christ (Eph. 4:15). Thus, the core of the entire process is the real gift of Self, the stripping of the ego in us. It is a painful operation yet indispensable for any real relationship with our Saviour!

“Now please pray so that I may respond to such a beautiful vocation; that, like the bread of the sacrifice, I may lose my life, my substance, my personality, to be changed into the spirit and life of Jesus, retaining only a human appearance, humiliation and poverty, so that the virtue of Jesus may dwell in the midst of my infirmities.” (Request for prayer by Fr. Eymard to Mme Tholin-Bost, May, 1856)

The beautiful vocation he speaks of is his own when he answered the call to be a Religious of the Blessed Sacrament. It was after a long and painful struggle that he finally set off on this new path and possibly felt a little unsure of himself! Nevertheless what is worth noting is that even at that early stage of this new-found way of life, he was very clear in his mind that the foundation of this beautiful vocation was a total surrender of the Self. This insight would no doubt be made more precise as he went along. One cannot miss even in this statement the similarity he envisages between himself and the Eucharistic Bread. While retaining the externals or accidents of bread, like colour, shape, taste and so on, the sacred Host is truly the person of Jesus. So, he would want the power and person of Jesus to shine through his own external limitations of language, assumptions, prejudices and the like.

That Fr. Eymard was able to conceive of his life in these terms is itself a gift from the Father. For one thing this approach of keeping before his eyes and mind the constant picture of the Eucharist

itself makes the project so much more simple and intelligible. Secondly his love for Jesus would surely have goaded him on constantly to surrender in



the manner and measure in which Jesus did thus making his entire life so much more fruitful and effective. Truly, Fr. Eymard could not have zeroed in on the heart of Christian living in a better manner. The sad part, however, is that while he himself lived this path enthusiastically and scaled the heights of sanctity, so few others chose to follow in his footsteps, or even do so nowadays.

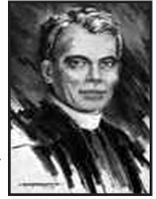
Possibly the reason again is the demanding price involved in such an enterprise! It is like climbing a mountain from the most difficult side, the one involving a sheer cliff of thousands of meters, simply because it would take the climber faster to the top! What effort, what risk and what vigilance yet the intensity of love makes all this acceptable and the positive outcome almost infallible! Such a daring venture would certainly not appeal to everyone, nor would it be within the capacity of everyone; yet each era will have its own heroes who would hear God's call to this venture and be generous enough to attempt it and persevere in it. Even in the midst of our modern world which advocates and provides all kinds of short cuts and conveniences even for mountain climbers, there will be the exceptional few who would dare the 'impossible dream' and reach for the unreachable star! Fr. Eymard's dream was that his followers would excel precisely in this, as they worked for the spread of Christ's Eucharistic kingdom in this world!

“When we work hard, we must eat well. What a joy, that you can receive Holy Communion often! It’s our life and support in this life -- Receive Communion often, and Jesus will change you into himself.” (To Mme Grisaud, January, 1855)

We need to recall that in the days of Fr. Eymard frequent reception of Holy Communion was a rare phenomenon. Exceptionally holy people almost totally dedicated to the spread of the Kingdom would be given special permission to receive the Lord in the Sacrament of his love daily. Most of the others would have had to be satisfied with an occasional sharing in the Eucharistic banquet. Against that background it is interesting to note Fr. Eymard's approach, comparing the Eucharist to our daily physical nourishment. It is obvious that the more hard work we have to do, the more energy and strength we need and that can come from only two avenues. We need to eat sufficient nourishing food, the kind that promotes health and growth, and secondly we need to exercise to ensure that what we eat is assimilated and converted into energy readily available for the work we need to do. Only then would we be able to undertake strenuous activity for a considerable period of time.

Included in his statement is the truth that the nourishment we receive in the Eucharist is the person of Jesus himself and not just some magical bread that will transform the person automatically into a spiritual giant. We need to develop a deep and loving personal relationship with Jesus and that can happen only through frequent and conscious

interaction. Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist would have to be a personal engagement with the Lord, listening to his Word in the first part of the liturgy, catching the key point concerning the love of the Father for us and then leading on to a wholehearted surrender of the areas in which the Self still predominates. Having done this in symbolic form during the celebration, it would need to be followed up with vigorous exercising of this surrender all through the day.



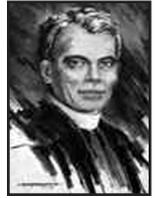
Anyone prepared to undertake such a spiritual regimen consistently could be assured of astounding progress because the very purpose for which Jesus gave us the Eucharist is that we might be associated with him in a living fashion in working out our own redemption and also helping him reach out through us to the 'other sheep' who need to hear his voice. While the progress may not be dramatic immediately, it would nevertheless be real and palpable. After a fairly long period of time everyone around would be able to see the difference in such a person's life. We are told that after he had heard a lot about the evident sanctity of the holy Cure D'Ars a man went to visit him to ascertain for himself. When on returning his friends enquired about what he saw at Ars, the man exclaimed: "I saw God in a man!" Those who knew Fr. Eymard personally over a period of time would have been able to say the same of him too, though they might have said something like: 'I saw the Eucharist in flesh and blood!' Wouldn't that have made it easier for them to see Jesus as a real person in the Eucharistic bread?!

“Have a great love for Jesus in his divine Sacrament of Love; that is the divine oasis of the desert. It is the heavenly manna of the traveller. It is the Holy Ark. It is the life and Paradise of love on earth.” (To the Children of Mary, November, 1851)

Christian life has often been compared to a journey across the desert from our 'Egypt' of Self into the 'Promised Land' of intimacy with the Father. The first biblical journey of the Israelites across the desert then becomes the paradigm for the Christian life. It has its ups and downs, good days and bad, but in the midst of it all, happy is the Christian who has found the perennial source that will sustain him/her all through this journey. Fr. Eymard was one such fortunate person to have discovered the riches of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Love. Here one will never thirst or hunger 'Come to me... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (Jn 6:35).

Not only does Jesus satisfy the needs of those who come to him as the only source, but he offers them rare delicacies, such that they would never even have imagined. After all, he knows what our real needs are and besides, he is resourceful enough to be able to provide these for us in plenty. Further, once we have definitively placed ourselves in his hands, he takes care of our every need, even before we ask him. It is as if he encourages us to make even greater progress through this showering of gifts! If we train ourselves to recognize these gifts and trust him enough when things

don't go precisely our way, there is never a day on which we would not experience his loving kindness.



Way back in the Old

Testament God had assured his people through Jeremiah: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile” (Jer 29:11-14).

Having discovered this treasure we certainly would find that we actually live now in Paradise, lacking nothing. The words of Ps. 23 would then be true in our lives: 'He leads me along the right path... even if I walk through the valley of darkness and death, no evil would I fear... your have spread a banquet for me in the sight of my foes, my head you have anointed with oil, my cup is overflowing' (v. 4-7). We would not only be happy with regard to our own journey, but we could even help several others around us as they struggle along the way. Once we learn how to use this treasure we no longer would go through life 'weeping and mourning in this vale of tears...' as we recite in the traditional prayer, 'Hail, Holy Queen...!'

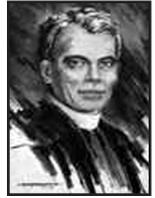
“Live on the divine Eucharist, like the Hebrews did on the Manna. Your soul can be entirely dedicated to the divine Eucharist and very holy in the midst of your work and contacts with the world.” (To Mme Isabelle Spazzier, November, 1859)

For those who have a busy and hectic life with a thousand different things to attend to, as is the case with so many of us today, two items become very important: proper food and rest and the right kind and amount of exercise. As we journey through the desert of life, harassed and bewildered 'like sheep without a shepherd,' we need easy access to a source of renewal. And in his infinite goodness Jesus our Saviour has provided this for us in the form of the Eucharist. We come to the Eucharist to be nourished, first of all, on his life-giving Word and then on his life-giving Body and Blood.

However, we need to be reminded repeatedly that these gifts that Jesus offers us do not work automatically. They presume a certain amount of effort on our part too. When listening to the Word, e.g., it is not enough to catch sounds and superficial meanings; one needs to be totally open and receptive, almost in a contemplative mood, for the Word to produce its full and energizing effect. And the same applies to the Sacred bread and Cup of the Eucharist without a lively faith, these cannot transform us the way Jesus would want to transform us into himself!

