

(Fr. Eymard death anniversary
1868)

“God loves us personally with a great benevolent love, with an infinite and eternal love. This benevolent love consists in willing purely and exclusively what is good and what is best for the person who is so loved.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

The greatness of God's love for us stems from the fact that he created us. Now, when God does something, he always has a beautiful purpose behind it. He created each one of us to fit into this great plan of his, determining every detail of our lives even before we were formed in our mother's womb. This precision on God's part flows not merely from the perfection that is his being and action, but much more from the infinite fund of love that he is. Hence, it would be true to say that every detail of our lives is the result and expression of God's infinite benevolent love for us.

Further, while it is true that whatever God does is always something good, positive and beautiful, yet we are not just the result of an automatic sort of action of God's part. He has consciously willed each and every detail, setting it in its rightful place with infinite patience and love, so that nothing might go wrong in my life. However, all this would be true provided I wholeheartedly and lovingly fall in line with his loving plan. Should we deliberately choose to disrupt God's plan for our lives, we cannot rightfully expect things to 'work for our good.'

Nevertheless, even in this case, God's infinite love and power make him go out of his way to re-fashion us into the best possible product of his love.



Once a person is convinced of this great truth about his/her life, how could anyone indulge in grumbling and complaining that one has not been given a fair deal? One generally engages in such grumbling when one compares oneself with others who might seem to be endowed with a greater measure of blessings. Yet, while this is absolutely true that God does not distribute his gifts equally to all (recall the parable of the talents in which one servant is given five, another two and the third is given only one! Mt. 25:14-30), yet he does love all his creatures equally and provides for and cares for each one with the same infinite love! What we would notice if we did look more minutely is that while we may not have as many talents as others, yet we have sufficient to make our life's task fruitful. Besides, the others who have more talents than we, might not have the same talents that we have... and so on, for the entire lot of persons here on earth at a given time.

We might question why God did choose such an arrangement. For one thing, it makes for variety and creativity and also allows for a lot of sharing and collaboration. Thus, while I need you, you would possibly need another ten different people to make your life successful; and some of them would be needed by me for my life's journey to be complete. Thus we are all called to work as one loving family, in joyful collaboration one with another.

(Liturgical feast in honour of St. P. J. Eymard)

“The great attributes of God which are used by his benevolent love upon a soul, upon you are: Divine wisdom which chooses what is best for the good and current situation of the beloved soul.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

There is no doubt that God is the infinitely wise One and when he chooses or ordains something for us that choice would be absolutely the best in those circumstances. Nevertheless, since God's ways as so different from ours (Is. 55:5-8) there would be times when we imagine that what God has given us is more harmful than beneficial. That is when we begin to question not only God's wisdom but also his love. 'How could God do such a thing?' we cry in horror! 'Where is God in this impossible situation?' we moan inconsolably. Yet, if we can have some patience and wait for God's time to unfold, we would discover that what he did give us was the best anything else would perhaps have destroyed us altogether!

It took the Chosen People the entire desert experience to realize that all the hardships they were made to endure were for a good reason it enabled them to discover the qualities of God such as his fidelity and love, his infinite creativity and fatherly care of them. He looked into every detail of their comfort and provided them with what was the best. Nevertheless this did not stop the Israelites from grumbling time and again till after innumerable examples they painfully learnt the lesson of trust in the Lord. Centuries later, the prophet Habakkuk was

able to express this faith in the following marvelous manner: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights” (Hab 3:17-19).



Perhaps even in our day, after all the helps that Vatican II offers us, very few of us would be able to reach such heights of trust in God. We somehow tend to forget the Lord's goodness despite the innumerable examples we witness each day in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. But once we develop the required amount of trust in God, then we can exclaim with St. Paul, 'If God is for us, who is 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 8:31-39)

“Prudence applies these means of sanctification; Divine Power helps us, sustains us, defends us.” [To Countess D’Andigne, March 1865]

Prudence is the virtue which enables us to judge which is the most appropriate thing to do or say in a given situation. One of the several gifts of the Holy Spirit to us, it is a very precious help especially when we find ourselves in difficult situations either personal or even concerning others or the community. With regard to our becoming more Christ-like, prudence helps us choose the right and most effective means so that we make the maximum progress with the least harm incurred. Thus, it warns us to avoid people and situations which would land us into trouble or force us to compromise even with regard to our Christian principles.

By gifting us with the Holy Spirit, Jesus assured us of the presence of the Holy Spirit who would enable us to bear witness to Jesus in the most appropriate manner. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (Jn 14:15-17).

The important point to remember is that the Spirit always abides with us and offers us the help of his grace. The point is to use these spiritual gifts placed at our disposal at the right time and in the right measure. And this calls for some little effort, practice and skill on our part. In

general it could be said that if we have acquired a sufficient amount of discipline to know when and how to divest ourselves of the Self, then



we need have no fear. It would then be relatively easy for us to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who abides with us precisely to assist us along the journey of life.

In all these matters, it is important to aim at never missing even a single opportunity given us to grow in the spirit. The more we respond positively, the more quickly we build up the habit of attending to the Lord; and negatively too this is true the more we tend to fall back, the more difficult it becomes to respond correctly the next time. Thus, we could completely negate the precious help of the Spirit precisely when we need it and then have only ourselves to blame for it. In the Acts of the Apostles we have several examples of the use of the gifts of the Spirit as the early Christians sought to witness to the Risen Lord. They knew when to speak and what to say, how far to challenge the Jewish and other authorities so that their statements produced the right effect and led their hearers to repent.

In our lives too, we cannot dispense with the marvelous help the Lord offers us and need to train ourselves in the proper use of it. When we make mistakes, we can always learn from our failures so that we do not repeat them again and thus progress along the path of eternal life.

“Mercy always has the heart of a good mother at hand to forgive us, lift us up, because the child has two enemies or rather two claims to mercy; its weakness and its fickleness I might say its stupidity and its presumption.”

[To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

We ended the previous reflection stating that we should not be afraid of our failings because we can always learn from them. We need have no fear of the Lord not forgiving us or drawing our attention to how we can benefit from the failing. His love for us always prompts him to offer us the best, even when we choose not to respond at our best. Having created us and accompanied us all along, he knows best our weakness and propensity to evil. Our inconstancy and double-mindedness is always before him. Knowing that he is with us should encourage us to venture out boldly especially when it is a question of witnessing to his love and mercy.

If we have learnt when young how to ride a bicycle we would recall that initially an adult, parent or friend, would have to run alongside us as we grappled with the problem of maintaining the right balance. If we tended to fall, s/he would hold the seat and steady us so that we could keep moving. And this process would go on until we became capable of balancing by ourselves on two wheels. And once this happened, we did not need to consciously worry about keeping our balance that happened almost instinctively. Yet, for this to happen there was need of an initial period of training and practice. And the length of this

period varied from person to person.

Recognizing our innate tendency to fall by the wayside, initially we need to be helped quite a lot by God's Spirit. And he generously and faithfully offers us this help. Knowing that he is beside us, especially in important situations, we can afford to confidently move ahead counting on his guiding presence. As we gain in experience and skill, we can then launch out without worrying too much about our ability to cope that will come almost by instinct. Nevertheless, we should we vary of relying too much on ourselves. Being constantly aware of our nothingness and inclination towards choosing the opposite of God's will would help us be alert and place our trust consciously in the Lord.

The reason for this caution is that the human body naturally imbibes the principles e.g. of balancing, and this is then written into our very physical make-up, as it were - so, in this case there is no free, conscious choice that comes into play on each occasion such balancing is needed. But, in our following of God's Spirit, ultimately each time there is at least a flicker of a conscious choice that we need to make. If at all our actions are to be fruitful and meritorious, then they must stem from a free decision we make. Yet, such decisions need not and do not always take an enormous amount of time and energy though the outcome of these decisions could be weighed down with crucial consequences for ourselves and for others! These consequences, we must remember, can be both positive and beneficial as also negative and harmful!



