

**“Heaven is our goal; the world is only an exile.” [ ]**

The language that Fr. Eymard uses here is certainly that which befits his time. And most likely those who spoke in these terms would picture 'heaven' as 'up there', or at least as something to be attained only after one's departure from this world. Those privileged to have assimilated Vatican II teaching would realize in our times that the heaven which is our goal, is not a place, but a gift offered to each human person here on earth itself. God invites people to enter into a deep covenantal relationship with him whereby he becomes their God and they become his chosen people. Far from being a 'place' heaven is rather a level of relationship with God which is intimate and loving.

Once a person definitively enters into Covenant with the Father, he not only becomes intimately one with each of the three persons of the Bl. Trinity, but as a natural consequence every human being becomes at least potentially his/her brother or sister, and all are called to live in harmony and love. In other words, our heaven is here on earth itself and involves a new and different quality of life. Jesus challenges us to a new and alternative way of life in which each lives not for himself in isolation and self-concern, but with an openness and generosity towards all. The basis and reason for this is clear: if God offers his very infinite self to us in Covenant, what is there that we could possibly lack? Why would anyone in this situation feel the need to hoard for the future or for difficult times? Assured always of God's love, even when we fail or sin, covenanted people live not in fear

and greed, but in total selflessness and love.



They take God's word seriously when he says, 'even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not

be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Mt 10:30-31) and so their preoccupation is not with themselves. Rather, they experience the inner freedom to think about the needs of others and reach out to them effectively. If at all they consider life in this world as an 'exile' it would be in terms of not being able to enjoy *fully* the blessing of intimacy with God. Yet, they are deeply aware that such a deep intimacy is their birthright because of God's gift to them and one day they will surely enjoy it to the full. Hence, they do not regret being in this world. Instead, they rejoice at every opportunity they are given to share God's love with others as generously as they themselves receive it. They use their inner freedom to be inventive and creative in finding out newer and better ways of sharing with others particularly in giving freely to others without drawing attention to themselves. And if at all such giving involves suffering, they rejoice to have been counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the name (Acts 5:41). For such Christians, each day is a blessing given by the Father and their objective is to make the most of every situation so that they can be a blessing to others.

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***“People in the world work more than we do.” [ ]***



One of the characteristics of Fr. Eymard is that he was deeply conscious of how much the Lord had blessed him. He would often say, 'Jesus gives himself to me totally through the Eucharist and so I wish to give myself totally to him through the Eucharist.' The key words in this statement, of course, are 'himself' and 'totally'. What Jesus gives us is not some 'thing' which is perishable or available elsewhere; rather he gives us himself and that too 'totally' not just in bits and pieces but in its fullness. A little reflection is enough to convince anyone that such a wholehearted gift can only come from a divine respect and love for each person.

so they have to be compensated for it? Whatever be the reason, it is interesting to see that Fr. Eymard too felt that our lay faithful are often more generous than consecrated religious. Yet, a Blessed Sacrament religious dedicated to the Eucharist, the sacrament of thanksgiving, should be instinctively a grateful person. S/he is one who realizes deeply his/her nothingness and hence sees everything as a gift, an unsolicited and undeserved gift for which no amount of thanksgiving would be adequate and sufficient. Hence, as each Eucharist reminds us 'it is right to give God thanks always and everywhere.'

The response to such generous and wholehearted giving can only be a similar gift of one's own life, offered lovingly and totally! And yet strangely and ironically enough, it seems that religious persons in general are the ones who return this gift of God's generosity with utmost miserliness! People 'in the world' seem to appreciate God's gifts much more personally and hence respond often much more generously and consistently. Often too their circumstances of life are much more demanding and difficult, nevertheless, their return gift is something precious and worthy of God.

As a matter of fact, a Blessed Sacrament religious studiously cultivates the virtue of gratitude expressing it not only in words and symbols during the celebration, but primarily through action and his life throughout the day. S/he is grateful to God first of all, and also to his/her fellow humans and will leave no stone unturned in the attempt to thank others adequately. Thus, his whole life becomes a continual hymn of thanksgiving.

Why do religious in general often fail in this matter? Could it be that they tend to take things for granted, as if it is their right to receive these gifts from God? Or is it because they think they do God a favour by surrendering their lives to his service? Perhaps it is the feeling that they sacrifice such a lot for God, and

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***“I've seen many shrines of devotion, but I have never seen any like Laus... the solitude, the desert, the woods... the oratories... prepare the soul to break away from the world. It's like the desert was for the Hebrews. I always remember how... I used to feel my heart beat with joy and longing when I would catch sight of that church of miracles and graces... That is where I received my vocation from the hands of the Blessed Virgin.”*** [To Mlles Marianne Eymard and Nanette Bernard, June, 1842]

That this particular shrine had a fascinating appeal for Fr. Eymard from his earliest days is clear from the above statement. Besides the natural ambience of prayer and self-offering that it could boast of, its spiritual significance was paramount. In Fr. Eymard's mind it functioned like the desert through which the Israelites journeyed towards intimacy with God. Isolating us from all the usual distractions that people surround themselves with, a place like Laus forces them to consider the role God plays in their lives. It invites people to discover God and some of his special characteristics. The hardships of the place make them realize that when everything and everybody else fails them, God will always remain in their lives as 'Yahweh, the faithful One!' In fact, the things they are deprived of make them realize that 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that issues from the mouth of God!' (Deut. 8:2).

We further realize that God is Yahweh

indeed, the God who is always *present*; and wherever he is present, he is actively present never passive or unconcerned especially about the



hardships and suffering of his covenanted people. Further, God's action is always a saving action he is not the God who destroys the work of his hands... 'a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench...' (Is 42:2-4). Again, he saves those who are oppressed, the victims of injustice and iniquity and yet he remains the sovereignly free God who will come to the rescue of his people when he chooses to he cannot be manipulated by anyone! And generally, he intervenes at the very last moment, when all human power is useless.

However, it is worth noticing that today we do not need to go to shrines and holy places in distant lands to discover God. God, the same God who interacted with the people of Israel, reveals himself to us in the cave of our hearts, in the Interior Cenacle where he dwells and to which he constantly invites us to come and taste of his love. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). What is needed is that we cultivate the divine presence within and like Mary be fully attentive to the divine Guest within, rather than be engaged like Martha in a multiplicity of activities seeking to please him through these. Once we discover this precious treasure, the Cenacle within, we will have discovered our real treasure and for this would be ready to give up everything else!

***“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]



needs to be broken before being given to eat, and so unless there is an effective dying to the Self in its manifold manifestations in our lives, we could celebrate as many Eucharists as we can, yet there will be no appreciable difference as far as our becoming more Christ-like is concerned.

The first part of Fr. Eymard's comment is mostly common sense for no one can expect to work hard unless s/he at the same time nourishes himself sufficiently. But perhaps that is where most would stop, imagining that merely by eating plenty of nourishing foods one would get strong and be able to work hard. In fact, it is not the amount of food we eat that makes the difference between weakness and strength. What is more important is that a person be able to digest and assimilate the food that s/he eats and for that regular and energizing exercise is a must. And the same applies to the Eucharistic nourishment that the Lord has left for us in the great Sacrament of his love.

Hence, unless our celebration is linked with a conscious 'Gethsemane' in which we grapple with our surrender to God's will, unless we willingly work to make Jesus the centre of our lives, until we effectively become the bread that we break for the benefit of others, the Eucharist we celebrate will be useless in fact, as Paul says in 1 Cor 11:17-34, we could very well be 'eating and drinking condemnation unto ourselves.' Hence it is important to add to Fr. Eymard's statement that our eating and drinking at the Eucharistic table should include a real desire to become like Jesus, ready at every moment to set our own wills aside and do what God asks of us. And this perhaps is the need of the hour, as far as we are concerned. For our celebrations do not lack creativity and involvement in most places what is sadly lacking though is awareness of the real meaning of what is done symbolically: the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the Cup!