We are fortunate in our day when Christians in most parts of the world can

celebrate Eucharist daily in their own language and often without too much inconvenience by way of travel and other amenities. Yet, it is a pity that so few,



proportionately, avail themselves of this great help. And even when they do, many prefer to remain only on the superficial level of 'devotion', what St. Paul referred to as 'milk', (1 Cor. 3:2) avoiding the more nourishing yet demanding 'solid food' that God provides of a total loving surrender to God's will at all times! Nevertheless, once a person has got the taste of the delicacies that the Lord provides, there is no stopping him/her from living on Jesus, of going to him at every moment, of sharing our very lives with him in every circumstance, of becoming Jesus in spirit and in truth.

Some might feel that this kind of attachment to the Lord would prove to be a distraction from the work schedules that we have in daily life. On the contrary, working in close collaboration with Jesus can lighten our work considerably, because then 'it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20). Nevertheless, this would need to be experienced personally before one can vouch for its effectiveness. In the above quote from Fr. Eymard, we could understand the word 'holy' in its original biblical sense 'different,' 'refreshingly new!' The person who lives close to Jesus will be different in several ways, for something of the kindness and goodness of the Lord will definitely rub off onto him, without even him realizing it!

“Keep your soul at peace, in order to be able to be attentive and very faithful to the inner movement of the Holy Spirit.”

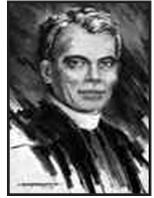
(To Mme Stephanie Gourd, November, 1850)

That Jesus gifted us with his Spirit before leaving this world is beyond a doubt. The experience of the early Church as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles assures us convincingly that the apostles who were gripped by fear at the time of Christ's death were transformed into bold protagonists of the Resurrection and of Jesus as Saviour after the experience of Pentecost. Almost every event in the account of Acts is said to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. And the same is true of the Church today.

Yet, there is one important condition that needs to be fulfilled if the Spirit is going to be able to act through ordinary faith-filled human beings. We notice that although the Risen Lord is shown as bestowing the Spirit upon the apostles on the very day of the Resurrection, yet it took them 'forty days' to be able to allow the Spirit to manifest himself through their lives. And that was because their faith particularly, was not yet mature enough. The different experiences they went through during that period enabled them to grasp the truth that now Jesus was with them in a totally new and different manner. They had to learn to recognize him present in almost every person who came into their lives. And the fact that there was now no set or favoured way in which Jesus could come to them, they needed to be alert all the time.

While learning this lesson would have been difficult, yet it was full of

surprises and adventure and that would have made it all the more interesting and exciting. The one foundational requisite however, would be an



inner tranquility which permitted them to listen deeply to what the Spirit suggested on each occasion. Especially when there is turmoil because the Self is agitated seeking to fulfill its own demands, the still gentle voice of the Spirit would be drowned, making it difficult or even impossible to discern his teaching.

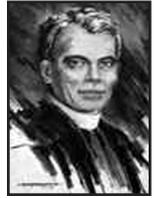
Separated as we are from the Apostles by almost twenty centuries, we find that we are at no disadvantage because the workings of God's Spirit are the same today as in their day. And in our lives too we need that deep inner peace and silence if we wish to be attentive to the promptings of God's Spirit. And when we truly can follow his inspiration, we are blessed in every possible way. Where the Spirit is there is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal 5:22-23). The tangible presence of these 'fruits' helps us know how far we are really listening to and following the inspiration of the Spirit in our day-to-day lives. It also enables us to discern what more we need to do to make the power of the Spirit more effective in us. And it provides us with the courage and strength to actually do it and experience the power of God's kingdom. Happy is the one who has welcomed God's Spirit as his permanent guest into his life!

“People are afraid to be powerless and so are off their path. We are neither natural nor supernatural. What can we do? Follow grace. Let the mind become accustomed to the truth which God's grace is offering. It takes a week or two for a truth to become natural and habitual, but we must make it the center of our piety and let everything converge toward it.” (To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, 1868)

Once again in this little piece of practical advice we see the genius of Fr. Eymard in his direction of people with regard to the spiritual life. How true it is that most people are afraid to be powerless, to lose control over their lives. Normally, every person wants not only to have total control over every event of his/her life, but also to know and feel the sense of being in control. And loss of control, even if for a short while, can be devastating, leading even to suicidal thoughts and attempts.

So, when Jesus invites his followers to 'lose yourself in me' (Mk. 8:35) that would be the most frightening prospect of all and so, even if the prospective disciple consciously chooses to accept Jesus as master of his life, yet subconsciously the practice of self-assertion will continue for a long time into the future. That is why religious life which was seen earlier as 'the perfect following of Jesus' was based on the vow of obedience through which the candidate totally surrenders his right to organize his life according to his own thinking. A conscientious practice of the spirit of obedience, even as St. Ignatius

outlined it so clearly, did bring people a tremendous inner freedom and peace. Yet, human nature being what it is, there would always be at least a small



area in which the person would want to feel that here at least 'I' am in charge: 'you can buy my back but you can't buy my will!'

Recognizing this tendency in even the best among us, Fr. Eymard cautions against allowing the Self to dominate in our lives. He suggests that we work consciously on making a given truth a habit in our minds so that then the basic lines of procedure are established and the person doesn't waste time shifting from one position to the other. Having gained ascendancy in one area, we then move on to the next and so on till almost the entire person is brought under the sway of the Holy Spirit.

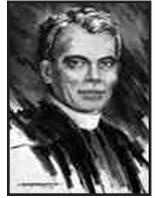
Again if this is going to be done successfully, one would need to be passionate about achieving it. Just as a person cannot acquire any skill, say e.g. the art of playing the violin without being passionately committed to the task, so also no one can be perfectly attuned to God's Spirit unless s/he is single-mindedly committed to submitting the Self to the reign of the Spirit and that calls for effort and perseverance. Only then can it be the centre towards which everything else converges. The difference between being passionate about something and merely wanting it is that when we are passionate, we go all out to obtain it, sacrificing everything else for its sake. When we merely want something, we will go after it when it is convenient, when we have nothing else to do and so on.

“In order to succeed in it (prayer), it should be done when we first awaken, when our whole being is calm and recollected. We need to make our meditation before anything else.” (Excerpt from a letter to his sister and godmother, Marianne 1837)

One of the specialties of Fr. Eymard was his mastery of the art of prayer. And in his direction of others in this aspect of the spiritual life, he ranks among the masters. In writing to the different persons he directed, he had to tackle various practical problems, particularly as each directee presented his/her case. Here he writes to his own sister, a lay person attending to the chores of a household. Knowing how such a person could get carried away with the innumerable little details of running a home he suggests that prayer be attended to the first thing in the morning. The mind is still fresh and relatively undisturbed by the various problems of the day which will come later, and so would be free enough to attend to the Lord.

Besides, it is a good practice to give the first part of our day to the Lord it would also set the tone for the rest of the day. It is like re-fuelling the vehicle, stocking it up with sufficient fuel for all the eventualities of the day. However, in the spiritual life the key element is that we do all that we attempt during the day in loving obedience to the Lord something that is naturally speaking very difficult to do unless consciously attended to. And hence, it is advisable to orient oneself correctly at the very start and then

hopefully everything would run smoothly according to plan.



Also, making a fruitful meditation is not just a question of thinking

out some correct procedures and strategies for the day. It is primarily a question of discerning God's will for us and aligning our wills to his, ensuring that we do everything in a spirit of obedience and love. Only this attitude will render our service meaningful and acceptable to the Lord. Further, spending time in prayer at the beginning of the day also ensures that we foresee the prominent events of the day and determine how our spirit of loving obedience can be brought to bear on these. Once these are seen in the right perspective, the chances are that when the event occurs, it will unfold according to our prayerful programming.

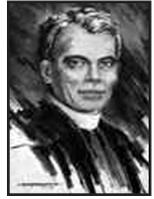
When all is said and done, it takes a lot of strenuous and persistent effort to be able to make our prayer have a fruitful effect on our day-to-day living. The more calm and peaceful we can be within ourselves the easier it is to surrender into the Lord's hands in the hurly-burly of life. And then, even with all the conscientious effort we make, there are bound to be ups and downs, fluctuations from day to day stemming from circumstances beyond our control. We would need to be patient with ourselves just as the Lord himself is patient with us. Some day his grace will triumph completely in our lives. Ours it is to simply respond to him at each moment as he directs us through his Spirit the rest he will take care of in his own inimitable manner!