“Divine Providence places on our path not only those who will test us in the practice of some virtue, but in its divine goodness for our soul it even determines our physical condition, illness or good health because that is the prescribed diet of the day by which to glorify God that day. It is the day's message signed by divine Providence.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

Continuing in the same strain, Fr. Eymard offers another piece of advice to his directee. In the book of Exodus God reminds his people that he 'bore (you) on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Ex. 19:3-5), meaning thereby that just as an eagle trains its young one to fly by literally pushing it out of the nest built on a high mountain ledge, so God himself put his people into several difficult situations as they journeyed across the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Yet, the mother eagle watches the progress of its young fledgling and rushes to catch it on its outspread wings just before it hit the ground and perished. Then it flies high up again and once more drops it off into empty space and the process is repeated again and again. Thus it is that God too watched over his people. Never did he allow them to suffer any harm as is stated in Deut 8:4 'the clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell all these forty years!'

Today too as God himself trains us to make us strong and capable of withstanding the enemy, he deliberately puts us into difficult situations to give us the experience of witnessing to his love

effectively. He knows what our capacity is and so leaves us alone till we really need his help and support. And having rescued us from harm, he will soon give us yet another experience and so on, till we have learnt the art of responding positively to his call.



Yet, our general experience is that when troubles come our way, our first instinctive reaction is, 'O God, why this, now?! Why me, and what wrong have I done?' Rather than approach the problem in this negative and diffident, self-condemnatory fashion, if we could train ourselves to say, 'Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity to exercise my spiritual muscles. I believe you are with me, and together we will come through victorious!' how much more positive would not the results be!?

Next we need to move out in his name, and with deep faith. After several experiences of this kind, we will stop being surprised at the marvelous ways in which God pulls us through even the most difficult situations. We gradually lose our inner fears, even when we have failed several times. Besides, once this begins to happen, the entire spiritual journey takes on the character of an adventure and the outcome of each victory is that we can spontaneously render praise and thanks to God, for we recognize that it was not our strength and expertise that obtained the victory, but that it was the Lord's own doing, a marvel in our eyes. "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. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved" (Ps 127:1-2).

“The best state to glorify God is my present state. The best grace is the [grace] of the present moment.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

Once we understand and accept that nothing happens in our lives except by the loving design of God, our loving Father, then it becomes easy to acknowledge that the best state is our present situation and the present moment is all we need to be happy and contented. However, more often than not, the problem seems to be: 'how do we arrive at this level of tranquility and trust in God's love for us'? After years of practice, the psalmist seems to have mastered this art when he prays: 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore' (Ps 131:1-3).

Once we can come to this level of inner peace and quiet, there is literally nothing that can disturb us. Another psalm (91) assures us of God's protective love in all adverse situations when it says, 'You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the

pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not



come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways! On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation' (Ps 91:1-16).

Further when we praise God out of this position of strength, our praise can be truly fulsome and selfless too. We don't need to wait to see more marvels before we burst into praise of this good God of ours, in fact, we will find that we praise and thank him 'always and everywhere,' as the Eucharistic liturgy admonishes us! Also, we do not go looking for reasons to praise God we find them all around us, every moment and in every situation. The result of all this is that our relationship with the Lord becomes very personal and enthusiastic there is a lot of feeling when we relate to God. He is no longer a 'distant and impersonal' God, but a God of mercy and compassion, abounding in love and goodness! (Ps. 145).

***'But who can assure me that he has forgiven me?' Your humble trust, your faith in his mercy! To seek certitude in this world is like wanting to be in heaven already. Wait!... It is necessary that humility, trust, surrender, a bit of mud on the way show us that we are still on the way, and that we must be God's beggars, God's poor ones and be indebted to him for his forgiveness, his grace and even his heaven.'* [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]**

The entire spiritual life is based on faith by which we take God's word seriously. We know that God is neither deceived by anyone nor does he ever wish to deceive others. And so, he always fulfills what he says. The promises may take long in being realized, but they are always fulfilled. And so, when dealing with God we should never seek to have a visible, external assurance, as that would be almost an insult to God. In fact, that is the great sin of apostasy that the Israelites committed in the desert by fashioning the Golden Calf.

To Moses God had revealed his name as Yahweh, meaning thereby that he is the God who is always present, actively present to every situation and the key action characteristic of God is that he saves those who cry out to him. He instinctively reaches out to the oppressed, the broken-hearted and the lost. But he generally saves at the very last moment, when all human resources seem to have proven useless. So, Yahweh is the one who can never be absent to any situation. Now when Moses went up the mountain to speak to God and did not return for several days, the Israelites despaired of his returning to them alive. And that landed

them into a big problem how would they know now that God is with them? The only assurance they had so far was the person of Moses, and now he too had disappeared.



To ensure for themselves a visible sign of God's presence, therefore, they approached Aaron who eventually fashioned the 'golden calf' out of the jewelry they had with them. The idea was not to worship the calf as a god, but rather, knowing that the understanding among the people surrounding them was that god rides on a bull when going from one place to another, they were sure that if they kept that bull before them, they would know when Yahweh would come down to the bull in order to go to some place or other. All they were looking for was a visible proof of God's presence in their midst and that was their apostasy: vitiating the very concept that God had revealed of himself as the God who cannot be absent to any situation.

So for us too, as long as we are in this world, we will not and cannot have any visible proof that God is with us, except the word of assurance he gave us: 'I will be with you always, even to the end of the world' (Mt. 28:20). To look for anything beyond his word is to dishonour God and fail to trust him. Against this background, we see that we Christians have a still long way to go. There is no difficulty with beginning our spiritual journey with all these external, physical props and helps, like statues, sacred places, pilgrimages and the like. Yet, there has to come a time in our spiritual growth when we move beyond all these and seek God in spirit and in truth, in the depths of our own being and especially in other people. After all, God did not come to dwell in temples made of stone, but in the human heart which he himself has fashioned!

“Abide in the house of God's divine fatherly goodness, like a child who knows nothing, does nothing, damages everything, but dwells in this gentle kindness.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1865]

The spirituality of childhood has been exemplified best for us by St. Therese of the Child Jesus. It was God's special gift to her that from her early childhood, she was accepted as a loved one and realized that she did not have to achieve great things in order to be appreciated by her parents. This parental approach enabled her to then transfer the same kind of relationship when dealing with the heavenly Father. For one thing, she was able to accept her limitations and shortcomings without feeling embarrassed or apologetic about them. She knew almost instinctively that when she surrendered her nothingness lovingly into God's hands, he would supply all that was wanting, and the two together could do great things for the kingdom.

Yet, for most of us this approach of littleness, brokenness and emptiness does not come easily. Somehow we have got it scripted into our very genes, as it were, that we will be appreciated and valued only when we achieve great things. That is why we brag so much about our little achievements magnifying them beyond proportion, and hiding our faults and failures, sometimes even telling lies in order to cover up our limitations and faults. How much simpler and easier would life not be if we could but adopt the little way of St. Therese!

Yet, for all of us human appreciation means such a lot we build our lives on that

appreciation and when it doesn't come our way, we resort to all kinds of tricks to draw the attention of others towards ourselves and our achievements.



This tendency is seen very clearly in little children below the age of five; while they do seek attention, they are guileless and are quite open about their needs. However, building one's inner security on the appreciation of others is a precarious business because human beings are so fickle they change ever so easily and readily, depending often on their own moods and fancies.

Instead, if we could learn from Jesus how to root ourselves in his love, knowing that it is a free gift given to us even without our deserving it, realizing that it is ours for as long as we care to keep it that would certainly make a big difference to the inner peace we possess. The Father loves us not because we are good but because he is good. He sees in us not just the stature we have achieved, but the potential that is ours a potential that we can realize to the full only by working in partnership with him. And when we have realized this potential that he wishes for us, the glory inevitably goes to him. That is when God would, as it were, thank us for collaborating with him in coming this far. He will say, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Mt 25:34-36).