It is a common experience to find people almost in every parish who are regulars at the daily Eucharist, who will not omit their celebration of the Eucharist daily yet they seem to be riddled with the same old faults and failings for decades on end, without their Eucharists making any difference in their day-to-day lives. The reason for this could well be that they are satisfied merely with the external celebration of the Eucharist as if it would magically bring them the strength they need and perhaps look for! For the Eucharist to make a difference in our lives, we need to exercise particularly the dying to Self that it presumes. The bread

The Eucharistic bread is not a reward that Jesus gives us for being good, but rather the incentive and challenge to go out in his name and gather in the lost sheep, even at some cost to ourselves.

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***“ The fruit of prayer and blessing is usually great and holy. Continue to beg, request, cry to God: it is allowable and even glorifies God. But dear Madame, don't give in to sadness, to a fixed sorrow, because that would mean losing peace, harming your piety, and weakening your trust in God.”***

[To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, January, 1866]

Here again, Fr. Eymard brings up a point in which both God's action and our wholehearted cooperation must meet. While it is true that God always takes the initiative in the spiritual life for it is he who invites us, he who draws near to us, nevertheless he always reminds us, 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Rev 3:20). Nowhere in the Gospels do we see Jesus forcing his decisions onto others; he always invites and waits for our answer. Again all his invitations are conditional 'if you wish to be my disciple, take up your cross and come follow me...' (Lk 14:27).

Sometimes the effort we make to respond requires something negative, as Fr. Eymard suggests in this quotation not to give in to sorrow. In fact, here he almost repeats what Jesus himself advised us, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take

you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (Jn 14:1-3). At other times he would need us to do something positive: 'If you wish to be



perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Mt 19:21).

Whether it be positive or negative, unless there is wholehearted cooperation on our part, there can be no covenant, for essentially a covenant is a free, loving, mutual acceptance of God's offer to share his very life with us! Unless there is a mutual giving of ourselves to God as he gives himself to us, there is no real covenant possible. Unfortunately since many do not understand this aspect of the Covenant, they miss out on the deep peace and joy that union with God offers us. In fact, the more we lose of ourselves consciously and purposefully, the more we stand to gain, because God is always faithful to his side of the Covenantal deal in fact, he gives us much more than we are even capable of receiving, requiring of us practically nothing, at least in comparison with what he offers us. Ps 81 puts it so forcefully when it says: 'Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me! There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me"' (Ps 81:8-11).

To sum up, our petitions must be accompanied by a readiness to accept God on his terms!

***“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.”*** [ T o M m e Antoinette de Grandville, July, 1859]

One thing that stands out in the life of Fr. Eymard is the tremendous realization he had of what the Eucharist really means in the life of a Christian. He was deeply conscious of the centrality of the Eucharist and of the words of Jesus, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you' (Jn 15:5-7). This realization burned in his bones like a fire and he constantly searched for zealous apostles who will carry this message of Jesus' love to every single person on earth.

And in the message he desired to convey, it is always the love of God which encourages, beckons even the habitual sinner to return to the source of love and peace! Never does Fr. Eymard seek to frighten people into submission to the Father, because he knew from experience that the people of his time were well past that level fear would no longer appeal to them as much as would the generous love of the Father and of his Son, our Saviour! But if people were going to be effective apostles of love, they would first of all themselves have to experience the reality of this love;

they must know for themselves how God's love is totally different from human love, how radically transforming it is when accepted wholeheartedly



and in a spirit of humble faith! Fr. Eymard was convinced that this love is abundantly available to us in the Eucharist, and secondly that once people were put in contact with it, like a candle to a flame, Jesus would do the rest! After all, it is his mission to bring all people back to the Father, and human beings are simply his instruments in this mighty task.

Further, Fr. Eymard is keenly aware that when things go well with us, most people do not feel the need of God in their lives. It is only when we have to suffer, when we are utterly helpless in the face of suffering and evil, that we look for help from some power greater than ourselves that is when we are most vulnerable to love. Now in this kind of a situation, it does not help to scold and reprimand people, even if they are at fault. As St. Francis de Sales put it, 'one can catch many more flies with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.' And so it is that the love of God experienced repeatedly is the only remedy for all the ills of our contemporary society. Immersed in the ocean of Self we can only get more and more enmeshed in it until someone offers us a taste of God's unconditional love.

What a beautiful calling to first taste of this love for ourselves, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord' (Ps 34:8-11). Once we have tasted this love, it is easy to pass it on to others.

***“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.”*** [To Mme Clotilde Tholin-Bost, May, 1856]

Perhaps the secret of Fr. Eymard's tremendously powerful life and mission is his realization of the value of his Eucharistic vocation. Shining like a burning torch of love amidst the darkness of Jansenist self-abnegation and self-condemnation, he was overwhelmed by the enormous task entrusted to him. He knew his limitations and so requests the prayers of others that he might rise to the challenge that this vocation placed before him. Never once, though, did he seek to water it down using his shortcomings as an excuse. Rather, he put in the work of three to four persons, was constantly on the move availing himself of every possible opportunity to drive home the message of God's love.

However, the deeper realization that characterized him was that it was not so much the work that he did, but the quality of life he lived that would make the difference. He was clear that unless he himself became the bread of sacrifice, as he put it, what he did and said would not have much impact on people. And so, he sought to be for Jesus what Jesus himself was to the Father the messenger and more, the sacrament of his love! As Jesus

was the bodily enfleshment of the Father's love, so Fr. Eymard sought to become God's love in flesh and blood.



While initially he found himself saddled with a plethora of defects and shortcomings, he soon realized that a good part of this would always remain as his human heritage, but that would remain only as the external appearance within he would have to *be* Jesus. As long as he could accept these external limitations and the humiliation it brought along with it, he would be able to present Jesus with the ideal gift of himself within, so that through him Jesus would continue to act and attract people into the kingdom. He literally lived what Paul said, 'It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20).

As we sought to work out this project of becoming the bread through which Jesus could continue to feed his people, he began, no doubt, with a lot of effort supported by the Self. Soon he would realize that there is a far better way, that of allowing the Spirit to act in him and lead him forward step by step. This was, of course, the more Eucharistic way and he embraced it wholeheartedly till he came to the total gift of self in the vow of personality he took at the end of his Rome retreat. And while he did not enjoin this fourth vow on his religious, yet he desired that all would some day reach those heights, thus offering to Jesus a perfect instrument to continue his saving work.

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***“We don't feel the wind in a well-closed house. A soul that knows how to dwell in Jesus doesn't feel the fury of the storms. Try to reach that beloved dwelling... How do we dwell in Jesus? By loving his adorable and ever beloved will; by contemplating his infinite goodness which is constantly pouring itself out upon us. Oh! how happy we are when we live in that divine atmosphere.”*** [To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, November 1862]

This comment of Fr. Eymard is best understood against the background of the severe winters experienced in Europe. Even when it is biting cold outside, one can be reasonably comfortable indoors, even if there isn't a well-stoked fire blazing, because the closed atmosphere remains reasonably warm even when there is a storm raging outside. Raising that experience to the spiritual level Fr. Eymard invites us to imagine how warm and comfortable we could be when we dwell in Jesus. We would have the warmth of God's love to comfort us and everyone who chooses to dwell in Jesus can expect the same. In fact, Jesus was sent by the Father precisely to offer us all a wonderful experience of this love of the Father for all mankind.

Jesus himself suggests the way we could dwell in him when he says, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:31-32). To remain in the word of Jesus is to follow his teaching whole-heartedly without cutting corners or omitting the aspects that are difficult, like carrying our cross and following after him! Besides Jesus himself

links obedience with love when he says, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (Jn 15:9-10). To follow the commands of Jesus for any reason except love would really amount to disobedience because he calls us to be his friends and not servants, 'You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (Jn 15:14-15).