“As far as possible, you should pray in quiet and silent devotion. Try to have a favorite topic of prayer, such as a devotion to the passion of Jesus, the Blessed Sacrament, awareness of the divine presence; go directly to Jesus without too much fuss.”
 (Excerpt from a letter to his sister [as well as godmother], Marianne 1837)

Fr. Eymard continues with the practical advice he offers his sister and godmother, Marianne. The 'quiet' referred to in his advice is not only the lack of external noise and disturbance, but also indicates the inner quality our prayer should have. Generally when a person is a beginner in the prayer life, there is a multiplicity of words and images that are used and quite understandably. It is truly a conversation in which the pray-er feels the need of expressing every detail of the incident under review. But as the experience of God's ways deepens, one begins to realize that there is no need of too many words. For one thing, God knows what we need even before we ask him (Mt. 6:5-15).

While being silent in God's presence is difficult for most of us, yet it is worth reflecting that it offers us the opportunity for the highest form of prayer. And that is because when we are totally silent and still, the Self cannot be at work and hence, there are very few obstacles to our communion with the Lord. Fr. Eymard also suggests other means for a speedier communication with the Lord and those are: having a favourite topic for our prayer. This permits us to go straight to the Lord,

without too much of thinking around the theme or topic which is new or different. However, we would do well to avoid one obvious pitfall and that is to get stuck in our favourite 'pothole' as it were. Hence, while we take the same topic, it would be good to be open to listen to all that the Lord says to us on each specific occasion. Another advantage of the familiar topic is that it touches our heart and engages the emotions more readily. It is always easier to dwell on a topic that we like.



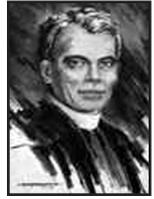
Fr. Eymard very sagaciously adds that we should always aim at going straight to Jesus, without too much fuss or toying around with substitutes. As we fly straight into his arms, we first listen to what he has to say to us; we also pay attention to any specific thing he may be asking of us, even on a familiar theme. This is important, because there could be things that we do not like and would seek to avoid, maybe even unconsciously. Having established contact with the Lord, it would be good then to remain in silence for as long as we can, allowing God's Spirit to work on us. After all, what is important in prayer is not what we do but what we allow God to do in us. During prayer we must be like a patient undergoing an operation; having been securely anesthetized we cannot come in the way of what the surgeon does we place ourselves trustfully into his hands and accept all that he does for us; we believe that he will do what is best for us. And in these circumstances, the results cannot but be the best. The same can be expected when we place ourselves trustfully into the loving hands of God who in every instance does want the best for us!

“Before prayer begins, leave aside any duties which would distract you.” (Excerpt from a letter to his sister [as well as godmother], Marianne, 1837)

Fr. Eymard is still on his advice to his sister regarding prayer. This bit of advice could best be understood against the background of the Martha-Mary story in Lk 10:38-42. Martha was preoccupied with a number of chores that she felt she had to do in order to please Jesus. It is true that she was doing all that work for the sake of the Lord exclusively, but what Jesus seems to point out in that story is that it is far better to attend to the person of Jesus than to do things which we imagine he would be pleased with. The difference here is the same as that in 'offering' and being 'obedient' or in surrendering something to somebody. When we offer something to another person, we are the ones who choose what gift we will give to the other, and while it is true that we would usually choose what is the best, nevertheless, what we think is the best need not necessarily be what the other would like to receive or is in need of.

When we give what the other specifically asks of us, that is when we can be sure we will please the person because only then would we fulfill his explicit wishes. And of course, if we meticulously seek to give him only what he likes, attending to all the details he has mentioned, then we need have no fear that our gift would not be acceptable. Another reason for putting aside distractions regarding our duties would be that underlying the preoccupation with the job is Self, generally in the form of

fear that we would fail, or forget or not appear in the best light, or again the inordinate desire to please the other person. But when we have consciously sacrificed the Self in us, as



much as is possible, then these kinds of distractions would be less nagging and persistent.

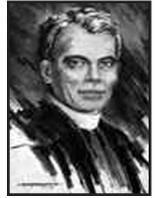
However, when all is said and done, it is helpful to remember that distractions are normal for all human beings, and also that we get distracted in almost everything we do. They are the result of our human condition. So unless we train ourselves through a fairly rigid discipline in the matter of concentrating on the job on hand, we will find our mind wandering in everything we do. A more positive approach would be to ensure that our hearts are really set on the Lord, that he is truly the centre of our lives and that we are ready to lose everything but not his love; then it will be a lot easier to concentrate on his presence to us in prayer. Again, we will discover from experience that when we have big crosses to carry, our prayer is somehow more fervent and less distracted. Could it be that in such moments we are automatically focused on our need and experience it as a need for life, a matter of life and death; in such moments nothing else matters. Our preoccupation is with the person who can help us in that crucial need. We work to be totally attentive to all that the person tells us; if not, we are the ones to lose primarily. When we begin our prayer, therefore, it would be helpful to place ourselves in such a situation it would certainly make our prayer more focused!

“Have confidence in prayer. It is the unfailing power which God has given us. By means of it you will obtain the salvation of the dear souls whom God has given you and all your loved ones. 'Ask and you shall receive,' Our Lord said. Be yourself with the good Lord.” (To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, January, 1864)

Fr. Eymard spent a lot of his time writing to his directees offering solutions for the concrete problems they experienced in the spiritual life. Undoubtedly much of this advice would have come from his personal experience in the spiritual life. The normal growth of the prayer life goes through various stages: the initial stage generally is one of sweetness and great attraction during which the person feels like staying longer and longer in prayer. That is the way the good Lord attracts the person to himself.

But not long after, there comes a more or less prolonged period of dryness in which one feels a positive distaste for prayer, distractions seem to multiply and the time spent in prayer appears to be a sheer waste or a real drudgery! That is when the person needs competent guidance from an experienced person. In one such situation, Fr. Eymard counsels the person to keep faithful to the practice of prayer even if it doesn't seem to be very valuable at this stage. One needs to believe that even though the prayer one makes at this time seems useless, yet it is a powerful means to get closer to Jesus, the one we love. We are told that this period of dryness is largely a test of one's faith. It shows us concretely and forcefully whether our following of Jesus is because

of love for him, his person, or rather for the gifts that he so generously has been bestowing on us.



If one gives in to the temptation to abandon prayer in such times of dryness, it seems clear that the attraction was not primarily to Jesus but to the consolations obtained in prayer. Nevertheless, the good Lord will not allow the person to leave him all that easily. It is said that if the person is genuinely interested in growth in the spiritual life the Lord will somehow provide the means an appropriate book or passage that enlightens, a good spiritual guide who helps at the right time and in the right way, a friend or companion with whom the problem is shared and which ultimately leads to good direction and guidance. Perseverance in prayer in spite of difficulties will surely obtain for the person all that was sought.

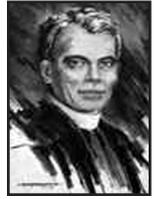
Also, this dryness is a good indication that somehow the Self is still intruding into one's relationship with the Lord. This is a natural obstacle one would need to watch for. Realizing where the problem lies, all the person needs is a dose of greater generosity to let go of the Self and seek the Lord for his own sake. If the person is helped by good guidance, the period of dryness may not last long; it would give way to the next stage of prayer in which the person engages more in affective prayer rather than in mere meditation or thinking. The bond of love will have grown and so more place is given to feelings. At this stage, again, the amount of 'talking' involved will be less than previously; the person is now able to remain in silence with only a 'loving glance' or the silence of wonder!

“We must know where mediocrity of spirit comes from. The first is the worst: it's a scattered mind, a life which is too active. Nothing can cling to it. It's like the seed of the Gospel falling on the open road. The remedy is to bring the mind back to natural reflection by some reading or serious meditations which strike it and help it to be focused.” (Guidance to a directee re prayer).

We have here another piece of practical advice in connection with difficulties in prayer. The problem here discussed seems to be constant distraction during prayer. It is helpful first of all to realize that distractions are a normal part of the functioning of the human mind. Distractions plague us in almost every kind of activity we engage in. However, when they become excessive they point to a possible number of ailments. The most obvious and serious one, of course, is what Fr. Eymard indicates a lack of discipline or self-control. This discipline is something which has to be applied all through the day. If e.g. when working at the computer, the mind wanders to the letter that has just come in and is lying on the table right before one's nose, and one promptly stops typing to read the letter that kind of approach indicates a lack of discipline and would naturally lead to a lot of distractions and produce work of a very poor quality.