“Do not dwell on your spiritual difficulties; absolutely cut short any turning back on self.” [To Mme Benoit Richard, March 1865]

When we have learnt the art of dealing with God as a child relates to its loving parent, then our entire focus, all through the day, is not on ourselves but on him. As the psalmist puts it, 'As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us' (Ps 123:2). As long as we maintain this stance, all will go well. But the moment we revert to looking at ourselves, no matter what the reason, we will find ourselves sinking like Peter when he requested Jesus to allow him to walk on the stormy seas 'But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"' (Mt 14:30-31).

And yet, instinctively that is exactly what we do, turn back repeatedly on the self. Our instinct of self-preservation is so strong that it will take us years of practice working on divesting ourselves of the Self before we attain any mastery in this area. Hence it is that Fr. Eymard advises his directee not to look back over the Self when caught in a difficulty. It could be that the person has actually failed. Even so, the best that can be done in that situation is to acknowledge one's weakness, take responsibility for the failure and leave the rest to God's love and mercy. Yet, all is not over. The Lord

himself will point out to us where we went wrong. We need to listen calmly yet attentively, carefully picking up a vital suggestion or two and then



working on it energetically with his help. And in this work too, we focus more on the Lord than on ourselves, for '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. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved' (Ps 127:1-2).

In an earlier reflection we had noted how it the Lord himself who places difficulties along our path to heaven, because it is through these that he actually draws us to himself. While he does test us in this way, he carefully watches lest we harm ourselves through our own stupidity and carelessness, of course. It is through these obstacles that we learn to trust in the Lord and work in liaison with him all through the journey. Further it helps if we train ourselves to refer all the glory immediately to the Lord, without waiting for a pat on the back like the disciples after the feeding of the five thousand in the desert. If we can move on to the next assignment, that would be a great help, for here again we would need to focus on the Lord and not on ourselves.

Further it is helpful if we have a spiritual guide or confidant who can alert us when we tend to focus on the Self. This reverting to the Self happens so surreptitiously that most often we are not even aware of it, or tend to gloss over it as being of little consequence. An outsider would possibly take a more serious view of such situations.

“He (God) takes away everything from you in order to be your only possession. He even takes away your virtues and your ability to work in order to be your only virtue and activity.” [To Countess Adele de Revel de Nesc, April 1865]

The classic example of this would be the story of Job in the Old Testament. According to the story, Job was already a devout follower of God, yet to prove to Satan his fidelity even in times of adversity, God allowed his friend Job to be tested. What is remarkable in the story is that one by one all his possessions and family were taken away leaving Job bereft of every human solace and support. Even his health was denied him and he was covered with sores all signs of very serious wrong-doing, according to the thinking of the Jews of his time. Yet Job remained steadfast with a remarkable expression on his lips: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing! (Job 1:21-22).

Of course, this is easily done in a story, but in reality it can very trying and painful. And generally our human experience shows us that when things begin to go wrong, they usually come in a row, one after another in quick succession. Nothing seems to work out well. If we can see such situations as a testing from God and can come to realize that when all is said and done, nothing remains, nothing is permanent except the

love of God what a blessing that would be! So far, the fidelity of Job is truly heroic. But there is a sequel that is even more heroic.



As Fr. Eymard points out, God often takes away even our virtues. His three friends come ostensibly to console him, but end up badgering him with all kinds of accusations. After enduring this for quite some time, Job caved in and also began speaking against God till his better sense prevailed and he listened to God's side of the story, clinging to him in faith. In the story, of course, there is a happy ending in that Job is shown as receiving all his family and possessions back and living happily ever after. But in actual life, this does not often happen yet it is only faith which was intended to be strengthened by these adversities, that is our support.

Finally our boast is only in God who never loses sight of us all through our struggles! He apparently acted very cruelly in allowing his beloved to suffer so much, yet he permits all that in order to fill the chosen one with even greater blessings. The Paschal Mystery reminds us that the more we allow ourselves to be emptied, the more we are filled. Thus, the emptying or dying is not an end in itself, but only the preliminary part. Even Job is reported to have exclaimed, “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me... If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up... I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! (Ps. 27:8-14).

“You must enjoy your present: you have our good Master who never leaves you; and you don't leave him either. Remember that one act of surrender is worth a thousand freely chosen deeds of virtue.” [To Countess D'Andigne, June 1865]

The cardinal principle of the spiritual life, which most often people forget, is that in the spiritual journey we make through life, what we do is never as important as what we allow God to do in us. It is he who initiates the entire process, accompanies it with his loving care and brings it to completion in his own good time. All that the beloved has to do, and as consistently as possible, is to permit God to have his way step by step. We must never forget that God's ways are not our ways, as he himself reminds us through the prophet Isaiah, '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. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Is 55:8-11).

Now, given the fact that what God chooses for us is always far better than what we could ever choose for ourselves, it is always safer and wiser to opt for what God offers us, no matter how difficult and painful it might appear on the outside.

Hence, one act of surrender to God's will, particularly if it seems difficult or even impossible for us, is far more precious than any number of self-chosen acts even though painful. This



one act of surrender will certainly take us closer to the fulfillment of God's marvelous plan for us. We recall Jeremiah here, 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile' (Jer. 29:11-14).

Fr. Eymard himself practiced this Golden Rule: He would never venture to undertake any project without first enquiring of the Lord and Master, 'What would you have me do, Lord?' In this he followed in the footsteps of St. Paul whose great act of total surrender on the road to Damascus was expressed in these terms. Other great biblical figures also did the same, notably David of whom it is said repeatedly, 'And David consulted Yahweh!' (2 Sam 2:1...). Unlike Saul his predecessor who often did things on his own and paid dearly for this attitude of his, David always sought to do what the Lord commanded and he prospered, in spite of his weakness in other areas. Once we develop the habit of looking for what God has in mind for us, we can be sure we will not stray too far away from him. His infinite love for us will keep us safe in the palm of his hand!

“I know that you need God, the Blessed Sacrament, adoration. This need will precisely be your law just as you went to Blois to get some rest, sunshine and strength. That is the rule of your sojourn.” [To Mme Isabelle Spazzier, October 1865]

All through life we need to take reasonable care of our physical health. But it is equally important that we spend time and energy after our spiritual well-being. And perhaps the best means at our disposal for this is to spend some time in prayer each day, prayer in which we consciously listen to what the Lord has in mind for us. We have shown earlier how one act of surrender is far more precious than a thousand self-chosen acts of self-denial and so discerning God's will is of paramount importance in our following of Jesus. What we need to note here is that in prayer, we should seek to be silent and to listen more than to express our needs to God. Jesus reminds us that... 'do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For, it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well' (Lk 12:29-31).

Besides, since we are aware that God's ways are far above anything we can think out by ourselves, we can be sure that in almost every decision we make on our own, we would act in a very myopic manner, without keeping the entire picture in mind. God's vision is far more broad and all-encompassing and so much more reliable in the long run. Hence the

need to keep our eyes focused on his will for us. And even in prayerful silence, it is so easy to hear only what we want to hear, particularly when what the Lord asks of us is difficult and demanding. On so many occasions in the Old Testament, we see that even prophets spoke falsely, claiming their version was the truth. And the true prophet always authenticated and vindicated his stance through the personal suffering his oracles brought him!



When we seek to listen deeply and dispassionately, we need to first consciously say to ourselves that it is purely God's will that we seek. Then we do our best to listen objectively. But what is more important is to check out what we have heard to ensure that it is really God's will. In general, three simple tests are recommended: The 'Time' test (God says the same thing in different ways all down the line; he does not keep changing his demands. God's word endures the test of time); the second is the 'Reality' test in that whatever God asks of us is appropriate in a concrete situation; his demands are never airy-fairy! And finally we have the 'Charity' test implying that God will never ask of us something that is clearly against love... since God is love by nature!

Besides all these, of course, we have the 'Common sense' test in which we check out our findings with another experienced person before beginning to implement our plan. Further, if we are ready to adapt our plans 'mid-course', even as it unfolds, then in all probability we would be doing what God really asks of us. If we are in the habit of always consulting God at every step, we won't go far too wrong!

“If you need to economize your time, let it be for greater recollection and union with God.” [To Miss Marguerite Guillot, October 1865]

for this one thing first, so that we learn how to put our trust totally in him.