As long as we sincerely seek to do God's will, we remain in Jesus like the branch which feeds on the sap of the main stem of the vine, and then nothing can harm us. How foolish we are when we choose to do our own wills and land ourselves into all kinds of complications and then we run to God himself seeking relief! We act like the prodigal Son who leaves the comfort of his father's home and seeks fulfillment outside only to realize after a while, that there is no place like home! Somehow we either take a long time to learn this lesson, or it takes several knocks and hardships to bring us to see reality as it is. More often than not, we rather would attempt to change reality than change ourselves!

Blessed are those who have found their true happiness in the Father's house because they are prepared to pay the price for this fulfillment. Compared to what the world offers us the Father's love is far better and less demanding too! "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness" (Ps 84:10).

***“Dear friend, find God in the calm and peace of solitude. It is easier to find him there. Enjoy God in his goodness to you and follow the path of his divine Providence which has so sweetly and powerfully led you to where you are now. Reflect diligently on our Lord in his divine Sacrament and you will be as happy as one can be on this road to Heaven.”*** [To Fr. Paul Marie Marechal, November, 1867]

We can be sure that the spiritual advice Fr. Eymard offers his friends and directees is almost always based on his own personal experience. Being perhaps forced to live a fairly hectic life himself, he would well have realized how important it is to seek God in silence and solitude. In his meditations we find that he constantly chides himself for being so active and preoccupied; but when he immersed himself in contemplation enjoying it far more than relentless activity, he often reprimanded himself for not caring sufficiently about those entrusted to his guidance. And thus, he found himself almost perpetually on this see-saw of action and contemplation.

Nevertheless, he did relish the times he could be by himself in personal communion with his divine Master. No wonder then that he recommends this calm and solitude so strongly to anyone who was prepared to take his advice. Further, he found again from his own experience that perhaps the best atmosphere in which to engage in this contemplation was the presence of the Lord in his august sacrament of love. When one is able to see the Eucharist not so much as a 'thing' no

matter how precious, but rather as a Person, the person of Jesus himself, there is no doubt that the communion attained can be deeply intense!



Further, he would often use as the basis for this contemplation the words of Sacred Scripture through which Jesus speaks to us in a mysterious yet real manner. To plumb the depths of the sacred word is to enter into communion with Jesus. Even in the Eucharist one can realistically ask whether one can commune with Jesus in the sacrament of the Bread and Cup unless one has first communed with him in the proclamation of the Word! And yet, even today when the Word is so freely and generously available in almost every language and with an abundance of commentaries and explanations, one wonders how many really commune with the Lord during the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharist! While most would certainly acknowledge the Scriptures as something sacred and precious, the inter-personal dialogue with Jesus through the Word seems to be lost to most Christians!

For most people, 'reflection' seems to be limited to a conversation with (within) oneself, and hardly moves to the level of a dialogue with a living person, Jesus, in which we talk as much as we listen to what he has to say to us, in a very personal and concrete manner. Without the important aspect of listening in which we give Jesus a chance to get across his personal message to us, the proclamation could end up as a monologue or a series of instructions on what to do or not do if we wish to go to heaven! The more important aspect of experiencing God's love, of seeing his qualities more clearly, is often overlooked. But where this is assiduously worked out, contemplation can really be a thrilling experience!

***“See how kind and foresighted, how maternal divine Providence can be? Surrender yourself to its protection and let it guide and do everything. Sleep quietly, God is watching for you and over you.”***

[To Mme Josephine Gourd, May, 1858]

Fr. Eymard was well experienced in the process and pattern of the Covenant God wishes to enter into with every human being, even though he may not have been able to use the language that we use today after Vatican II. He had learnt possibly from his own experience that as a person progresses in the spiritual life, s/he tends to become more and more passive in the relationship. This is because having learnt to trust God fully, the person realizes that one does not need to actively do everything; in fact, at this stage what is more important is to allow God to do all that he pleases, because whatever he wishes for us is for our good. It is he and he alone who knows what is best for our further progress, and so the less the person interferes with his work, the better.

Unfortunately, God's approach being almost the very opposite of ours, we tend to feel that we are moving in the wrong direction, that we need to be more active doing out bit, as we used to do before, at the start of the spiritual process. God always seems to ask of us something that goes against our human reasoning and that quite obviously, since we are now on a totally different plane of existence. As at Cana when there was need of wine, Jesus asks the servants to fill the jars meant for ablutions with water! And yet no sooner did they comply with his demand than he provided them with the most delicious

wine. Similarly in our dealings with him today too he will ask what seems ridiculous to our minds, and yet no sooner do we comply than he comes up with the most beautiful gifts.



Following the imagery of Fr. Eymard, we recall what is done at the time of a physical operation. The patient in this situation cannot afford to be moving around, even with the best of intentions, e.g. helping the surgeon in the operation. The more he interferes, no matter how good his designs, the more he blocks the procedure. And so, the surgeon puts the patient to sleep with a powerful anesthetic and only then can he proceed to do what is needed. The end result, nevertheless, is beneficial to the patient. As we go through life, if our trust in the Lord can be strong enough to allow him to do whatever he wills, no matter how ridiculous or harmful it might seem to us, what blessings would we not receive! Ps 127 reminds us, 'Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest, you who toil for the bread you eat; when he pours gifts on his beloved while they slumber' (Ps 127:1-2). And Ps 121 completes the picture when it says, 'He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore' (Ps 121:3-8).

Father Eymard wrote this prayer when he was twelve years old. That was also the memorable day of his first communion, which took place on Passion Sunday: *My dear Jesus, I thank you for the grace which you have given me that you have come to dwell in my heart... I give myself to you as you have given yourself entirely to me.* (March, 1823).

This statement of Fr. Eymard even at the tender age of twelve shows us that he appreciated the privilege of being able to receive Holy Communion and that he did understand clearly what this implied. He was aware that this was not just a one-way giving, that Jesus would give himself totally to him and that was the end of the matter. He too needed to give himself totally to Jesus, allowing him to be the Master of his life. In fact, this would be a line that he re-visited fairly often in later life, that his giving to Jesus must be total as Jesus' own giving to him was total and unconditional. While many of us desire this kind of a generous self-gift, it is rare that one follows through in this giving throughout one's life. Fr. Eymard never felt the need to go back on this promise he made.

As he grew in the spiritual life, he realized better and better what this giving meant it did not involve primarily a giving of his gifts and talents for the service of the kingdom. What God asks us to surrender first and foremost is our nothingness, our weaknesses, brokenness and failures, because once we surrender these wholeheartedly, then the greatest obstacle to our progress is overcome. We realize step by step how much the Lord can work

through us when we are totally pliable in his powerful hands and what is more, when we acknowledge our nothingness we would rarely dare to take the credit



of the positive outcome to ourselves.

Once we surrender our nothingness totally into the Lord's hands, then it is easy to offer the more positive aspects of our lives, without feeling the need to boast about these gifts placed in his hands. We then feel safe enough and courageous to venture into whichever field the Lord draws us through his Spirit, allowing him always to work through us. Our cooperation is nonetheless wholehearted for it is now based on the Lord's power and strength. Like David facing the mighty Goliath we go forward in the Lord's name and with the poorest of human resources we achieve great things for God.

The difficulty, however, is to maintain the initial generosity with which we surrendered our all into God's hands. Actually each time we succeed in the name of the Lord, the idea that we can be powerful in God's hands as long as we accept our own innate weakness should grow deeper and stronger in us. But in practice, this does not often happen. We very easily get enamoured of our 'own' success and gradually forget that it is God's power at work in us and not our own genius! In short, to begin with a generous and total self-surrender is far easier than to sustain a prolonged acceptance of our nothingness when collaborating with God. Maintaining a balance between our own weakness and God's power operating in and through our actions is perhaps the most difficult aspect of our communion with God!

***“Let us find everything good, everything fine which comes to us from his fatherly hand. Let us lovingly surrender to him our worries for the future, forgiveness for the past, and walk under the beautiful sun of his grace.”*** [To Mr. Rosemberg & fly, March, 1862]

One of the characteristics of a person who is really in love with another is that s/he somehow sees only the good that is in the other. It is because of this that it is said that 'love is blind' (to the obvious faults of the beloved!). Thus even in our relationship with God once we have tasted the love of God and are deeply convinced that he wants nothing but our good, then even the unpleasant and painful events of life become acceptable and pleasant because we see everything as coming from the loving hands of God.