What the person needs to do is focus on the typing and leave the letter for a later time or day, perhaps once the typing

work has been finished. If this kind of a discipline is adhered to strictly and consistently throughout the day, then one can see immediately how it would help even in the time of prayer. As a matter of fact, the advice Fr. Eymard gives is along the same lines. One needs to first of all learn to control the mind a work that is done throughout the day and with a very definite purpose and objective. Yet, during the prayer all that the person needs to do is to return to the topic chosen for the prayer. And the easiest way is to re-read the passage chosen and pick up the line of thought that was being pursued.



Since the problem is largely of the mind, it is the mind that needs to be reined in and not so much the feelings. However, underneath all this suggestion is the presupposition that the person praying really wants to be in communion with God. If this goal is not clear or if the person is double-minded then obviously the strategies suggested here will not work. Most spiritual guides would add that at the start of one's prayer session, it is helpful if one spends a little time quietening the mind and getting 'warmed up' as it were for the prayer. While this practice might seem to be time-consuming, it nevertheless, saves a lot of time downstream.

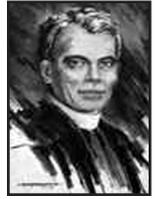
For better results, however, it would be helpful to practice this discipline rigorously all through the day. One cannot expect it to work during the time of prayer only, when the rest of the day is spent in conscious day-dreaming or wool-gathering. One has to pay the price for the results desired.

“The second source of mediocrity of spirit is mental boredom toward what is serious and positive. This illness can only be healed by openness to divine love, since it is based on discouragement.” (Further advice to directees)

In this little gem of spiritual advice, Fr. Eymard tackles yet another difficulty in mental prayer. He refers to a kind of mental lassitude or indolence because of which one does not apply one's mind to serious topics of reflection. Such a person's mind is like a butterfly flitting from one flower to another, picking up a little here and a little there, but there is no consistency. It is evident that if this is the situation of the person who comes to prayer, at this time too the mind will keep flitting from subject to subject. Limiting ourselves only to spiritual matters it seems obvious that such a person is not really committed, or better hasn't yet been gripped with the love of God. For, once this happens the entire person is enthused with the love of God which then enables the mind to concentrate on the matter at hand. Or, putting it in another way, the communion with God is so engaging and filling that the person does not feel the need for anything else.

And so Fr. Eymard's suggestion is that the person should ask the Lord to give him/her a real taste of his love. For one thing, no prayer made sincerely and wholeheartedly ever goes unanswered by the Lord. After all, he himself longs for our loving response to his invitations all through the day. And so, if the person is sincere in asking, the Lord will surely answer the person's prayer. This prayer

could be made in one's own words, or even by using the words of a psalm. A psalm useful in such situations would be Ps 62:1-2, “O God, you are my God, for



you I long, for you my soul is thirsting, like a dry weary land without water...” All one needs to do is to pray these words putting as much meaning into them as one can, in the given situation. Even if the words don't seem to come from the heart one hundred percent, yet the person continues to pray them, telling the Lord that this is the best s/he can do in the circumstances. Earnestness and perseverance in this line would certainly produce good results.

However, as was mentioned in a previous reflection, such fickleness of mind cannot be cured only by attending to it during the time of prayer. Some concerted effort would also be needed to be made during the rest of the day. A good spiritual principle in this regard would be the adage: “Do what you do” (*age quod agis*) or 'do what you do, do well!' In other words, if one forces oneself to do every single assignment or work with gusto and enthusiasm the chances are that gradually the habit of being fully focused on the job at hand will have been formed. This habit will stand one in good stead during the time of prayer too.

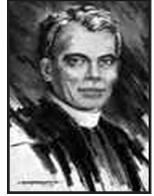
In practice, one notices that there is nothing so engaging and fulfilling as the experience of God's love, especially when this is experienced also on the feeling level. If we could give more attention and reflection to the times when we are favoured with this kind of experience, this would certainly eliminate many of the problems one faces in prayer.

“The third source is laziness of the mind which fears to consider the truth.” (Further directions to directees regarding prayer).

As his spiritual advice unfolds, Fr. Eymard comments on the third source of difficulties in mental prayer which is intellectual laziness or lethargy. When the mind doesn't really want to consider what is involved in a particular concept, it 'drags its feet', as it were and the end result is that one does not understand what is said or explained. At times, it is the fear that having understood the truth one would then have to practice it; fear paralyses the mind making it slow to grasp the truth. Actually, this is one way of evading the truth which somehow it senses is a costly affair. We see one such example in the life of the apostles: Jesus made several attempts to explain to them the necessity of the cross in the life of a disciple if he really wished to follow him fruitfully, but on one occasion we are told (Mk. 9:32-35) that they failed to understand what he said to them and they were afraid to ask him. Instinctively they knew that if they had asked him candidly for an explanation he would have given it to them, and then they would have had to follow it. But the teaching of the cross in our lives can be very frightening especially if our assumptions in following Jesus are not the right ones.

Hence, it is important if we wish to grow in the spiritual life that we approach the Lord without any conditions. This is possible only if we have already experienced his delicate love which will never allow us to suffer alone, nor beyond our strength. Further, if he himself, the Lord and Saviour had to accept the Cross in his life as the means chosen by the

Father to achieve the redemption of the world, how could the life of his disciple and follower be any different? Besides, we know from our daily



experience that nothing valuable comes to us without a price that we have to pay. Communion with God is about the highest grace we could ever aspire to obtain, and so we have to be ready for the price that accompanies it.

Also, if we have begun our spiritual life knowing full well that there cannot be any growth in relationship with Jesus as long as the Self reigns supreme in our lives, then we would not have much difficulty in accepting the pain and difficulties involved in any of the truths Jesus places before us. Again it would be helpful if we approach every truth in a spirit of adventure, ready for whatever surprises it might have for us. Of course, this comes easier with some people than with others; nevertheless it is a quality we can develop in ourselves with a certain amount of determination and practice.

Finally, where love predominates there isn't much need to labour over the understanding of a truth. The Lord himself will enable us to understand it and that too 'from within.' It is like the law of love being internalized within us through the power of his grace. Once this happens we do not have to struggle to love all whom God places with the circle of our lives. He gives us the inner strength to overcome all natural obstacles. Besides, he will also provide us with the opportunities, graded according to our strength, to be able to handle these situations. So, we really have nothing to fear or worry about! And the same holds good for all the truths that govern our relationship with God.

“The fourth source is when we counteract the grace, the attraction of the moment. The mind becomes closed and foolish. We must follow the need and light of the moment.” (To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, 1868).



our spiritual life, then they must be the best and most appropriate ones for us. This again will depend on the level of trust that we have been able to develop

Coming to the last of the obstacles we encounter in prayer, Fr. Eymard lists perhaps the most dangerous one of the lot. It is said that we see only what we want to see and hear only what we want to hear! Whether we are consciously aware of this inner resistance or not, it will effectively act as a block and we might not even be aware of it. That is when we act as closed and foolish.

with the Lord. Like the psalmist we should be able to say, 'even if I walk through the valley of darkness and death, no evil would I fear, for you are there with your crook and your staff and with these you give me comfort' (Ps 23:4). Once we can look on the grace being offered us in this fashion, we will find that all inner resistance simply dissolves and perhaps even without much effort on our part, we could be open to listen and much more to practice all that it demands of us.

The reasons for this inner closed attitude or resistance could be several, but the key one is fear of the price we might have to pay. Another possible reason is that we haven't yet really 'fallen in love with' the Lord, we haven't yet tasted the depths of his love. Because once we taste his love, that experience itself will dissolve every possible obstacle and smoothen the path we have to tread. A further reason could be ignorance both of the value of the grace the Lord offers us, or again of its importance and role in our spiritual life. If we believe that we can do without it, there is not much likelihood that we will be open to receiving it.

In the bargain, our prayer too will become more alive and effective as a result of our facing these difficulties positively. And the reason for this is that it is the heart that rules our lives. So, if our heart is set on God and on achieving a reasonably close communion with him, then all the rest will fall in line. Not only that but we would even possibly find ourselves progressing from one step to another with remarkable ease. Hence, the main point would seem to be that we are open to every grace the Lord offers us, no matter how strange and demanding it may seem to be at the start. Even one grace consciously resisted can prove to be fatal in our journey towards our total communion with the Blessed Trinity!

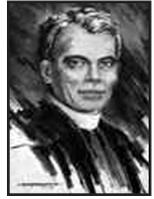
Not focusing so much on the reasons, because in practice it doesn't really matter from which angle the difficulty arises, what is important is what we need to do in such circumstances. Fr. Eymard suggests wisely that we simply try to be open to the Lord's grace. In these situations we remind ourselves that if the Lord offers them to us at this juncture of

“Go to the good Lord very simply, with the surrender of a small child. Tell the good Lord what you are thinking, what you want, what is upsetting you. Oh! How happy we become when we discover this interior conversation with our Lord. We carry our treasure [with us] everywhere. He becomes the center of our heart and life.” (To Miss Stephanie Gourd, January, 1848).