Once our following of Jesus is unconditional, we can be sure that he will lead



Generally when we seek to economize on time, it is so that we can do what we have planned to accomplish. Once we have completed our plans, then we seem to be at peace. But, as we have shown in the previous reflection, all our plans come to nought when we do not consult the Lord and do what he has planned for us. Hence, if we genuinely wish to save time (by doing the right thing on each occasion), the first thing we need to do is to be deeply silent for a while and ask for the Lord's guidance. Initially this could take us some time, because the Self would keep intruding and misleading us. But after we have acquired the skill of discerning God's will and are ready to change our plans even while mid-stream, we need have no fear of wasting time running off at tangents as we journey through life.

us to the highest level of intimacy with the Father. That should be the goal we constantly have in mind, and then we won't go far too wrong! However, it is helpful to realize that this is a skill not easily learnt precisely because the Self in us is so subtle and crafty that it will keep returning and leading us in all directions, except the one which takes us to the Father. Hence, we would need to practice this skill all through life and be on our guard especially when serious decisions are involved.

Yet, we need not be anxious about this, because God loves us tremendously and will not allow us to go astray as long as we sincerely want to follow him. He will keep repeatedly demanding things that make us more and more reliant on him rather than on other creatures, and he will not rest until we are totally his! Yet, there will be moments similar to the time Jesus spent in the Garden of Gethsemane in which we have to struggle against our own self-preserving instincts and literally wrench ourselves away from Self and throw ourselves into the loving and merciful hands of the Father. Prayer and inner recollection are a must for this kind of a life of intimacy with the Father.

Besides, we need also to learn the practice of putting aside our vested interests when seeking God's will. Usually we instinctively seek to avoid whatever demands more effort, or is painful, or is likely to take more time and involve more inconvenience to ourselves. So, even without perhaps being aware of it, we could be avoiding all decisions that include more pain. We are often like little children who are ready to part with almost everything they have, except of course the 'comfort blanket', the one little piece of cloth that somehow provides them with inner security. And in his wisdom the Lord too would ask precisely

“You love silence, solitude of soul; that is the sanctuary of God where he gives his oracles of love; love it very much and there you will learn quickly and easily how to know God in his light, enjoy him in the essence of his goodness, imitate him in his spirit of love.” [To Natalie Jordan, September 1864]

Fr. Eymard is all praises for his directee who has developed a taste and passion for silence and solitude—the one place where we can be sure to meet God and hear his voice speaking to us with all the love he has for each of his beloved children. However, this is more easily said than done, for no matter how much we try, there is each day something or other which tends to disturb us and prevent us from communing with the Lord. Keeping ourselves far from outer distractions like noise, entertainment, disturbing friends and so on could be relatively easy. But even when this exterior silence is available, there is always the inner battle that we need to wage against all the memories, fantasies and other delightful thoughts that seem to plague us precisely the moment we settle for prayer.

Generally it is our faults and failings that keep flitting through our minds; we take great delight in going over and over those scenes working out how we should have acted or would act in similar situations in the future. Or again, it is something in the future that awaits us which becomes the focus of our attention and we keep working out how we will handle that situation. The secret seems to lie in the ability to stay with the present

moment—it is this skill that ushers us into the sanctuary where God speaks to us in love. One of the great helps to achieve this inner silence is a total lack of fear,



especially of being punished for our failings or of being abandoned by God. Once we are convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt of his undying love for us, and of receiving it always in spite of being unworthy or inconstant in our response, then nothing will really disturb us for long.

That is when we begin to taste the beauty of God's revelation of his infinite love for us; the Scriptures suddenly begin to come alive and we see meanings that we seemed to have glossed over for so long. We marvel at our shortsightedness which prevented us from seeing what was so obvious. The truth, of course, is that love sharpens our vision and in fact, all our senses. We do become one with the beloved and intuit more than 'hear' what he says to us. Having become one with him, we read his mind, as it were, while others who have not been so blessed just cannot see the obvious! However, we need to watch against one common failing in such a situation—that of taking the credit for all this to ourselves, as if it is through our own skills and ingenuity that we are able to do this. No, the praise and gratitude must always be directed to God who is the one who grants us the gift of intimacy with him.

The other important point is to ensure that we allow that love of God which we experience to flow through us freely onto all others whom the Lord brings into our lives. In fact, the more we give to others, the more would we get! All we need to do is to sit back and listen, allowing God to do the rest.

“We are always beginners in this school of love, because we are always learning something new; we enter more deeply into the depths of the knowledge of God and his virtue.” [To Natalie Jordan, September 1864]

Another feature of this close and intimate relationship with God is that we can never learn enough. One reason for this is that we keep on forgetting what we have been gifted with, even when we seek to share it with others. So, each time we glimpse God's tremendous graciousness, it comes to us as a surprise, it is an 'a-ha' experience all over again. Thus we are always learners; or as someone else put it: 'in the spiritual life, we are always novices, constantly learning.'

Besides this, once we have mastered the art of being still in God's presence, he does share all his secrets with us. As Jesus told his fledgling disciples, 'To you has been given to know the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven"' (Mk 4:11-12). The more we respond to his graces, the more generous he is in lavishing his secrets on us. That is when prayer becomes one long moment of silent drinking in of these secrets of the kingdom.

Now the best part of this teaching is that this depth of sharing is what God intends for each and every one of his children. But sadly enough, only a few will ever attain it because the depth of self-emptying required is rarely achieved;

very few are brave enough to pay the full price consistently. Generally a lot of personal suffering also accompanies this level of intimacy suffering



accepted in love and gratitude. Once this level of intimacy is attained, then the person 'lives and moves and has his being' in God all through the day! What God promises literally comes true: 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people' (Ex. 19:3-5; 24:3-8). Having reached this level, the person also experiences a gradual but definite distancing from all human/material pleasures and distractions. At the same time, the person's love for all people and the whole of creation too, increases and s/he takes on God's own love and concern for all creatures. However, what is stressed here is that God's ways being totally above our way of thinking, each time we relate to God, we find ourselves entering into new and uncharted territory and hence the need of learning!

Perhaps the best example of this level of intimacy is St. Francis of Assisi in whose presence even wild animals felt at home; neither did he experience any fear before anyone or anything. Isn't this truly an experience of heaven on earth?! So many holy men and women have experienced this level of inner freedom and love. And surely, who would not want such a situation for oneself? Why is it then that we pull back from paying the price, when we can see how marvelous are the results? One answer could be that our faith isn't yet strong enough to entrust our lives totally and irrevocably into God's hands, and so we keep oscillating between God and Self, enjoying neither one fully!

“Let your prayer be made up of silence, contemplation, union with Our Lord; that is the only true centre of life. The rest is painful and difficult work of the soul; it means working too much.” [To Natalie Jordan, September 1864]

In our day and age, we have been creative enough to invent all kinds of gadgets to reduce the amount of work we do; or better, we want to get more work done with as little an expenditure of time and effort as possible. Applying this concept to the question of prayer, we notice that we do waste a lot of time when we go about it the wrong way. First of all, we come to prayer not so much to get things from God, as if he were some kind of a Super-Santa Claus dispensing gifts and favours to all who ask of him! Rather, we pray in order to dispose ourselves to be open to receive all that God, in his goodness, has already bestowed on us.

The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will,

according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory' (Eph 1:3-12).



Once we grasp this true purpose of prayer, we can afford to remain silent and desist from asking favours and things from God. Instead we keep reminding ourselves that whatever we might need has already been gifted to us because of God's love and goodness. In silence we allow God's love to gradually penetrate the darkness of our lives and enable us to open up to him. All this is far less strenuous than when we relentlessly keep asking of him. Besides, it would be true to say that today God cannot give us anything more than what he has already granted us. So, all we need do is remain close to him and allow him to draw us to himself.

Unfortunately, most of us are chronic and hyperactive do-ers and so cannot keep still. We long to feel that sense of achievement which comes from a lot of struggle. It is in situations like this that we need to remember that, '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. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved' (Ps 127:1-2).