Besides, we have the assurance of Jesus himself who told us, 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!' (Mt 7:11-12). The Father gives us what is good because by his very nature he is goodness itself; even if he wanted to, he just cannot give us something that is bad or harmful for us. That would go against his very nature! Now the fact is that whatever God gives us is good for us, yet that does not guarantee that we would always see it as good for us and hence appreciate the gift and thank God for it. We do have the strange power of interpreting God's action from our limited viewpoint and then imagining that he doesn't care for us.

Even the great prophets sometimes interpreted God's actions wrongly. Thus Isaiah complains, 'The Lord called me before I was



born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God" (Is 49:1-4). All the time he suffered at the hands of the very people he approached with love, Isaiah felt God had abandoned him, yet later when he was quiet before the Lord in prayer, he realized that in reality, things were just the opposite. God had not forgotten him at all, but rather was very close to him precisely in his moments of suffering.

The more popular story of *Footprints in the Sand* similarly reminds us that in our most desperate moments, God is closest to us. So, it is to our advantage to see good in everything that happens to us. It will make it a lot easier to express our gratitude to God both in words and also in action and to trust him totally with every aspect of our lives, be it the past and our failings or the future and all that awaits us.

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***“You are in perpetual thanksgiving, dear friends. Remain so always. May God give you a thousand times more loving reasons” (to be so). [To Mr. Rosemberg & fly, March, 1862]***



against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 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 8:28 -9:1).

Awareness of God's goodness leads almost naturally to heartfelt praise and thanks to him. Repeated experiences through which we are convinced of God's love will strengthen the bonds of trust between us so that as time rolls on, we become more and more convinced that nothing bad can happen to us as long as we remain close to our loving Father. Once we have imbibed this attitude or frame of reference with regard to all that happens to us, every event of our life will be one more reason for praising and thanking God. In fact, we would soon find ourselves eagerly looking forward to the next assurance of God's love in the event that unfolds before our very eyes.

This was also the attitude of Mary trained as she was as a devout Jew to see God's loving hand in everything that happened to her. Referring to her unique experience of God, she exclaimed, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name' (Lk 1:46-49).

That seems to have been the attitude of Jesus himself who praised God when the disciples returned after their trial mission, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will' (Mt 11:25-26). They certainly had not done great marvels while on their trial mission, yet even the little they did was a clear manifestation of God's love for his people!

Thus, 'we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose... What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is

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***“Go towards our good Master by surrender more than by effort, by love more than by virtues, by recollection more than by action. [To Mme Natalie Jordan, August 1862]”***

Expert that he was, Fr. Eymard, in this statement, recommends to his directee a sure and tried way of approaching God, one that will produce definite and positive results. At the start of one's spiritual journey, it is customary to put in a lot of effort, generally directed by the will. While this is almost a must for beginners, they soon realize that all this strenuous effort is nothing more than a response to God's love which was present from the very inception, leading and enticing us into a deeper relationship with him. As God's love becomes clearer and clearer the disciple begins to pick up that what he does during the time of prayer is not as important as what God does, for it is he who takes the initiative and leads the way from start to finish!

Soon s/he will realize that God does most of the work, and his/her part is only to follow and allow God full freedom to work out his loving designs in his/her life. St. Teresa of Avila, the great teacher on prayer reminds us that there are three ways of watering the garden. The first is to draw water out of a well and pour it into buckets which are then poured out onto the plants a very tedious and painstaking effort! The second is to install a pump which draws the water out of the well and directs it through a pipe straight onto the plants. All the gardener needs to do in this case is to direct the pipe to where the plants are so that they get a sufficient supply of water this is less energy-

consuming than the previous approach. But the third way is when God makes it to rain over the entire garden and the gardener has practically



nothing to do while the plants get all the water they need.

These three ways of watering plants in the garden describe more or less the three stages of one's growth in the spiritual life. We notice that as the disciple grows, he has less and less to do as long as he is comfortable allowing God a free hand in his life. This is sometimes referred to an 'active passivity' or a 'passive activity' that is needed for growth in the spiritual life. While it all sounds very simple when talking about it, yet in actual practice it is not all that easy to achieve this combination with some consistency. This is because of the natural tendency we all have to want to be in control of our lives and everything that happens in it. Losing control over our lives is about the most difficult thing for someone to allow, especially when one is highly self-willed and ambitious. Without our realizing it, this desire to control keeps reasserting itself and slows down the process of our spiritual growth.

And so, every good spiritual director encourages the directee to surrender more and more into God's hands, not just out of necessity but out of love. Because when love comes into the picture, things move a lot faster and one is more likely to truly surrender to God. We have a clear picture of the difficulty of surrendering in the story of the Rich Young Man who went away sad because he found the price too high for his liking!

***“When your soul is dry, sad and almost discouraged at the sight of our sins, don't begin by looking for the cause in yourself... but turn immediately towards the divine and fatherly goodness of God.”*** [To Mme Antoinette de Grandville July 1862]



To turn to God in moments of our moral weakness needs deep humility, an inner acceptance of our sinfulness, an acknowledgment that we cannot help ourselves in such times, and that we cannot do much to get out of that predicament! Those who have such a liberating self-acceptance find it easy to turn to Jesus and accept gratefully from him the gift of forgiveness. And incidentally, it is precisely this self-acceptance that keeps us close to Jesus and makes us more watchful in the future.

Fr. Eymard was particularly sensitive to the Self as the greatest enemy of the spiritual life. And he would have certainly known that if ever there is a time when we tend to focus on the Self it is when we have sinned and are deeply sorry for it. That is when we dig and probe into ourselves to find the reason for our failure. However, in such circumstances, the reason for the failure is irrelevant, because it obviously stems from our weakness, inconstancy, lack of clear commitment and the rest all of which are well known to our Lord and Master. What is important at such moments is to realize our weakness and turn to the source of our strength, the Lord's divine mercy and kindness.

This approach stresses the truth that if at all we are close to Jesus, it is because he has taken the first step and invited us and also because he constantly watches over us, guiding and protecting, warning and supporting, healing and renewing us as the case may be. Our attitude should be like that of the psalmist in Ps. 121, 'I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore' (Ps 121:1-8).

In fact, in these difficult moments, just one glance of love is sufficient, as was in the case of Peter when his eyes met the gaze of Jesus during the Passion. Far from being a look of condemnation, it was a look of mercy and compassion, inviting the sinner to return to the healing love which he offered so generously and with such deep understanding of our innate helplessness. No matter that we have fallen into the same sin several times before Jesus knows that the remedy is not blame and shame, but rather a loving acceptance which he was sent to offer to us by his loving Father.

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***“Serve Our Lord for himself and to please him. Oh! how happy you would be if love were the rule, motive and reward of your actions!”*** [To Mme Antoinette de Grandville, July 1862]



before beginning any action and consciously stress that we wish to do this work out of love. Even when our intentions are not all that perfect and strong, yet the very desire to do everything out of love will make the Lord grasp us in his loving arms and make that a reality for us. But, maybe we would need to be cautioned about one point: when we genuinely work out of love, it is likely that we won't even be aware that we are, in fact, acting out of love. If we are conscious of it and perhaps even take pride in the fact that we act out of love, then we would need to check our stance because that kind of self-consciousness could be a sign that we are in fact acting out of self-concern and not out of love!

Here again, the key point seems to be the Self. While most of us would like to think that we serve the Lord out of love and for his own sake, yet in practice that is hardly the case. It is very difficult, almost impossible, to rid ourselves of the surreptitious influence of the Self in all our actions most often it creeps into even the best of our actions, without even our being aware of it. In fact, the presence of the Self is more evident to others who watch us from a distance rather than to ourselves, since we are so close to it and tend to believe in the wholeness of our intentions primarily. How then would we come to rid ourselves of this pest which dogs our steps everywhere?