This piece of advice is given by Fr. Eymard to Ms Gourd at a time when she was in the thick of caring for her sick and aging parents. Such a situation would naturally be a very trying one, with the mind constantly engaged in figuring out what is to be done next. Such a person would certainly not have the time nor the freedom and peace of mind to sit quietly before the Blessed Sacrament and pour out all his/her woes to the Lord. How then does one maintain one's communion with the Lord in such situations?

Even though he wrote this advice years before he himself had the experience of the Interior Cenacle during the Rome Retreat, Fr. Eymard hits the nail on the head when he suggests that Ms. Gourd learn to converse with Jesus present in our very lives. In saying this, Fr. Eymard shows himself as being way ahead of his times. After Vatican II it is customary for us to refer to the seven different ways in which the Risen Lord is present to us (Eucharist, Word, Sacraments, Church, Poor, Hierarchy and each baptized). The most important of these is the personal presence of Jesus to

each person in the depths of his/her being. Fr. Eymard reminds Ms. Gourd of this personal presence suggesting that she learn how to converse with Jesus whom we carry as a treasure within.



Even in our day, awareness of this presence of Jesus is somewhat rare among Christians. We would all admit that their faith has reached remarkable heights if they can vividly realize Christ's real presence in the Sacred Bread and in the neighbor. However, we very often forget that the most foundational presence of Jesus is his abiding in our hearts and lives. And once a person has learnt how to dialogue with the Lord present in the midst of our very lives, then it doesn't matter how crowded the external atmosphere of our lives may be. The inner dialogue continues almost night and day, once we have acquired the skill it demands. And the difficulties we experience, depriving us as it were of time and opportunity to visit the Lord in the Tabernacle, are actually graces inviting us to develop this skill within us. It is a blessing in disguise which we would be foolish to lose.

Once we become familiar with Christ's presence within us, then 'who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:35-39).

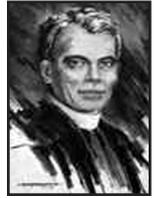
(Fr. Eymard Grace of Self-giving 1853)

“Be serious about the presence of God, the knowledge of Jesus Christ, a definite thought of some virtue, and you will have a center of strength and consolation.” (To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, 1868).

Written this time to another spiritual daughter, Fr. Eymard offers further helps to make one's prayer more effectively. Prayer can be defined as the 'loving response to the conscious awareness of God's action in our lives.' God is constantly at work in our lives, working always for our good. God is goodness itself and hence cannot explicitly choose something that is evil for us. He can only give us what is good. But unfortunately, we do not always recognize God's goodness towards us especially when it comes to us in the form of suffering.

Often it takes us a long time to be able to recognize God's good intention in sending us something which we interpret as harmful. At face value, the event seems damaging, yet in the long run we invariably see God's wisdom in granting us that grace. The Jews had learnt this lesson over centuries of association with Yahweh that when God promises to bless them, they don't necessarily have to wait to see that particular blessing... they could start thanking and praising him already in the present, even if the blessing took another year to appear. This is what made Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, to start rejoicing and blessing God from the moment that Eli, the priest, assured her in God's name that she would return to

Jerusalem the next year for the annual feast to give thanks to God for having borne a son (1 Sam 1:13-18). She did not wait till she was sure that she was



going to bear a child, and to be assured that that child was in fact a son. Their trust in God was so deep and extensive!

So also for us today, once we are convinced of God's infallible love for us, then all we need to do is to keep this before our mind's eye and we find ourselves in communion with God. Even if everything around us is gloomy and negative, we can still rejoice within ourselves because our God is the faithful God whose word remains true from one generation to the next. Hab. 3:17-24 is worth reading in this context.

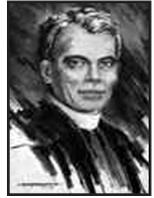
Underneath this skill and practice is the art of placing ourselves totally in the loving hands of God, knowing that he holds us in the palm of his hands and that nothing can really harm us. Happy the person who has such a conviction about God's love for him/her! What militates against such a deep conviction of God's love for each of us, is our own faults and failings. Thus we build up the argument within ourselves: 'when I am not at all faithful or serious about my side of the contract, how can I expect God to treat me as his very special child?' While there is some truth in this reasoning, we must never forget that God does not love us because we are faithful or whatever, but simply because he is good, infinitely good. There is no denying the fact that when we sincerely seek to do our best, we will benefit even more, simply because then we are more alert to God's designs and can pick them up more easily and unerringly.

“Be the apostle of the divine Eucharist, like a flame which enlightens and warms, like the Angel of his heart who will go to proclaim him to those who don't know him and will encourage those who love him and are suffering.” (To Mme Antoinette de Grandville, July, 1859).

There can be no doubt that Fr. Eymard saw the Eucharist as the solution to all the evils of the world of his times, and for that matter, of all times. What perhaps saddened him most was that so little attention was given to this marvelous and most efficacious remedy, while all other means which promised even a little respite were given so much more importance. Not only did he resolve to strain every nerve to bring home to people the power of the Eucharist to change Society and the Church, but he also endeavoured to recruit as many helpers as possible to assist him in this project. In this letter to Mme Antoinette he urges that she undertake to be an apostle of the Eucharist, but not just a silent and passive one. The need of the hour was, and always will be, more dynamic witnessing.

Using his favourite imagery, he recommends that she be the flame emanating from the fire of Eucharistic love which will then warm the hearts of those seeking for this remedy and bring them to wholeness. However, what most people needed was a convincing testimony coming from the real experience of people of flesh and blood. So he recommends that like an angel of his loving heart she go out and tell people

about God's love. As always this testimony will stir people to accept the love of Jesus only when the person witnessing can recount what a difference



Jesus has made in his/her own life. Perhaps the best example of this in the Scriptures is the approach of St. John. He writes, "...that which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life the life that was made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it ... so that you may have fellowship with us and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ..." (1 Jn 1:1-4).

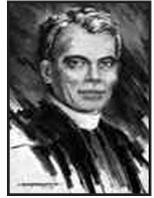
Fr. Eymard's sights, however, are always on the entire picture. He calls for a witnessing to those who haven't yet heard of the message at all, but at the same time requires that the apostle also go out to those who have heard and perhaps have not fully grasped the implications of this world-shattering truth. In our day the number of this last group would be quite numerous. This last kind of witnessing is even more difficult, for some of the people in this group can tend to be cynical. Besides, they usually have a string of arguments to support their position and stance, generally grouses they have against Christians who have treated them badly. Nevertheless, the underlying message is that this work is not really ours, but is the work of Jesus himself. We are merely instruments in his hands, his disciples and apostles, and so we work according to his plans. He it is who will direct us to approach the persons he has chosen and he will guide us how to function in each situation. Ours it is to be totally at his disposal, like clay in the hands of a potter!

(On the evening before his first holy communion, Peter Julian wrote a little book of Acts in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. The sixth act of this booklet has been the guiding light of his life:) *'My dear Jesus, I give myself to you as you have given yourself to me.'* (On the following morning, Passion Sunday, he had the happiness of receiving Jesus and that is when he communicated to him), *'I shall be a priest, I promise you!'* (March, 1823).

One of the outstanding qualities of Fr. Eymard is that from the very outset he was keen on giving back to Jesus in the measure in which Jesus had given to him. Even though he knew that this was impossible for any human being, yet that was the burning desire of his heart. We see this present already at the time of his First Holy Communion. Young as he was he understood clearly both the nature and the extent of the gift he was receiving. As regards the nature he realized that it was not just some *thing* that Jesus was giving him, but rather that he offered himself, whole and entire! And so, his return gift would have to be nothing less than the total gift of himself. Even though he did not fully understand the implications of this deduction, something he would see very clearly later in life, yet his logic is absolutely correct. Nothing else would satisfy the heart of Christ as much as the total gift of oneself.