“Remember that the best condition of love is to be ruled by its necessity, and the greatest proof that we love God is to love him with self-denial and sacrifice.” [To Ms Zenaide Blanc de St. Bonnet, October 1864]

To be ruled by the necessity of love is the same as saying that in the matter of love, surrender is far more important than aggressive activity! Unless we first ourselves experience the thrill of being loved by someone and that too unconditionally, we generally do not understand what love is all about. This is important because instinctively we all feel that we are basically not worth much, that no one would really care to love us, especially if they really knew who we are, or which are the basic qualities we are endowed with! That is why we so often put on masks pretending to be what we really are not.

But when someone discovers our true worth and loves us for who we really are, we suddenly wake up to the thrill of being loved. For this to happen we need to do nothing except allow ourselves to be known for who we really are, warts and all! Yet, in general, we hide our faults and limitations, the skeletons we keep in the cupboard, the darker side of our lives. When God loves us not only in spite of our weaknesses, but rather because of our limitations, that's when we wake up and begin to live. It is only after this fundamental experience of being truly loved that we become capable of loving others.

In our response to God's love too we experience some basic difficulties. We

generally tend to feel that if we offer to God the things that we like and appreciate, that will make him happy and feel honoured. Yet, because God's ways are so different from ours, we cannot really know what God wants, unless of course we listen to him telling us what he wants of us. And that is what demands obedience and self-sacrifice, the two basic elements of any real return of love to God. Jesus reminds us in his last discourse, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them!"' (Jn 14:15-21).

The self-denial spoken of here is not a question of depriving ourselves of something we like or would want, but rather requires the going against our own ideas about what God seeks of us, or about what would please God coming as a gift from us! It entails ensuring that in no way does the Self come into the picture, no matter how subtly! And this kind of almost ruthless self-denial can be far more difficult and painful than merely giving up something we like!



“Don't receive persons who have been refused by other Communities, or who have been professed, or even who have received the religious habit. The reason is that they make comparisons, they are already anxious, and finally, the Master must have the first fruits.” [To Ms. Marguerite Guillot, October 1864]

From the vast fund of practical wisdom that he had acquired Fr. Eymard arrived at a pastoral principle with regard to vocations that is fairly common and acceptable even in our day. Discerning one's vocation in life is no easy matter and some times, even after a fairly long period of careful scrutiny, we are still not certain what God asks of us. In fact, it is said that even after entering into a seminary or formation situation, one is still discovering where the Lord really wishes to have him/her serve. And so it happens reasonably often that a candidate joins a particular seminary or Institute and then is advised to leave as s/he doesn't seem to have a vocation to that way of life.

Still working at clarifying one's vocation the person could then seek entrance in another Institute: this is where the catch lies! Would the person fit into this other congregation and its specific way of life? If the person has been sent away from the first congregation because s/he lacked the basic requirements for religious life, particularly the readiness to die to Self, to take up the cross and truly follow Jesus, would s/he be able to measure up to the demands of this new situation? While theoretically it could

be possible, and there would always be some exceptions, the general experience is that s/he would not fit into the new situation! This is true because the basic condition is not being met: that one enters into the Covenantal relationship primarily not in order to *get* but in order to *give*! It is similar to divorcing one's wife because 'I don't like the way she acts or cooks or something like that!' A lasting relationship is based on a commitment, 'for better or for worse.' And if the commitment cannot be upheld in one situation it is not likely that the person will uphold it in another.

The reasons Fr. Eymard gives in this piece of advice remain true, but they do not perhaps go to the core of the problem the person's basic self-centred approach. He himself did notice this in several of those who joined and were his novices that a person who wasn't generous in the 'gift of self' seldom lasted the entire training period. These are the very kind of persons who would make comparisons in terms of what the previous congregation gave them and the present ones do not; they are anxious about 'securing themselves' in one sense or another and hence are never quite at home. But the person who follows Jesus because he wants to give of himself and that too totally would rather delight in all kinds of hardships which s/he then bears out of love!

This difference of approach is noticeable in several tell-tale signs, one prominent one being the spirit of complaining and fault-finding! Like the Israelites leaving Egypt they constantly grumble about what is lacking rather than appreciate what is available.



“Consider trials as graces; bear them with love, because that is the real fruit of virtue. Often remember that a mother must suffer for all her children, and bring them to birth in God’s service by her own sufferings. Saints are difficult to form, their crown must be bought dearly.”

[To Ms. Marguerite Guillot, December 1864]

Ms. Marguerite Guillot was a favourite directee of Fr. Eymard and he often wished her to be a saint; he encouraged her enthusiastically in this direction. And obviously, knowing that no disciple of Jesus is worth his/her salt unless s/he takes up his/her cross and follows after him, he urges her to look upon all the trials she faces as special graces from God, to be accepted and cherished in love. That she had many big crosses to carry is beyond a doubt. Having accepted to lead and guide the women’s branch of the Eucharistic Society, which actually was the outgrowth of the Third Order of Mary, she faced innumerable difficulties. These concerned not only the selection and training of candidates for the Society, but also the customary cares and concerns of having to provide for their accommodation and maintenance.

There was one particular foundation that led to a lot of bitter problems involving the lady who donated her premises for the use of the community. Later she decided to take it back and that led to tremendous financial and other worries. Yet in all these, Fr. Eymard was able to accept the setbacks with calm and composure and here he shows her, his counterpart, how to make the best of them in her own life and spiritual journey. He reminds her that she is the

spiritual mother of all those who joined their august congregation and as such that she would have to bear the pains and struggles of their individual growth.



Besides, there were difficulties from the priests and bishops they had to deal with, especially as they began to expand and move into different dioceses. Fr. Eymard was a regular preacher of Recollections and retreats for them and judging from the number of letters he wrote to her, they were in constant contact and had a number of issues to sort out. Further, like Fr. Eymard, Marguerite too had several physical ailments to contend with, often heroically continuing with her daily routine in spite of pain and discomfort.

In all their sufferings, St. Paul would have been their sure guide, especially what he wrote in 2 Cor. 4:6 - 5:1, 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is being wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.'

“However, in these difficult moments, we must pray, suffer in silence, make good use of humiliations and wait patiently for God's time. The good Lord always blesses the cross which is carried for him.” [To Mmes Marianne and Nanette, December 1864]

Writing to his two dear sisters, he speaks eloquently on the same theme of suffering for Christ's sake. They too had their moments of trial and perhaps their biggest suffering was that Fr. Eymard their beloved brother and saintly priest could hardly be called their own. While he did give them the best, he was more at the service of the people God had sent him to, than near to them, his immediate family. Perhaps the greatest suffering he caused them was when he left to join the Marists, telling them that he could not wait even for a day more, for “tomorrow would be too late!” While he understood the urgency of his calling, they who had dedicated their lives to look after his material needs in the rectory, found it difficult to see why just one day more could mean so much!

Even in this pain, Fr. Eymard was sensitive enough to write often and enquire about how they were coping, encouraging them always to see the hand of God in these developments. Later, he would ask many of his friends to look after his two sisters, particularly when they were ill and he himself could not spare the time to be with them. Perhaps not able to rise to the stature of their brother, they nevertheless were close to the Lord, as best they could, given their situation. Pious and devout as they were,

they accepted their crosses with resignation and love and were even cheerful as they bore their daily burdens. Possibly they offered all these as



sacrifices for the spiritual success of Fr. Eymard's own ministry. He always kept them abreast of developments especially with regard to the two Societies he founded. They were his spiritual partners in this great enterprise, though he ensured that he did not burden them with his problems, which were his particular cross to be carried lovingly.

Possibly Fr. Eymard had in mind the saying of Jesus applying these principles almost literally to his own case, 'As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:57-62).

While this approach seems rather rigid, looked at from another angle it speaks of the total gift of his very Self that Fr. Eymard sought to make to Jesus, in return for his own self-gift to him. He kept back nothing when it was a question of responding generously to the Lord.