In short, in the face of this dangerous behaviour concerning the self, we do well to leave the intricacies to the Lord whose love for us will not allow us to become victims of its insidious and malicious machinations. A convincing sign of his love operating in us would be a deep sense of pervading peace and joy which can come only from the giver of all good gifts. This peace would remain even if we have failed in our attempts because we are sure that the Lord is in control and will work all things out for our good. Another indication is that we don't feel the need to hide our faults or blame them on others. We take responsibility for our failures and work to respond better in the future.

The answer is to be found in what Paul says when he asks: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Rom 7:24-25). We too need to place things in the hands of the Lord no sooner we discover, or are told about the operation of the Self in us. Not only can the Lord handle this for us, but knowing our weakness and the ravages the Self works out in us, he protects and shields us with the power of his own victory. All he asks of us is that we remain close to him through a sincere effort to obey him in everything.

The other antidote of course, is to consciously work to make love the guiding principle of our lives in all things. We would need to pause a few moments

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***“Hold to everything and to nothing; to everything, when God wills it; to nothing as soon as God no longer wills it even your exercises of piety and charity, because God has changed them for something better.”*** [To Mme Antoinette de Grandville July 1862]

One of the most common mistakes most people make in the journey towards intimacy with God is to confuse the gifts for the giver. Any reputed spiritual guide would warn his disciples to focus all of one's attention on the Lord and not on the gifts he gives us. It is he who is more important than the gifts or blessings he gives us. The gifts are but signs of his love for us and are meant to draw us more closely to himself. This attachment to the Lord would mean that whatever he tells us should be more important in our eyes than the practices we undertake even if done under his own inspiration.

We would have noticed in our following of Jesus that we get attached to certain practices very quickly. That is because these practices somehow please us and make us feel close to the Lord. Gradually we somehow invest these practices with almost magical powers to make us feel close to God! And then, of course, it becomes difficult for us to let go of them when the Lord asks that of us. It is important to remember that perhaps the biggest gift the Lord gives us and which is the surest sign of our closeness to him is our inner freedom to do whatever the Lord asks of us. And he too will ensure that we not only have this freedom but also exercise it. He often does this by asking us to do a particular exercise or to walk a

particular path. But after a while in which we have tried to be faithful to it (and perhaps gotten attached to it in the bargain), he asks us to do the exact opposite which then becomes difficult because we feel we might displease the Lord who originally had asked us to do precisely that.



When we find that happening in our lives, we need to keep our gaze fixed on the person of Jesus. We might need some extra help to discern what exactly the Lord asks of us in this tricky situation, but once that is ascertained with some degree of clarity, then we need to focus only on what he asks of us, no matter how difficult or strange, or even unreasonable it may seem. Positive support from one's community can be a great help in such situations, though ultimately it is our own decision that counts.

It also helps to remember that if the Lord asks us to give up some practice it is because he wants something better for us and so, as long as we cling to the old practice, the new cannot become a reality for us. It is somewhat like what happens during our schooling: we need to leave the familiar surroundings of the class we have been in the whole year if we wish to move higher to the next level! And in the higher class many things will be new or different, unnerving at first, but beneficial and growth inducing in the long run! And this is true of all genuine progress we leave familiar shores for more distant and profitable lands! Again, no new knowledge can be gained until one has left the old paradigms and wholeheartedly accepted the new ones. Where this does not happen, only words will have changed, not our inner attitudes!

***“You are in perpetual thanksgiving...remains so always. May God give you a thousand times more loving reasons (to be so).”*** [To Mr. Rosemberg and fly, March 1862]

But once we learn the art of picking up almost everything that happens to us and consider it a blessing, then thanks could spontaneously come to our



hearts and lips, almost without any effort. A poor person is instinctively a grateful person precisely because he is deeply conscious of his poverty and helplessness.

During the Preface of each Eucharist, the celebrant reminds the assembly that 'it is right to give thanks and praise to God always and everywhere.' Though this is the ideal towards which every Christian should be working viz. that his/her entire day/life becomes a continual and perpetual act of praise of God, yet we know that in practice this hardly ever happens except in a few isolated instances. The reasons for this lack could be several, but perhaps the key ones are, first of all, that we do not actually consciously give praise to God at the time of the Preface itself in the Eucharist. The celebrant does invite all, it is true, saying 'Let *us* give thanks' but hardly anyone actually joins him in praising God for some specific blessing received. But if we did make it a habit to praise God consciously at each Eucharist, the chances are that we would remember this and practice it enthusiastically also during the rest of the day.

One saving feature we can always fall back upon is God's goodness in that he will never allow us to be filled with a sense of our own greatness for too long. Sooner or later he permits us to fall into a difficult situation, one that is beyond our capacity to handle. Even in such situations, we could of course, have recourse to our own resources like past experiences, close friends and influential people around us. Yet God has a way of disconcerting us and bringing us to our knees and then we begin to learn the all important lesson of praise and gratitude.

Another reason could be that we again have not made it a habit to pick out God's blessings showered on us so generously and lavishly. Here again God's blessings become readily perceptible only when we realize our own emptiness and weakness. When we are filled with a sense of our own greatness or when everything seems to go well with us, we hardly ever think of God. And so, we take his blessings for granted or presume that God owes us these favours!

However, it is far better to praise God for reasons connected with love, so that our praise also is suffused with love. Further, this approach of love will bring us much closer to God than any other reason because it is the very nature of love to unite people in a very powerful bond. That explains why Fr. Eymard wishes and prays that God gives his directee a thousand times more loving reasons to praise and bless him. That would not only benefit him personally but also ensure that he remains deeply united with the Father.

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***“Let us lovingly surrender to him our worries for the future, forgiveness of the past, and walk under the beautiful sun of his grace.”*** [To Mr. Rosenberg and fly, March 1862]

Once a person has developed the art of blessing God in every circumstance, always and everywhere as the Preface admonishes us, then listening to God's voice and his desires for us, obeying him with attention to even the smallest detail, recalling his goodness to us frequently all this becomes relatively easy and pleasant. Further, worrying about the past or the future would also be less visible in such a person's life because his entire life has been handed over to God. What St. Paul says of himself is true also of such an adorer: 'it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20).

Rather than spend time in worrying about past sins or future ventures, the ardent adorer focuses on the present and how best s/he can fulfill God's will, particularly on how s/he can use every opportunity presented to him/her to extend God's kingdom by offering people around him an experience of God's unconditional love. This is perhaps what Fr. Eymard means by 'walking under the beautiful sun of God's grace!' The adorer realizes that s/he is singularly loved by the Father and that he constantly showers his choicest blessings on him/her, offering him/her what is always the best. Sustained by God's grace and favour the adorer goes through life without a worry or fear yet filled with the fullness of God's sunshine over every moment of his/her

life.

With such an approach, the Christian would be living the covenant which the Father desires to make with every



single human being. Depending on the depth of his realization of God's love and the surrender s/he makes into God's hands, s/he will enjoy to a greater or lesser degree the peace and joy of the kingdom already here on earth. Again, for such a person death would not be a terrifying event as it is for so many people; it would rather be like a homecoming, a return to the Father's house where s/he will receive the fullness of blessings and experience a direct encounter with the God of love. When lived while on earth in faith and love, this union reaches its apex affording the adorer a direct and personal enjoyment of God's loving kindness.

It is a real pity that so many of us forego this great blessing simply because we don't appreciate sufficiently God's goodness and love each moment of our day, nor do we care to learn this important lesson and practice it assiduously until it becomes second nature with us. In fact, this should be the top priority in every person's life, because once this inner poise and tranquility is achieved, everything else falls into place taking on its rightful value and importance. When every human person begins to live in this way, we would experience heaven on earth!

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***“Bear with your feelings of powerlessness in God's presence: that is the poor person's adoration. At the same time stay very simply at the feet of God.”*** [To Mariette Guillot, October 1862]

God when she responded, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word!' Then, she goes even further.