Further, it is encouraging to note that right from this early age, Fr. Eymard was able to glimpse that the Christian life was

not something purely and exclusively personal, a kind of reward for being good and virtuous. He saw it always in terms of service and mission: what



he had received so generously he would need to give back and the best way to do that would be through the priesthood, by becoming a pliant instrument in the hands of the divine physician to bring peace and solace to his suffering people. Little did he realize at that early age how his faith and keen desire would be tested in a thousand different ways as he went along. Nevertheless, he was sincere and direct in his communion with Jesus. He did not wish to be a priest merely for the honour that it would bring him, nor the enhanced status in society that it offered. He saw the priesthood largely in terms of being at the service of his Lord and Master. And that is what he endeavoured to be, a servant of all, within the congregation and outside of it.

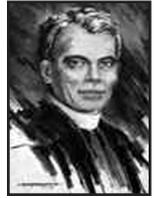
No wonder that towards the end of his life, he would find a much better expression of these desires of his and blaze a trail for others to follow. This approach of Fr. Eymard invites us to examine the motives and reasons why we have chosen to follow in his footsteps. If our following of Jesus is not the outcome of an experience of Christ's personal love for us, we will never have the same orientation as Fr. Eymard had, nor will we enjoy the blessings that he was favoured with because of his total surrender into God's hands. However, if it is the Lord who has called us, then we can be sure that he will offer us the needed graces to follow in the steps of Fr. Eymard.

(Recalling the day he entered the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and how the novices made adoration or reparation before the Blessed Sacrament exposed for a sacrilegious profanation of the Sacred Host, he writes: It was here in the novitiate that) ***'I learned to make the Eucharist the center of my life and I grew in deeper love of Jesus in the Eucharist.'***

The day he entered the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate was a turning point in Fr. Eymard's life. He felt he had taken his first steps along the path which would enable him to fulfill his dreams. These dreams, we have noted, began at the time of his First Communion when he had promised that he would give himself entirely to Jesus, just as Jesus was giving himself whole and entire to him in Holy Communion. It might have been just a coincidence that at the time of his entry into the novitiate this desecration of the Eucharist had taken place and that the novices were asked to spend extra time in prayer before the Sacrament exposed. From what he writes we can see that this time spent in prayer was for him not just idle day-dreaming, but an attempt to come to grips with his fundamental choice of the priesthood.

Already here we see the movement of his heart towards giving his all to Jesus; for that Jesus would have to be the centre of his life around which everything else revolved. In short, nothing else would matter for him from now on, except Jesus and his plans and designs. Further, we notice that for Peter Julian even at that

young age, Jesus was not just some ethereal figure up in the heavens he was the God present personally in the Eucharist. That he was able to grow in his love for Jesus as a person is itself a great grace. But we cannot forget that in his goodness the Lord wants to bless *all* his children with such abundant graces, if only they would be open enough to receive them! Why is it that novices today so seldom experience such growth? While there is here undoubtedly the mystery of God's election or choice of persons for very special tasks, nevertheless the candidate's ability to respond also forms part of the total picture.



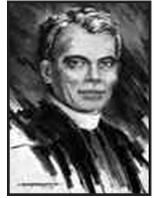
It is worth remembering also that while he was at home his family did almost everything possible to turn his mind towards becoming a prosperous businessman in the footsteps of his father. So, Eymard's choice to make Jesus the centre of his life is not just something that would have come to him easily. There was an inner attraction that he followed faithfully, and to realize this he was ready to pay the price. The sickness he went through already while in the novitiate, which almost brought him to death's door, was a test of his fidelity and love. Come what may, he never let go of his desire to give something great in return to Jesus, particularly his service as a priest! No wonder he adds, "My health began to deteriorate and I was sent home to die. Throughout the illness I kept repeating, 'I shall be a priest some day and will celebrate Holy Mass.'" In the end, his trust in the Lord was vindicated to the benefit of himself and of so many others!

(Having finally realized his dream and fulfilled his promise to Jesus when he was ordained on July 20, 1834 he celebrated his first Mass at the Shrine of Notre Dame de L'Osier on July 22, the feast of St. Mary Magdalene. He realized at the very onset of his pastoral ministry that I would) ***'first nourish myself on Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist, and then feed others.'***

In his single-minded pursuit of giving back to God as much as he had received he was able to zero in on the essentials. He realized keenly that a priest who was not familiar with God's word could not really function optimally. The simple reason for this is that without a thorough knowledge and grasp of Sacred Scripture, the priest would not truly know the plans of God for his people. It is there in the Scriptures that one discovers how much God loves his people, how much he wants to shower all his blessings on them, and which are the methods God uses to win over his people. And so Fr. Eymard resolves to first nourish himself on the Word and even as he took up this task, he found greater relish in the writings of Paul and John. These two scriptural authors led him deep into the mystery of God's love.

Even as a young curate at Chatte, he took up the practice of reading Sacred Scripture every day and using its inspiring passages for his prayer. Here again we see that his reading of the Bible was not just so that he could say that he has completed the entire book, not just to obtain a superficial grasp of its truths. He was keen on going to the very roots of it all he was thorough

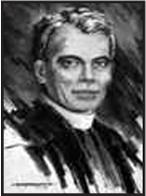
in all that he did. And he achieved all this, without the help of the commentaries and different translations that are at our disposal in our day!



Another practical principle that Fr. Eymard seemed to have stumbled upon is that the best way to profit from one's own learning is to share it with others. For in the process of sharing one understands better and in a more practical way what one has learnt. However, for him there was also the other angle, that of mission. He realized that no grace is given to us for ourselves exclusively, but is always meant to be shared. The more one shares, the more one receives in return. And so, he decided to nourish his parishioners on the same scriptural 'bread' that he partook of. We can be sure that for him this was no mere academic exercise. He tried to set his listeners on fire with the love of God as much as he was able to discover it in the passages he read and prayed over.

There is no doubt that the best means we have at our disposal to know and love Jesus is the Word prayerfully read and reflected upon in personal prayer. That this takes precious time is without a doubt, but no worthwhile relationship is able to flourish unless one is prepared to 'waste' time with the beloved. It is during this time of interchange that one discovers the marvelous qualities of the other and this personal discovery is what endears one to the other. While this is true on the level of human relationships, it is far more exciting and meaningful when dealing with God because his ways are not our ways and each discovery turns out to be a marvelously pleasant surprise. What a wealth for sharing is available if one is desirous of doing so!

“I would also have to 'learn to speak to the hearts of people.' I have lived this all my life.”
 (Reflection during the early days of his priesthood).



To speak to the heart requires that we use verbal pictures more than abstract concepts, words that carry feeling rather than cold facts and statistics. Thus

Taking the insight further he realizes that the Word of God is not meant primarily for the intellect, but for the heart. When we relegate it only to the head, we end up with 'knowledge that puffs up.' As Paul observed, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (1 Cor 8:1) and this kind of learning does nothing for growth in the spiritual life. What really makes the difference is that which touches the heart and here the term 'heart' is taken not just as the seat of emotions, but as the core, the centre of one's being, the core from which come all the decisions one makes. Unless the heart is warmed and excited by the discovery of God's wonderful, almost unbelievable qualities, nothing much will change in our lives, neither on the level of our relationship with God nor in our dealings with our fellowmen.

when God's love is presented as in Hosea 11:1-4 a father lovingly stooping down to pick up his child and raise it close to his cheek, this verbal picture warms the heart much more than by merely saying God loves us and has made us his children! Again, when the Scriptures tell us of God's feelings: 'my heart recoils at this; how can I abandon you Ephraim... for I am God, not man! (Hos. 11:8-9), this picture of God struggling within himself with a tough decision to punish people or not, makes us realize much more deeply how sincere and true is God's love for us. Having tasted this love with several examples of this sort, one would hardly want to consciously refuse God anything. Our response would be something like what the psalmist says: 'one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere' (Ps. 84:10) or as Peter put it, 'Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6:68). What a marvelous work the priest is called to do and how sad that so few priests have time for this kind of ministry of the Word. Fr. Eymard realized its tremendous importance for him as a priest and warmly recommended it to others!

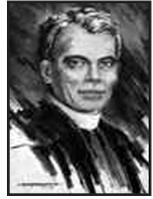
But dealing with another at the heart level is not an easy task. It is far easier to explain something intellectually to speak from the heart and to the heart requires personal experience of what one talks about. Thus the progression: first one would have to learn the lessons of Scripture at the feet of the divine Master and only then would one be able to transmit what one has learnt to the people one serves. Having seen the relevance of his insights and discoveries for practical Christian living, he would then be able to present it to people in a way that would really motivate and inspire them to work at a deeper relationship with God.