“You are right: work at holy recollection; that is the root of the tree, the life of virtue and even of divine life. Distraction of spirit is really harmful for the heart, because when the mind is flitting everywhere... it leaves the heart dry, stops feeding it with good thoughts, the memory no longer reminds it about the presence of God... Then our poor heart is reduced to pious feelings about a God of devotion and his inspirations of grace without being well rooted in him...” []

Fr. Eymard very cleverly tracks down the problem of ineffective prayer to the lack of recollection throughout the day. As Jesus said, 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Mt 6:19-21). So, if throughout the day our mind is engrossed in material cares and worries, it is no wonder that when we come to pray, these same thoughts will invade our minds and hearts. Besides, constant engagement in such (ungodly) thoughts does tire the mind leaving it with very little energy to pay complete attention to what the Lord says in time of quiet and prayer.

That is why great spiritual teachers like St. Ignatius of Loyola advise their charges to maintain a deep inward silence once a person has completed his/her night prayer and retires to bed. Again, the first thing one does on waking in the morning

is to recall the theme of one's prayer. As one goes about one's morning chores, these are the thoughts one keeps in one's mind, looking forward to the time one is going to



spend in prayer. Only with such precautions can one expect to make that prayer fruitfully. Especially in our modern times, if one is keen on making prayer effectively, then one has to consciously cut down on feeding the mind frequently on tid-bits of news, watching frivolous programmes on the TV, preoccupation with worries and anxieties concerning one's work or assignments - only then could one hope that one's prayer will change one's life for the better.

The principle being enunciated here is valid of all aspects of life. A person wanting to excel in the game of cricket would need to fill his/her mind constantly with matters dealing with the game. One needs to be steeped in it, in fact, the game has to become a passion for the person concerned, else one would end up being only mediocre at the game. In the spiritual sphere too this same holds good. When God is not really the centre of our lives, the one treasure we want to obtain by all means, we cannot expect a deep intimate relationship with God. Ours will be only an acquaintance with him, or as Fr. Eymard puts it, we will entertain only pious feelings about God; our insights into his nature will only be superficial and common place and we will talk about him without much unction.

We might be busy with God's work the entire day, yet our personal knowledge of him and our relationship with him will not be more than that of a servant to his master. A servant does relate to his master yet that relationship is quite different from that of the son to his father!

“May Christian charity be sovereign among you: that is Our Lord's primary virtue and soul of religious life... I am not telling you: 'bear with one another'; but 'love one another,' since you form the beloved family of our Lord.” []

This is one of the suggestions taken from Fr. Eymard's spiritual conferences. Falling back onto one of his own key insights into Gospel principles against the background of the spiritual climate of his times, Fr. Eymard emphasizes the centrality of love. While most others of his time focused on reparation and that too with heavily negative overtones, he stood out for his emphasis on love as the primary virtue and requisite for a deep spiritual life. As Jesus put it, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:34-35).

The true mark of a disciple then is not enthusiastic service, heroic self-abnegation nor even martyrdom out of duty, but rather any and every action done out of genuine love. The real catch in the new commandment which Jesus gives us is that we love one another, *as he has loved us!* This is what makes it truly distinctive and also mighty difficult. Jesus loves us with an unconditional and unsurpassable love and to be able to love in that manner, we need to be deeply united with him thinking the way he thinks, feeling his personal feelings, deciding and acting exactly as he did, and

so on.

Of course, the resources for this kind of a life are made available by Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit. ... 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:3-5). It is this love that we draw upon when reaching out to our needy brothers and sisters. So all that Jesus asks of us is to be channels of his love to others and so this is where the real catch lies: we need to be constantly aware that our calling is to be channels of God's love. The particular work entrusted to us, our specific mission is life is only the means through which we make this love of God available to all around us. Even the daily chores we do in the home or place of work have to become expressions of love. Thus, the gardener engages in gardening out of love while the farmer sows and reaps his crops with the same love. The engineer and his subordinates labour for the same goal while the housewife does her chores out of love too!

Once we see the centrality of love in our lives, then our 'ambition' is to become experts or professionals in loving. We can never forget that this love is always selfless and given totally, without counting the cost because that is the kind of love that Jesus offers us constantly, even when we disregard and reject him. That is the only love that is around for us to circulate freely and generously - all the rest is counterfeit!



“We must bow our heads beneath the Cross and pray for those who persecute and cause suffering.” [May 1867]

Fr. Eymard was very clear from his constant reading of Sacred Scripture, that one could not hope to be a disciple of Jesus (leave alone a faithful one) unless one was prepared to take up one's cross (and Luke will add, 'daily' to emphasize that there is no escaping it even for a day!) and follow after him. The authentic sign that one engages in kingdom work is the sign of the Cross. Already in Old Testament times, the real prophet authenticated his utterances by the fact that he had to suffer personally for the sake of what he preached, even though some times he did this against his will. The false prophet glibly says what he knows the people want to hear - no condemnation of their evil ways, no impending punishment from God, no urgency for a radical change of life-style! As long as the populace was confirmed in their selfish ways and behaviour, they treated the prophet well and acclaimed all his actions.

Jesus reminded his disciples that this would be their fate too. “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would

not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'



When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning' (Jn 15:19 - 16:1).

With this warning of the Lord ringing in our ears, we bow our heads to the suffering that comes our way, as we go about establishing the kingdom of God in our midst. The real test that we have interiorized this important principle is that we can even rejoice in the midst of suffering as the apostles did... 'As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah' (Acts 5:41 - 6:1).

However, if our suffering stems from our own fault, then we deserve it, as St. Peter reminds us, 'If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Pt 2:20 - 3:1).

“I wish only one thing for you: greater love for God, a flame which grows higher and more intense. To love God and be loved by him, what more could we have or desire? [To Mme Antoinette de Grandville, January 1867]”

As mentioned several times in his writings, Fr. Eymard's special contribution to the Church of his times was his focus on the centrality of love in the Christian following of Jesus. That was a special grace given him especially against the background of the Jansenist movement which concentrated on the negative side of life, insisting on strict penances, a distrust of human nature, severe and prolonged corporal punishments and the like. Basing himself mainly on Sacred Scripture, Fr. Eymard was able to sift out the essentials from the accidentals and discover that love alone was the key. Hence, both in his own life and also in the spiritual direction he offered to others, he never tired of coming back to this point of love.

Again it was not just a question of loving God more or less. What he aimed at was the highest and most passionate love for the Father simply because that is the way God himself loves us, each and every one of us, no matter what our moral condition is! As portrayed for us in the entire Bible, God's love for his people is almost unbelievable. Even when the people sinned and that too quite consciously and deliberately, while they did reap the punishment of their wrongdoings, yet it was God himself who drew them out of the mire. This is something that most people even today fail to understand. No matter what our

response to his love is, God continues to love us 'as if' we really were the most dedicated of his children!

A classic example of this short-sighted



understanding of God's love is the statement that we hear so often during Advent. “Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness... make a straight path...” (Is 40:1-18). When asked 'who is supposed to prepare this path for the exiles to return?' (presuming that people know that it is a path from Babylon, the place of exile back to the Promised Land, Israel), most people including priests and seminarians would immediately respond, 'Why, we sinners, of course!' Yet a more careful reading of the text reveals that it is God himself who will prepare this path, a straight and smooth road (through the initiative of the foreign nations of Babylon and Assyria themselves) for his people to return, because 'they have already received a double punishment for their sins' (and God doesn't want them to suffer any more even though they themselves landed themselves into that trouble!)

It is this 'almost crazy' love that God has for us that we need to reciprocate with a similar 'crazy' return of love shown through our daily activities. This is how the saints lived and many of their 'peculiar' behaviour can be explained meaningfully only when placed in the context of this kind of love. Happy indeed is the person who allows him/herself to be loved by God in this way and also loves God in return (even in his children) in a similar manner!