Once again in this piece of advice given to his directee, Ms. Guillot, Fr. Eymard touches on the central aspect of our Christian following - that we accept our nothingness before God, but having placed our nothingness into his powerful hands, we step out at God's command and do all that he asks of us. It is well-known that God resists the proud and even knocks them off their seats while he raises the lowly and places them with princes on high. That seems to be God's preferred way of dealing with human beings. Having revealed himself as 'the God of the oppressed' he cannot but come to the aid of those who accept their nothingness lovingly and are not afraid to place it, for whatever it is worth, into his loving hands.

Having surrendered her nothingness into God's powerful hands, she stepped out in faith to take the gift of redemption to the home and family of Zechariah. She stayed there for three months while helping to transform all the three members of that family. Zechariah was freed of his impediment of speech, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and praised Mary while the little baby John leapt in his mother's womb. Later too Mary remains for us a model of this delicate combination and balance between our emptiness and the Lord's fullness. In her song of joy she proclaimed, 'The Almighty has done great things for me, holy is his name ... he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.'

Perhaps the best example and model of this attitude is found in the Blessed Virgin Mary. In Lk 1:26 we are told that 'the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee... to a virgin betrothed to ...' The term virgin is to be understood here in the sense in which the Jews of that time accepted the word; for them it meant one who in the eyes of society was a 'nobody' because for them a woman was valued only insofar as she had borne children. So, it is to this humble and 'useless' virgin that God sent his messenger asking for her cooperation in the work of redemption. And it is this emptiness of hers that Mary placed before

When do we need this acceptance of our nothingness most if not during the time of prayer? When we experience our helplessness in prayer that is when, most likely, we make prayer that is truly effective. For the less Self we experience in our lives, the more of God's power are we likely to see at work in our nothingness!

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***“Now, what does it mean to dwell in Jesus? What is the path that leads to that divine dwelling? How can we enter there? What are the conditions for remaining there? To dwell in Jesus is to leave oneself behind, to strip oneself of self to give oneself as one gives wood to fire.”***  
 [Retreat, November 1862]

It would have been from long experience that Fr. Eymard made these observations about the Self as being the greatest obstacle to dwelling with Jesus. Elsewhere we hear him expatiating on this theme, especially as he finds fault with himself for emphasizing the Self so much in his own journey to God. Yet, keen as he was to give himself totally to Jesus for his service, and particularly out of love, he relentlessly pursued this 'death to self' in all its several manifestations. One of the simplest was his practice of always ascertaining whether everything he wished to do or say was really the will of God. And he did this not just cursorily as most of us would. At least at the start of the process, he took time and put in a lot of personal effort to divest himself of any vestiges of the Self in his decisions. Later, as he went along, this would have become easier with practice, yet, he never omitted it altogether.

His intense desire was to be consumed totally for Christ, so that his kingdom of love might dawn among the people he served. Possibly if his followers today were to do the same, discernable changes for the better would be observed by all. After all, the root of all our problems whether it be in

connection with God or neighbour, stem from an over-emphasis on the Self. Where it can be resolutely put aside, pleasant relationships prevail. This, of course, doesn't at all mean that one makes oneself into a doormat, allowing everyone to stamp one underfoot. We need to stand up for our rights as well, but again only when that is necessary. We see Jesus himself do this when he openly and forthrightly questioned the soldier who struck him during the Passion, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' (Jn 18:23).



Jesus spoke up because here it was a matter of what concerned the Kingdom and in this matter he would permit no arrogance. But when it came to something more personal, he preferred to remain silent. This little distinction can often vex us as it is difficult to know when it is a question of God's name and honour and when it is purely the Self that seeks redress. Nevertheless, when we are conscious of how insidiously the Self enters into all our transactions, we would be a lot more careful the result would be that we would not find it difficult to dwell in Jesus, to experience the joy of being close to him and of receiving his guidance and love at all times. In fact, once we are on the right track in this matter, we would immediately become aware of the times when we have acted out of self-concern. Further, we would also find it easy to accept the death to self, especially when it comes in the form of a public humiliation or rejection.

***“The path which leads to this dwelling in Jesus is a love which gives all and wants to suffer all.”***  
 [Retreat, November 1862]

Continuing with the reflection we began yesterday, Fr. Eymard is quick to add that the negative side alone is not enough. In order to dwell in Jesus one needs to be divested of the Self, for sure. But that would possibly leave only an empty shell within us. We would need to further be filled with love, for as the famous hymn reminds us, 'where charity and love are found, there God abides!' God is love and so there cannot be any interaction with him unless we live in love. This love we speak of is the positive side of the dying to self mentioned previously. For Self and God cannot dwell together at the same time and in the same place.

However, we cannot take it for granted that simply because we drive out the Self from our lives, we are necessarily filled with love. Jesus reminds us that “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first” (Lk 11:24-26). So, once we eliminate the Self, its place must instantly be filled up with love; besides this is the only remedy that will keep the evil one away from our lives. Yet, we must not think that this is a task that we alone would need to attend to. The Lord himself will flood our lives with

his love and life when we sincerely invite him to enter and take possession of what is really his very own (Rom. 5:5).



To continue to keep the Lord close, all we need do is to follow his commandments. This follows from our love itself, for Jesus reminds us, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' (Jn 14:15). Like the sheep that belong to his pasture, we listen to his voice and follow wherever he leads us. We can be sure that he will provide us with the best of everything because of his tremendous love for us.

In short, we can be sure that as long as we want to remain close to Jesus, he will never desert us because the very reason he came to dwell among us is that he might be close to us; is he not our 'Emmanuel' God with us, God within us? The only time he will be found missing from our lives is when we choose to drive him away through our self-centredness or we choose not Jesus but someone or something else. Something like this happened during the Passion when Pilate asked the Jews, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?'... The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas” (Mt 27:17-21). Every temptation we face is simply this same question put to us in different forms: Whom do you choose as your Lord and Master Jesus or Self? It would be very revealing to observe the answers we give on different occasions!

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***“Eucharistic love is your entire law, virtue and holiness”*** [Mother M. Guillot, December 1862]

We observed in the previous reflection that it is not enough to rid oneself of the Self; what is more important is that we fill our lives with love, the kind of love that the Spirit of God pours into our hearts. Paul reminds us, 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God! For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life' (Rom 5:6-10).

This love that God pours into our hearts so freely and lavishly is the talent that has been given to each one of us. All we are asked to do in life is to make it increase by using it freely in our dealings with others. For this is something we notice easily in our lives, that the more freely and generously we open our lives to others, sharing with them all that we have and are, the easier it becomes to continue to do this on a regular basis. The more we restrict the love we share with others, either because of fear or indifference, the more difficult it becomes to really reach out to others generously. We remain calculative and fearful and as a result we miss out on the

thrill and joy of giving. The recipients of our love too will be quick to notice that our giving is only half-hearted and instinctively they keep their distance



from us. Thus we gradually begin to notice that we become isolated and aloof from others, while our lives shrivel up for want of love.

And so the secret of holiness, as Fr. Eymard points out, is to keep sharing our love and our very selves with whomever the Lord sends into the path of our life. This is what we begin at the Eucharist as we fulfill the Lord's Eucharistic command, "Do this as a memorial of me!" As Jesus broke of himself and gave to all his friends reminding them that this was his very life given for them, so we too give of ourselves freely. This approach or attitude becomes the guideline for our living out what we celebrate in the Eucharist. And because it involves the totality of our lives, it is the one thing that is necessary and sufficient for attaining holiness. In the Scriptures, to be 'holy' is to be 'different'. God is holy because he is so totally different from us human beings. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Is 55:8-9).

Once we begin to live in love and by love, then we too become different, more God-like and hence holy, different from those around us! This is perhaps the most frightening part of it all to stand out as different. Most would rather prefer to be lost in a crowd, doing what everybody else does, be it right or wrong!