(During his retreat on entering the novitiate Fr. Eymard reflected on the Rule of the Marist Congregation). *'I felt a strong attraction to live the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary and to study constantly her obedience and her divine love . . . I shall . . . storm heaven to obtain the spirit of the Society of Mary.'*

Most Christians all over the world today have a very strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but often she is taken only as a means and guarantee of assuring our place in heaven. Rarely does one come across a Christian who sees the sterling (truly Christian) qualities of Mary, (especially her faith leading to obedience, and her love) and seeks to imitate them. The result of this kind of self-centred devotion to Mary leaves us perpetual infants clinging to our mothers' skirts. Rather, Mary is given us, especially by Vatican II as the mother and model of the Church. What is meant by this expression is that whatever is shown as happening in the life of Mary as she tried to respond wholeheartedly to God's call, will happen also to us. If our response can be like that of Mary, then she will have served as a model for us.

Mary's spiritual journey is shown as beginning with the call at the Annunciation. Even though she didn't fully understand the implications of God's invitation for her to be the mother of the Redeemer, having cleared her doubts, she embraced God's will unconditionally: 'I am God's servant; let it be done to me according to your word!' Never once in the Scriptures is Mary shown as going back on this generous offer of herself! She

was able to obey God through thick and thin because of her deep faith and love. 'The Almighty has done great things for me... holy is his name. He has looked on the lowliness of his handmaid...!' (Lk 1:48-49). Mary believed that whatever happened to her was an expression of God's love and so she sought to cooperate with it wholeheartedly.



The apparent rebuke that Jesus gave her when she intervened at the Wedding at Cana requesting for wine might have surprised Mary, but certainly did not discourage her. Unfazed she went straight to the servants and instructed them to do whatever Jesus might suggest. And her faith was rewarded. Further Mary's love was not just a matter of words. As Jesus himself put it, 'happy are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (Lk. 11:27). Mary was faithful to every command of the Father, even when she was required to accompany Jesus along the way to Calvary and stand at the foot of the Cross witnessing his cruel sufferings. She kept affirming God's goodness and love within herself even if externally it seemed so difficult to understand how love was being expressed in that cruel crucifixion.

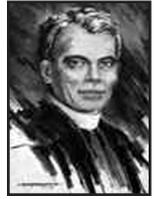
Fr. Eymard with his usual sharp spiritual insight picked out these two qualities of Mary for imitation in his life. We know that all through his life he had a very personal and tender devotion to Mary but always along the lines of love and obedience. Even after starting the Congregation, he made sure that he placed the draft of the Rule he had written at the feet of Mary seeking her guidance and intervention he wouldn't want anything that was in any way against God's holy will.

(Projecting into what Fr. Eymard would have said on becoming provincial of the Marists, we could imagine the following:) ***'I am the Provincial...This new responsibility places me in front of everyone. Since all my actions become public knowledge, I must make many sacrifices contrary to my character. Now I must be serious, constantly thinking, and disciplined in everything because my life is on display. It's hard at times, because you know how I'm naturally rather joyful and, above all, simple.'***

For Fr. Eymard being raised to the position of Provincial of the Congregation was not so much a matter of honour or prestige as of wholehearted service to the religious entrusted to him. He realized his responsibility to lead from the front and took it seriously. He decided to change himself before he could ask others to change, and this even in matters that would naturally be difficult for him. Like Paul he would want to be 'all things to all people so as to gain at least a few for Christ' (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Besides, if he was placed at the head of the group in order to encourage all to follow Christ completely, he would need to show them by the example of his life how this is to be done. Further, if others experienced difficulties along the way, his own experience of tackling such difficulties would stand him in good stead and so the need to live the Rule without any compromises.

However, we can be sure that for Fr. Eymard it was not just a question of giving

good example, because this could have led him to double standards, one way of behaving when he was in the presence of others and quite a different one when alone with no one watching



him. His was the genuine desire to give of his best to the Lord who called him, irrespective of whether others were watching or not. Yet over and above this level of giving, he felt himself called to also encourage his brethren by example more than by precept.

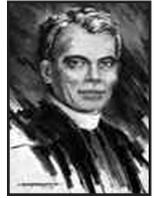
Authority in the Church today is seen in terms of service to the brethren rather than of throwing one's weight around. Yet, we cannot avoid the danger of seeing the post mainly as one of power and position, with all the subordinates offering deference to the authority figure, treating him like a person superior to all others. Fr. Eymard desired to remain his simple self and this becomes possible only when a person is strongly rooted in Christ's love. Once we are convinced that God loves us, even with our faults and limitations then we don't feel the need to worry about what others think of us. We accept the fact that we would make mistakes and gladly take responsibility for them. Yet these mistakes would not stem from stubbornness or arrogance but rather from human limitations.

Recognizing their limitations, authority figures joyfully and humbly accept the opinion of others, listening with attention and love, seeking always what is good for the majority rather than for a few. They are good listeners at all times, and do not keep personal grudges against those who think differently. They do not feel threatened because others have better ideas, qualifications or qualities but are prepared to place all that they have at the service of their brethren.

(Reflecting on his experiences as a young Marist, Fr. Eymard notes), *'In the past . . . I hardly noticed the priests in minor seminaries and colleges who were responsible for the hidden and arduous work of educating young people. I came to appreciate all those who engaged in the work of education. I likewise saw and experienced the graces God had given me, as I was able to work with the local people, parents and priests This was also the fertile ground for many conversions.'*

Just as Jesus mentioned, 'In my Father's house there are many mansions,' so in the Lord's vineyard or the kingdom, there are a variety of ministries to be done. Paul warns us that all these are from the same Spirit and are directed towards the same end, the building of God's kingdom and the glory of God (1 Cor 12:4-26). In his sphere of work, Fr. Eymard discovers some ministries which he himself had hardly engaged in, and hence did not appreciate sufficiently. The work of training youth is a mighty difficult one not only in our times, but in any age. At this period of their lives, they are full of questions, they like to experiment with their freedom to see how far they can go, they enjoy challenging authority in any and every form, in short, they go through a very challenging phase of their lives. What is demanded most of those who care for them is: understanding, patience, love and acceptance a combination of gifts not easily found in most people. Thus Fr. Eymard realized how arduous was this

task and also that it was basically a thankless one, a hidden one for which little or no recognition is generally forthcoming.



While he admired the work that the priests assigned to this task were doing, he was also able to see the special blessings he himself had been endowed with, particularly his ability to speak to the hearts of adults and enable them to appreciate God's love and possibly be a greater help to the youth as they go through the difficult years of adolescence. And so, he neither envied priests assigned to work with youth, nor downplayed his own role in God's kingdom. This approach not only kept him happy and energetic in all that he did but also enabled him to pray for, support and collaborate with others in these ministries. Paul would put it this way: 'I planted, Apollos watered, but it is God who grants the increase!' (1 Cor. 3:6-9). Happy is the Christian who sees things in this way and joyfully collaborates with everyone around him, be s/he Christian or otherwise, for we are all labourers in the Lord's vineyard.

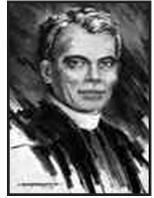
This approach was also the parting wish of Jesus who prayed for unity among all his disciples, a unity that would reflect and recall the unity existing in the Blessed Trinity itself. In spite of the prayer of Jesus and the assurance of his Spirit such deep and fruitful unity, particularly in our apostolic endeavours, is still an ideal far from being a reality among us. Later Fr. Eymard would encourage his religious to work in unison with diocesan priests and also all people of goodwill, working for God's kingdom.

(Through his position as Provincial in his community, Fr. Eymard also came to see the religious indifference of the world alienated from the church in France at that time. He would often say to himself,) ***'I wish the world were full of zealous apostles to shake it from its lethargy and indolence...'***

That Fr. Eymard was singularly endowed with a thoroughly apostolic spirit and zeal is beyond a doubt. While others of his time lived in the very same milieu, he was among the few who felt its problems and difficulties very acutely, so much so that he was deeply and personally moved to do something about it. He was strongly aware of the religious apathy in which Christians lived, particularly in France. This was a complete pendulum swing from its earlier religiosity which even earned for France the title of 'the eldest daughter of the Church!' Possibly this apathy and indolence were the result of many years of exploitation and suffering accompanied by a feeling that there was mighty little that they could do to change the situation.

Unlike others Fr. Eymard was convinced that there was a lot that could be done to change the entire situation of France but not with human strength and ingenuity alone! The God whom people had abandoned was the only One who could restore to them their true dignity and help them find the true meaning of their lives. He searched long and hard for the answer to this problem and eventually found it in the love of God, particularly enshrined for us in the Holy Eucharist.