“For bread to be good, it must be sifted, ground and baked. Let yourself be ground as was St. Ignatius, the martyr.” [To Ms Virginie Danion, January 1867]

Using the analogy of baking bread, Fr Eymard explains a very important principle of the spiritual life. To have quality bread, it is not enough merely to reap grain from the fields and proceed to process them into flour and the rest of the details. One needs to ensure that the grain is properly dried, that foreign or unwanted elements are carefully sifted so that the grain that will be ultimately ground is clean and pure! Even the process of grinding the grain into flour at the mill needs to be carefully attended to, particularly as regards its fineness. Then comes the process of kneading the dough and allowing it to ferment over a specified period of time and finally the shaping and baking in the oven again a process that requires total attention lest the dough gets burnt in the oven if kept for too long.

Comparing our lives to the wheat we too need to allow ourselves to be put through the process of purification which the Lord does for us, through several human instruments, no doubt. Some aspects of this process are painful certainly, but nevertheless necessary. The example of St. Ignatius of Antioch reminds us that the wheat has to be ground into flour in his case this was finally done by the teeth of the wild animals to whom he and several others were thrown, simply because they were Christians who adhered to Christ. Yet, the best part of his story is that as he was being taken to the city where he would be executed, he passed through several

towns in which many prominent personages resided. These influential persons offered to intervene on his behalf and obtain his release.



But, he deterred them saying, 'I am the wheat of Christ; only when we are ground in the mill of suffered can we become pure bread'... the bread which is Christ himself living now in the person of his disciples! In this way, not only did he himself go courageously to his death, but he also encouraged all his companions to remain steadfast till the end. What an example for us today. We certainly may not be called to sacrifice our lives in this heroic manner through martyrdom. But can we say that we give of our best (allowing ourselves to be broken, and ground into powder) as we remain faithful to our God-given duties, as we stand for the truth in our friends' circle, put in the whole time we are expected to in the office or place of work, no back-biting or cheating or telling lies to suit our convenience?

This is how we are called to manifest our heroic following of Jesus today, at the 'mill' of our daily commitments. And when this involves hidden faithfulness to our duty, it is all the more pleasing to the Lord, as there is very little that the Self can get out of it. Certainly there are numberless unsung heroes and heroines among us, especially in our homes where simple ordinary Christian women and mothers give all of their time and energy to bring up their families amidst numerous obstacles and hurdles, standing up for truth and justice no matter what the cost!

“We must hope against all hope, and raise our eyes towards the mountain of salvation without looking for human support.”

[To Mme Natalie Jordan, January 1867]

This particular piece of advice would come in handy in ordinarily difficult circumstances as when one struggles with the fulfillment of one's daily duties. A mother battling with the task of instilling Christian values into her growing teenagers often finds that she is fighting with her back to the wall. The children remain adamant claiming that everybody else in their circle of friends tells lies, indulges in unchristian and unjust behaviour towards the weak and the poor, cheats in exams, comes home late at night and a host of other details. She looks to her husband to support her in this difficult situation, but receives the cold shoulder treatment, as if to say, 'This is your domain, your responsibility I cannot handle this...!

In such a situation, to whom does she turn? It is very easy to throw in the towel and give up, but would that not amount to failing in one's Christian duties? In this and similar situations, the best advice is to realize that in spite of what appears on the outside, the Lord is still in control of the difficult situation and that all he asks of us is to place ourselves as instruments in his powerful hands. The more desperate the situation, the more must we trust in him, asking him to fill us with his wisdom, to instill in our hearts his patience and love, to move us to say the appropriate word and take the most effective action. All this can be crammed into the petition found in the Lord's prayer: 'Give us each

day our daily bread!' Bread stands for all that sustains life and makes it pleasant to live!

It is important to notice that we pray in this



ideal Christian prayer, that we be given 'all that makes human life worth living on earth' so that we may share it with others, with whomever the Lord places within the circle of our influence. In the example mentioned above, if the harassed mother prays sincerely in this way, the Lord will definitely take over and provide her with all that she needs to work out a Christian solution to the problem. This, of course, does not mean that the matter will be resolved in a few seconds there could be still several agonizing days ahead of her, yet what she will have done is place the difficult situation in the Lord's hands, allowing him to work through her at his pace and in his own way.

After all, establishing God's kingdom is not really our work it is the work for which Jesus was sent into the world by the Father. But Jesus has chosen us as his visible 'hands and feet' for today, and as long as we maintain our subordinate role in this great work he will not shirk his responsibility no prayer made with faith and love can ever go unanswered. And sometimes, the Lord's answer is 'wait let me handle this in my own time and way!' That's when we look to him in hope, without reaching out immediately for human support. We recall the Lord's words, as his parting reminder: 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Mt 28:20).

“In order to become a great saint be a soul of prayer and service. The essential thing is to desire it and pursue it.” [To Mme Natalie Jordan, January 1867]

It would be true to say that even in sainthood, there are degrees or more and less. That, of course, is obvious when we recall that no one is ever forced into a stereotyped way of responding to God's call. Each one gives according to the measure of his own free choice as the poem has it:

To every man there openeth, a high
 way and a low,
 And every man decideth the way his
 soul shall go.
 The high soul takes the highway, and
 the low soul takes the low,
 And every man decideth the way his
 soul shall go!

However, for anyone aspiring to the heights of sanctity a judicious balance between prayer and service must be maintained. In other words, intimacy with God is always a two-way traffic: as much as we receive, or better, open ourselves to be filled by God with his love, to that extent we have an obligation to pass it on to others. Or, the other way round too is true, the more we share with others, the more we ourselves will receive! 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back"' (Lk

6:36-38).

The spiritual journey we undertake, then, must involve a give and take. We approach God to be filled with his good gifts,



not merely to build up our own reserves, but rather so that we may have something worthwhile to share with our needy neighbour when we encounter him. Like Jesus, we too are to become 'bread broken' for the life of the world. And as during the feeding of the five thousand, when the disciples distributed Jesus' blessed bread to the people as much as they wanted, they still found themselves with twelve huge baskets of scraps remaining, so in our lives too the more generously we give, the more we seem to have remaining. The point is to give of ourselves selflessly, only then will it come back to us in greater measure. 'Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back' (Eccl 11:1). Besides, the Father will never allow himself to be outdone in generosity.

While on their desert journey towards the Promised Land the Israelites were warned not to collect more manna than they needed for the day's consumption. Anything that remained at night after they had eaten their fill would rot if kept for the next day. Thus, neither they nor their neighbour would benefit from it. The same is true for us too in our possession and use of earthly goods, as we journey towards heaven.

“Surrender to the fatherly Providence which has always watched over you so caringly and has guided you so well in your duties and in [finding] trust.” [To Countess Adele de Revel, January 1867]

Of all the qualities needed for a deep personal intimacy with the Lord, perhaps the most important one is surrender. However, it would be worth our while to ponder over this a little more deeply. The surrender we speak of here is not just a matter of words or ideas; it is not enough to say to the Lord that we desire to surrender into his hands. Many, e.g. sing the hymn, “I surrender all” very devoutly and wholeheartedly, but when the actual moment of surrender arrives, they are far from being like clay in the hands of a potter.

And so, the Lord himself takes us in hand and proceeds to make us surrender even the last and least desire to allow the Self to be master. We see this powerfully in the story of Jairus, the synagogue official who came to Jesus to ask for the cure of his daughter who was at the point of death. Even though he notices the strong desire in Jairus to be in control of his own life, Jesus offers to go with him to his house where his daughter lay. But, he takes the crowd along with him and discusses with them along the way. The result is that the procession moves very slowly while Jairus expected Jesus to arrive home before the girl died!

After a fairly long period of deliberate delay, a woman in the crowd touches the hem of Jesus' garment at which Jesus stopped and began enquiring

who had touched him. Even the disciples were amazed at this reaction of Jesus. Again there is a further delay as the woman owned up to the action and began telling Jesus 'the



whole story.' Now Jairus would have begun to despair about ever reaching home in time, before the girl died. In the next scene we hear of Jairus' servants who arrive to give him the news that the girl had in fact just died with that all of Jairus' hopes would have been shattered!