***“True love is self-forgetful, devoted, perpetually self-sacrificing, not through self-interest nor effort but with joy, finding its sole happiness in pleasing others.”*** [Mother M. Guillot, December 1862]

Like St Paul, Fr. Eymard too tries to spell out what true love is like, outlining only the main features of true love. As we have been saying all along, the key characteristic of true love is that it does not at all focus on itself. As a matter of fact, what happens instinctively where true love is found, is that the lover is so enthralled with the person of the beloved that s/he forgets him/herself totally. This is often seen in the fact that the lover, no sooner s/he falls in love, than s/he begins to neglect him/herself his/her own need for nourishment, rest and so on. Another feature is that s/he soon takes on the characteristics of the beloved, and that too unconsciously or without any strenuous effort. For true love either finds equals or makes equals (See Mk 3:20-21).

A further sign of the loss of Self is the absence of fear in giving of oneself. In fact, no sooner does love enter a person's life than s/he begins to act in an inclusive manner s/he not only says but also behaves as if 'all that is mine is yours and all that is yours is mine!' There are no secrets between the two anymore, there is a free mutual give-and-take and for all practical purposes the two lives truly become one. As Ruth said to Naomi, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God

my God. Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17).



In fact, the story of Ruth's devotion to the family of her in-laws is proverbial and contains all the qualities Fr. Eymard mentions in his quotation above. We could perhaps dwell a little longer on the total lack of self-interest shown by Ruth's readiness to do even menial work like harvesting grain in the fields of Boaz. This certainly takes a lot of genuine humility; it speaks of a real integration into the life and culture of the in-laws, giving up one's own life-style and preferences. Such dedication can come only from a real deep love. It is in this sense that true love transforms a person making him/her more like the beloved. And that is what the Lord asks of us when he invites us to enter into Covenant with him.

While the example quoted above seems to imply that Ruth had a lot to leave or renounce in order to identify herself with the life and culture of her husband, yet in our relationship with God it is he who relinquishes all that is rightfully his own and takes on our human condition (Phil 2:5-11) and that too purely because of love for us. We are the ones who benefit because we are raised to a higher level and far from losing anything, we have everything to gain!

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***“To love our Lord royally means total death to our selfish nature and within oneself as well; for love is death first, then life.”***

[Mother M. Guillot, December 1862]

Our previous reflection that in our love relationship with the Lord, we are the ones who gain the most, is both true and also false from different angles. We stand to gain because God is infinite in all his qualities so there is no end to what we could receive. As Isaiah proclaimed, 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted...O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.'" (Is 12:3 - 13:1).

Nevertheless, in practice we will gain only as much as we actually make room for God's life and love to penetrate into us. The more filled we are with our own greatness the less would we want God to share our lives; again the more we focus on our talents and achievements, the less would we even feel the need of God! And so, if we wish God to dwell within us, there is need of a great selflessness and self-sacrifice. And that too not just in words very often we feel that because we talk eloquently about self-sacrifice, we are highly selfless. The ultimate test in all these matters is not so much words, as our day-to-day behaviour.

Again, it is our actions in difficult circumstances that show what is truly within us. Jesus himself says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but

only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out



demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!" (Mt 7:21-27).

This is further supported by John when he says, 'We know love by this that he laid down his life for us... Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another... All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us (1 Jn 3:16 - 4:1).

***“Love is like eternity, ever growing with new gifts and affection. May your heart ever dwell in its centre.”*** [Mother M. Guillot, December 1862]

Having emphasized the importance of the positive element of love in one's dealings with God and neighbour, Fr. Eymard goes on to show the sterling qualities of love. He compares it to eternity not only in the sense that it never begins nor ends, but also because it signifies a certain fullness. Genuine love is never something static, remaining at the same level for a great length of time. Being a living relationship between two people, it either grows in intensity or diminishes till it is extinguished completely. Sometimes, it is compared to a financial bank account which a person has. The more deposits a person makes the higher is the balance and hence the greater the trust it engenders. However, when withdrawals are made the balance reduces and if one does not continue to make positive deposits in the account, it will naturally dwindle and disappear altogether.

Now the difference between the emotional bank account in which the deposits are loving deeds in favour of the beloved, and the financial bank account in which the deposits consist of money put in, is simply this: the financial account can remain stationary even if constant deposits are not made. It might even increase marginally because of the interest that accrues! But with emotional bank accounts, unless repeated deposits are made the level of trust will automatically dwindle and die out. That is simply because in the question of love, we are dealing with something living, a living relationship between two living persons.

And since it is a living quality it has to grow constantly if it is to survive!

In fact, in a loving relationship between two persons, say husband and



wife, one notices that when both parties are serious about maintaining their relationship, they invent newer and better ways of expressing their love for each other. Where this is absent, for example, when the husband or wife is excessively absorbed in work or his/her own projects, very soon a certain cooling off in the love between them is observable even to outsiders. Routine and formality gradually take over and soon nothing more than the outer shell of a relationship will remain. That is why the suggestion of Fr. Eymard that our love for God too must be kept aflame and burning through new gifts and affection, else we will engage only in routine acts of devotion. When this begins to happen, the devotee may not omit exercises of prayer and piety, but his/her heart will be absent from these activities and they will be done as a mere formality. That is when we content ourselves only with reciting words, without pausing to reflect on what exactly we say to God in prayer.

Another more telling sign will be the boredom one experiences with the whole exercise of prayer. In such situations, one literally waits for the hour of prayer to end so that one can plunge into more pleasing personal activities. Coming late for prayer, day-dreaming during the time of prayer, forgetting totally what one did during prayer these are further expressions that indicate that our heart is not in our relationship with God. To avoid this from happening, one would need to ensure that one's heart is at the centre of prayer, fully and actively engaged in it.

***“Go to the good Lord directly and honestly, and avoid all this soul-searching which heals nothing but springs from a heart which desires not to have offended God. That's fine, but we must not look at ourselves too closely.”*** [To Ms Stephanie Gourd, April 1863]

It is said of Fr Eymard that 'although little known he takes his place among the mystics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which is so often discredited and yet bears our roots' (A. Guitton, p 1). We get a glimpse of this greatness of Fr. Eymard in the direction he gives his spiritual dependents. In this comment given above, we notice that while he appreciates the heart of Ms. Gourd who doesn't want to offend God, yet there is a fair bit of Self lurking behind even these good intentions. And he picks that out from the tell-tale sign of an excessive soul-searching that she engaged in indicating that perhaps she took a certain amount of pride in being upright and devout!

The opposite picture would be that of the Little Flower, St. Therese of Lisieux who also had several shortcomings even in the matter of prayer. Yet, trusting wholly in the Lord whom she regarded as her Father, and acknowledging her littleness and brokenness, she continued doing her little best while leaving the outcome to God. She too desired not to offend God, yet without that minute soul-searching that is spoken of here.

The mark of a good spiritual director is precisely that he can pick up spiritual traps of this nature - a gift from the

Almighty undoubtedly, yet cultivated through an assiduous practice of prayer in his own spiritual endeavour. This is indeed a rare skill which perhaps only a few possess that they can be themselves in all candour and simplicity before God and others too. While acknowledging their limited capacity, they place all their trust in God who makes up for what is lacking in them. Some others, however, find it very difficult to 'tolerate' such imperfections in themselves and seem to be in a mighty hurry to eradicate all traces of evil from their lives. They remind us of the servants who go to the master and say, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn' (Mt 13:27-30).



God's ways are certainly not our ways and yet in our relationship with him in Covenant, we are invited to 'put on Christ', to take on the mind of Christ and be like him in his relationship with the Father. When we can keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, things become a lot easier the opposite, of course, is for us to keep our gaze fixed on ourselves, with all the disastrous consequences that follow! It is helpful to note that this choice needs to be made consciously, if it is to be truly effective.

***“You will not attain peace of heart by being upset or worried, but by surrendering yourself to his divine goodness and mercy.”***

[To Countess D'Andigne, July 1863]



reprimand (which actually is not there at all!). Rare is the person who in times such as these, can literally 'feel' God's loving throbbing heart wanting to enfold him/her in his

loving arms. Yet, he is even more delighted when we freely choose to let him lovingly be our 'goel' the blood relative whose bounden duty it is to come to our aid in such times.