Strangely enough, while several good and devout people still clung to their relationship with God and the Church, they chose to see God as the God of



justice more than the God of love and mercy! This tendency was heightened by the wave of Jansenism which swept across the whole of Europe demanding severely penitential practices, and viewing human nature itself as corrupt and irredeemable. Against such a background, Fr. Eymard soon came to realize that he was faced with a formidable task, a superhuman accomplishment; hence it would take a long time and a mighty task force to bring it about. Over the years as he struggled with the dynamics of this change needed in society, he discovered it in the love of God enfolded for us in Christ and perpetuated in the Holy Eucharist. That is what urged him to start the Blessed Sacrament congregation, gathering like-minded men and women to further this cause.

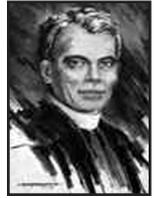
Thus, the Bl. Sacrament religious who continue the work of Fr. Eymard need to be at the forefront of change as zealous apostles seeking to shake off the apathy of the rest. The problems we face today may be known by different names like globalization, economic exploitation and so on, but the root of them all remains the same: our Ego or Self-centredness. Do we feel the fiery urge to do something about it, through the Eucharist which is the source of renewal in Church and Society?

(When in December 1845 Fr. Eymard was entrusted with the direction of the Third Order of Mary, an association of lay people who worked closely with the mission of the Society of Mary, he firmly believed that this was the mission God gave him while a Marist). ***'I gave myself completely to organizing this branch of the Society which was the wish of Fr. Colin. Much later on I learnt that he had prayed that the Lord send someone to assist him in realizing this goal. Little did I know then, that I was that person.'***

It is said that a person's vocation unfolds as s/he begins to respond to it. By the time he discovers his real vocation, he could be many months or years away from the original call. The Lord assigns us simple and easy tasks at the start, but seeing our enthusiasm and responsiveness, he gradually leads us to greater, more difficult and more important ones. However, he will never give us a task that is beyond our strength and capacity and never leave us abandoned or ill-equipped for the task. Together with greater responsibilities go the greater gifts and graces he offers us. The Third Order existed even before Fr. Eymard had joined the Marists, but it lacked organization and a focused purpose. With his customary zeal and enthusiasm, Fr. Eymard set about giving it some shape and order and also a definite goal to strive for. That was no easy task and it took a great deal of his time and energy.

But the response of the members urged him on, their generosity sparked off

even greater enthusiasm in him and thus within a short time, he was able to make the dream of Fr. Colin, the founder, a reality. Of course, Fr. Colin would have liked to have done all



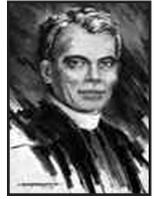
this himself, but given the burdens of the Marist congregation which was already on his shoulders, he could not, in practice, do much other than hope and wait for someone else (after his own heart) who would see this project through to completion. And Fr. Eymard was just the man for this work. Fr. Colin gave him a free hand in this matter and Eymard too gave of his best in return.

Little did he realize that just as God's providence was with Moses training him in Pharaoh's own palace and also in his escape across the desert into Midian, so also was he preparing Fr. Eymard for the task of starting a new congregation, not as another branch of the Marists, but as an independent reality. The ways in which God prepares us for and launches us into the mission he appoints us to are truly marvellous - not a moment or detail is wasted in this effort. He meticulously plans every detail - if only we would respond wholeheartedly and consistently all along the way, step by surprising step! Such cooperation not only achieves God's plans for us and for others, but also brings out the best in us and affords us the greatest sense of fulfillment. 'Happy the man who trusts in the Lord...!' (Ps 40:3-8). However, as all can see, this kind of a response calls for deep faith and trust in the Lord and also in oneself. While this too is God's gift, happy indeed is the one who accepts it humbly and lives it courageously till the very end!

(Difficulties and misunderstandings with my superior led to a transfer as Superior of the College of La Seyne-sur-mer on September 12, 1851. Fr. Eymard's first thoughts were), ***'Here I am in the midst of children, and I bless God, since it is his will that sent me here, and that is what gives me strength and a bit of good will . . . what is so difficult for me is this renunciation at every moment of the day. I must be concerned with a thousand things so far from my taste and attraction! God wants it: that is my only consolation in the midst of all these young people and their parents.'***

After his success with the Third Order, God indicated that he had other plans for Fr. Eymard, plans which are usually materialized only after going through several trials and tribulations. Besides, the work he ended up with was not to his liking at all! And the problem was not only that he had to deal with children, parents, teachers and the nitty-gritty of college and boarding life, but that he was simply overwhelmed with the multiplicity of activities. This left him with very little time for himself or for the things he would have liked to do. However, what kept him going was the fact that this was the clearly designated will of God. Having accepted this task joyfully, Fr. Eymard found himself unknowingly being shaped for a future task for which God was preparing him. His later love for work with the rag-pickers of Paris finds its beginnings here at this college and the young lads studying there.

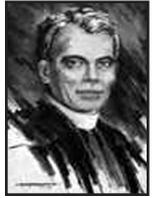
In God's providence, no detail of our lives is superfluous or wasted, as it were. Already in Jeremiah, God had assured the people of Israel, "I know the plans I have for you... for a future



with hope' (29:11-12). While blessing us abundantly in the present God also prepares for us a future with hope! And God's designs are always far better and superior to anything that we ourselves could ever imagine. And what God promises the entire nation of Israel even while they were suffering in captivity, he offers us too in our moments of depression and difficulties. If only we could fall in line with God's plans we too would see wonders. This was the experience of Israel as recounted in Ps. 126 (125) it seemed like a dream, indeed!

Besides, Fr. Eymard had to learn here the value of doing what God asks rather than in engaging in self-directed activity. This is the whole difference between sacrifice and offering. When we offer something to another, it is we who choose the object being offered, irrespective of whether the receiver likes it or not, whether s/he would benefit from having it or even cares to have it. It is we who decide what shall be offered and on giving the gift we feel as if we have done a great favour to the receiver. But the notion of sacrifice implies that we give to the other what s/he asks of us, and while that is what the receiver desires to have, it need not be what the giver would be happy to give. An example may help: if because my present need is a safety pin, I ask you for one, but you reply saying that because you love me, you would be happy to give me a piano instead for free! It is true that the piano is much more costly than a pin, yet of what use is it to me when all I need in my present circumstances is a pin?! Thus, Fr. Eymard had to learn to give what the Lord wanted and not what he thought would make the Lord happy!

“I have been somewhat like Jacob always on the move.”
 [Rome Retreat 1865]



When we consider his poor health condition, we have to marvel at the amount of travelling that Fr. Eymard did all through his life. He himself sees in this constant moving about a certain amount of restlessness, an undying thirst to give something worthwhile to the Lord who had blessed him so abundantly. For him it had a certain good aspect to it, but it was not totally devoid of negative connotations. It could be compared to an inner 'running away' from a problem.

What the actual problem could have been only Fr. Eymard can tell. But as we reflect on it we could possibly attribute a few reasons to it even if they are not really what afflicted him, they could serve as a warning to us. Initially the restlessness in the life of Fr. Eymard could be assigned to the fact that he had not yet discovered the right place where God wanted him. He would have discovered his right place only after founding the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. From this angle we could say that his wanderings definitely had a positive side to them he was searching for God's will and would not rest until he had discovered it, cost him what it may! And so, in this we should imitate Fr. Eymard in the sense that we too might not be very clear about our real vocation. Rather than remain complacent in the place where we are, our desire should be to give to the Lord not only the best but also what he actually wants of us.

From another angle we could say that Fr. Eymard moved around so much because he felt he had to plug in the

spiritual gaps that existed in the Society he founded. Here too, there are two sides to the question; one, that he saw himself as responsible for whatever

happened in his group of religious and that only he could attend to it. He often did try delegating assignments to others, but found to his dismay that they were either not done at all, or not done satisfactorily. The negotiations to obtain the Cenacle in Rome, is a case in view ultimately Fr. Eymard had to do this job himself. Knowing the man we could say that most of his journeys would fall under this heading him taking sole responsibility for the work that God had entrusted to him. It speaks of a delicate conscience and a readiness to face all the demands of his position without shirking any because of the difficulties involved.

This constant movement would not have arisen out of a sense of pride or egoism in the sense that he felt that only he could do the job well and that others were incompetent. He was much too much dependent on God's will to feel that only *he* had to do a particular job. He would certainly have believed that if God wants a job done, it will get done through some instrument or the other. Besides, there were many occasions when he saw this constant movement as a fault while at the same time, spending hours and days in prayer and personal reflection.