It is at this point that Jesus says to him, “Do not be afraid, Jairus, only believe!” This would have sounded pretty rude and insensitive to him on the part of Jesus, for had he not believed when he came to Jesus in the first place? What more could he do, now that the girl had died? What Jesus indicated was that now was the time for Jairus to put the entire situation of the dead girl into the hands of Jesus and allow him to do what he thought best! When Jairus did just that, Jesus went in haste to the house, and first of all stopped all from announcing (by weeping and wailing) that the girl was dead. Next, he proceeded to put every single person out of the house. Both of these actions would have been very difficult for Jairus to accept if he still considered himself as being in control. Yet, he was calm enough to permit Jesus to do what he thought best.

Taking the parents and his three chosen disciples, Jesus went into the room and raised the girl back to life. He was able to do this because Jairus had in fact totally surrendered. That is the kind of surrender that Jesus would want of us too!

“Study their temperaments and approach them ordinarily with kindness and patience, because people do not know or admit their defects of character. Self-love covers and protects our ego.”

[To Fr. Michel Chanuet, January 1867]

This piece of advice is given to Fr. Chanuet who at that time was in charge of the formation of candidates for entering into the new Blessed Sacrament Society. Having done the work himself for quite some time, Fr. Eymard would have known from his own personal experience which qualities in the formator would produce the best results in his charges. It is worth noticing that although he looked for quality in his formees, yet he never suggests unbending strictness, unswerving loyalty to the programme and the like. Having realized the supremacy of love, he insisted in all his writings to the formators that they exercise this love even towards those in formation.

Fr. Eymard's way of understanding faults against the rule is remarkable: he sees these not so much as expressions of ill-will or stubbornness, of a desire to do one's own will rather than submit to authority. He understands that most people do not know their own defects, because in general each one sees himself as perfect. Besides, they remain mostly on the level of the mind in which they possibly did agree with the principles laid down, but in practice acted differently! Further, even after one had 'disobeyed,' it is difficult for most to accept their faults and admit them, especially before authority. We tend to justify our actions and particularly our failures, because admitting them lowers our own self-esteem. In fact it is amazing to what lengths a person could go in order to protect

his ego from blame for wrongdoing. Psychology today has come out with a fairly long list of 'tricks' or games that people play, defense mechanisms that we use in order to escape every form of blame.



The reason why these tricks go unnoticed even by the perpetrators themselves is that we begin at a reasonably early age experimenting to discover which trick works best with which person. Once this has become a habit, it becomes almost second nature for us, with the result that we don't even notice that we are acting defensively. It takes a very honest person to discover and notice the 'un-truth' in his behaviour and further a very strong person to actually do something to change this false behaviour! However, it is only love and acceptance that will enable a person to serenely tackle such harmful behaviour and that is what Fr. Eymard suggests that formators use in dealing with their charges.

The ancient Indian fable about the contest between the Sun and Wind about which of the two was the stronger, explains this principle well. Choosing a farmer walking down the road, who on that cold winter morning had a blanket closely wrapped round his body, they decided that the one who could make him take it off would be considered the stronger. The Wind began and he huffed and puffed with all his might, but the harder he blew, the colder the man felt and so clung to his blanket even tighter. The Sun took over after the Wind gave up, and he began to shine brighter and brighter. In a few minutes, the man began to feel hot and so automatically took off the blanket thus rendering the Sun as victor. Similarly, it is not force but the warmth of love that will overcome the Self within us too!

“Never let yourself be moved by antipathy against any of your children; that is an ordinary temptation of the devil.” [To Fr. Michel Chanuet, January 1867]

It is an accepted truth in all educational circles that if a student dislikes his teacher especially for being strict, harsh or unreasonably demanding, s/he will develop a dislike also for the subject the teacher teaches. Realizing that his mission was to make the love of God the guiding principle in the lives of all Christians whom he came in contact with, Fr. Eymard cautions against linking any strong negative feeling like antipathy, unnecessary harshness stemming from one's own hurt ego with our attempts at educating people particularly in the ways of God. He sees such approaches as a temptation of the devil which will result in our losing the candidate perhaps for ever.

Rather, he recommends love as the supreme quality in all educational work. Now, it is true that the approach of love is much more demanding and perhaps terribly slow in producing the desired results. Fear, on the other hand, produces instant and near hundred percent results, especially if fear is applied at the right time and in the right measure. No one wants to fail in the exams, to be thrown out of school, or be ridiculed before others, and so would do anything in order to avoid such disastrous results. Yet, the sad truth about fear as an atmosphere in which to teach people important truths concerning life itself, is that once the person outgrows the fear element, s/he will throw overboard all that was commanded or imposed because of fear.

The results therefore, while being impressive at the start are seldom long-lasting.

Love, on the contrary, can be misunderstood and



taken to be softness or spinelessness and many take advantage of kindness shown in such situations. It is only when the candidate understands that what is being passed on to him is for his own good that he will internalize the message and live it. But once this happens, it lasts for life. Thus, the path of love in formation is more risky and uncertain with regard to results, but in the long run, it is more effective.

Unfortunately, almost all formators, no matter how much they are instructed to the contrary, seem to prefer the path of strictness, punishment, a flaunting of authority. It makes the teacher feel superior and in command of the situation, it produces good and instant results and is ostensibly admired by all! It takes a person of great humility and inner strength to be able to choose the path of love. Further, if this person has him/herself experienced the real power of love, then in all likelihood s/he will use it very sagaciously. Underneath this approach, there lies a tremendous respect for the mystery that each person is! Again, when we scrutinize the methodology that God himself uses in training us, we realize that his is the approach of love... a love that gives us himself saying, 'Take and eat this is my very self (life) given for you!'

“The goal which we give ourselves in our little community is to honour Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament in accordance with the purpose of the sacrifice, viz. to offer [to God] adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petitions, in other words, a perpetual mission of prayer. We consider the Sacrament in its fullness.” (Fr. Eymard 1867)

In this reflection we shall focus mainly on the last sentence in which Fr. Eymard uses almost prophetic words. His clearly set goal was to consider the Eucharist in its fullness and not merely as inviting Prayer before the Sacrament. Unfortunately down the years, the Congregation was turned into a praying group with perpetual adoration characterizing all its communities. In fact, up to Vatican II, SSS religious both men and women lived almost like contemplatives with a minimal ministry that of promoting prayer, hearing confessions and the counseling that went with it. It was even recommended to them, that in the spirit of the Self-gift they made of themselves, they sacrifice every desire for personal advancement in the area of studies, specialization and so on. They were considered as specialists in prayer.

Yet, Fr. Eymard's vision was very clear: he desired a wider understanding of the Eucharist and this came into its own with Vatican II teaching. In 1967 the Congregation was told by authorities in Rome that they would need to focus on the entire Eucharistic mystery beginning with the celebration as the centre and prayer before the Sacrament radiating out of it, together with other forms of Eucharistic apostolate. If they could not achieve this,

they had better close down as a one-sided approach to the Eucharist did not make sense any longer. This injunction from Rome brought about a major upheaval in the



Congregation with several religious leaving the Institute, a considerable drop in vocations and other related consequences. Nevertheless, the Congregation as a whole did make the effort to renew its approach and used a temporary revised (experimental) Rule of Life for about ten years.

Drawing on the experience of these ten years, the Congregation finally drew up the new Rule of Life and after its approbation by Rome in 1984 confidently began its approach of focusing on the entire Eucharistic mystery. What is stressed today, not only among Blessed Sacrament religious, but also among all Christians, is that the Celebration is central and takes up the major part of our attention. What is celebrated is interiorized through prayer made in the presence of the Sacrament exposed and then lived out through the day. In the kinds of apostolate proposed to the SSS seven different streams are indicated, all flowing from the Eucharist and returning to it as the centre. These are wide-ranging and cover fields like ecumenism, ecology, care for the environment, research into the Eucharist as understood and celebrated down the centuries, evangelization, both direct and indirect, social uplift, Scripture, Liturgy, even politics almost everything that can be linked with the Eucharist which is now seen as 'the source and summit of the life of the Church!' It is in this integral way that SSS religious seek to honour and respond to the gift of Jesus of himself to the Church in the Eucharist!