The point to take note of then is that as we advance in the spiritual life, we become more and more passive, like clay in the hands of the potter. “Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?' says the Lord. 'Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel!’ (Jer 18:2-7).

And the same is true of us too. It is God who shapes us, and even though often it is we ourselves who put a spoke in the wheel destroying God's handiwork because of our self-centredness, yet he is powerful and skillful enough to rework the entire thing and produce something much more beautiful than before!

To another directee Fr. Eymard offers similar advice of keeping one's gaze not on oneself but on the Lord. The surest sign that we are able to do this is the deep inner peace and tranquility that we experience even when we are keenly conscious of our failings. In fact, one part of us resents the failure that almost burns into our consciousness, yet the other side, the more spiritual side of the personality reminds us that it does not really matter to the Lord, as long as can sincerely accept our limitedness and cast all our cares on him. This is not an easy achievement and comes only after a lot of practice, with perhaps many a failure in between. Our natural tendency is to conceive of God as the all-pure and perfect God which, of course, he is. Yet having created us, he knows our natural weakness and loves us with these limitations.

What he asks of us in our following of him is to believe that his love for us is what will enable us ultimately to overcome all these shortcomings. The surest sign that we are not in line with God's plan is the worry and anxiety we feel, or perhaps allow ourselves to feel when we fail and imagine that we have let God down by not keeping our promises to him! From his point of view, what actually happens is that he sees our weakness and inability to help ourselves and comes readily to our rescue. 'Allow me to lift you up,' he seems to say to us, while all that we can see and hear is a

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***“You need to know that when a good soul wants to live a spiritual life, it has only one enemy left to fear: laziness, negligence.”*** [To Ms. Edmee Benier de Montmorand, July 1963]

The background which this piece of advice of Fr. Eymard seems to have is that a person has chosen to take the spiritual journey seriously and has actually begun. Usually this happens as the result of some striking insight which moves the person, on the spur of the moment, to promise God that he will respond generously. Having taken the first few steps, it can happen that the person gradually begins to take things for granted, neglecting some of the tiny details which in practice make all the difference. One such detail would be to renew one's motivation frequently and courageously and firmly put aside all excuses to discontinue the spiritual journey. Inevitably there will be obstacles in the way, small ones initially but growing in size and difficulty as time goes on.

One such obstacle usually is the example of people, perhaps even dedicated people, around us who choose not to follow the Lord's call wholeheartedly. What makes this temptation worse is that these persons seem to prosper and life seems pretty smooth for them, whereas the one seeking to follow the Lord faithfully experiences all kinds of hardships! Other obstacles that could intervene are slight physical discomforts, a pressing work that needs immediate attention, the ridicule of friends and neighbours and so on. In reality these are like thin threads binding us to the Self they can easily be broken

provided our initial experience has been strong enough and its original attraction is kept alive through frequent renewal! But until they are actually broken, we are not truly free.



The strange part is that once we literally put our foot down and decide to continue with the spiritual regime we have undertaken, everything becomes easy and simple and what is more, at the end of the spiritual exercise we feel real good about having stuck to our chosen programme. And if this is repeated each of the following days for about a fortnight, we realize that we have already developed the habit of a new life-style. Yet, it does not take a big problem to make us backslide into laziness once again. And if we do give in, returning to our spiritual programme becomes even more difficult and the relapse becomes even more of a possibility.

That is why it is helpful to have a kind of 'support group' of a few friends who together launch into this spiritual programme. The support of the others in the group carries one along when the temptation to slide back arises. And if one can be candid about one's feelings and failings at this time, it becomes all the more easy to stick to one's decision to follow the Lord. Reporting to the Spiritual Director is another help that one could use and if s/he is wise and understanding, the help offered and received can be tremendously useful. Such battles are rarely won when one fights all alone!

***"...go to our Lord like a poor, very poor person who is nevertheless loved and privileged, whose only virtue is gratitude, whose only merit is to know how to beg and to receive well..."*** [To Countess D'Andigne, August 1863]

shake the world. This is the basic Christian paradox, but so difficult to master and practice effectively as we go along.



Instinctively we seem

to abhor weakness, brokenness and use every possible means to cover it up. Our fear, of course, is that others will see that weakness and reject or ridicule us and we would then be counted as nothing, and left aside, 'on the shelf', as it were. While human beings might and usually treat us in this way, God's ways are just the opposite. When dealing with God, the less we have to boast about, the better. In fact having understood this important principle Paul states, 'He (God) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:9-10).

The Christian paradox that all of us have to face some time or other in our spiritual lives is that God's ways are so different from ours! As Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God' (1 Cor 1:26-29). Having chosen us because of our nothingness, God then calls us to accept our emptiness and lovingly place it in his powerful hands, so that working in close collaboration with him we can do great things for him!

Once a person has understood this great spiritual principle and begins to practice it earnestly, he moves pretty rapidly along the path of spiritual maturity. One useful suggestion to keep oneself faithful along these lines, is to ask the Lord each day to send us at least one solid humiliation that will keep us always humble and aware of our weakness! We need to always be in touch with our roots, as it were!

Our weakness serves only to draw God even more powerfully towards us; he races to our rescue when he sees that in our nothingness we call out to him in faith and love! So, provided we know how to make the best use of our nothingness, we have really nothing to worry about. We do not have to rationalize our weakness, nor explain it away, much less blame it on someone else. That is what we are when left to ourselves, weak and limited, but that same weakness when lovingly placed in God's powerful and creative hands can

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***“Wish me the real Cenacle (first), and then the Interior Cenacle; then I will be happy.”*** [To Mme. Natalie Jordan, January 1864]

This comment of Fr. Eymard becomes intelligible only against the background of the events that characterize the last few years of his life. The members of the Blessed Sacrament Society felt that it would be a wonderful idea if they, as men dedicated to the Eucharist, would be able to have possession and use of the Cenacle, the very Upper Room that Jesus used when establishing the great Sacrament of the Eucharist. So they made several attempts to obtain this great privilege, but all in vain!

However, the Lord used this desire sown in their hearts to lead Fr. Eymard to the discovery of a much greater treasure, viz. the Interior Cenacle, the cave of his own heart where God really dwells. At the time of writing this, the negative response from the Holy Father had not yet been conveyed to Fr. Eymard who undertook the Great Retreat (of 65 days) as he waited for this answer. And so we see him still hoping that the response would be positive yet he was able to balance it with the other (spiritual) side which was already beginning to be a powerful reality in his life: God's indwelling presence of which he was much more keenly conscious as days passed by. He nevertheless realizes that this is a very precious grace offered him by the good Lord, and so he wishes to capitalize on it in every way possible. In touch with his own weakness, he asks the prayers of several others.

The remaining part of his biography

indicates how different his life was after his return from Rome. He enjoyed this continual awareness of God's loving presence to him and sought to respond



in like measure. His acceptance of himself and his weaknesses, also his reactions to situations in which he was apparently rejected or ridiculed were so much more Christ-like that anyone who knew him well could not but ascribe this to the indwelling presence of his Lord and Master. While earlier he rejoiced at being privileged to have a room with a window opening out onto the Chapel through which he could see the Tabernacle clearly, now his gaze is turned inwards with an equal joy and gratitude. Wanting to belong entirely to Christ, he not only made the Gift of Self but crowned it with the Vow of Personality through which he freely and radically chose to belong totally to Christ from then on he would literally be 'Christ' even though the external characteristics would still be those of Fr. Eymard.

Fr. Eymard never enjoined this fourth Vow of Personality on any of his followers, though we can be sure that he would have wished everyone of them would also be privileged to receive that grace seeing what marvelous results this gesture produced in a generous and willing person! However, it would be true to add that such great graces are possibly reserved for the special persons endowed with an exceptional generosity and fidelity! All this is God's work all he asks of us is a total readiness to belong entirely to him.