

***“... let me tell you that fire feeds on itself when a good hearth supplies it. Activity is its element, that is true, but the true activity of love is within.”*** [Ms. Virginie Danion, February 1867]



these does this with a vivid awareness of the gratitude that wells up in his/her heart towards the Lord who has just recently saved him/her from a serious

It is a fact that one's enthusiasm of spirit is shown primarily through one's external behaviour, the zest with which one moves, the lilt in the tone of voice, the sparkle in the eye, the smile on one's face and so on. Yet it can happen that all these are present even though the real element of love is totally absent. This could happen because some people are naturally lively and full of zip while others are more placid and easy-going. Hence it is of importance to ensure that love really is the source of all our sprightly activity and that can be done by focusing more on the interior.

accident in which s/he could have lost his/her life! The other does the same lively actions almost from force of habit because s/he has trained him/herself to act in that way. There is no doubt that in this second person there is at least a general sort of 'feeling' of love towards the Lord, but it is evident that it lacks that freshness that characterizes the first person's behaviour! Fr. Eymard seems to indicate this by the expression, 'fire feeds on itself when a good hearth supplies it!' So, in our case, the hearth (or better, heart) needs to be constantly aware (consciously, as far as possible) of the depth of love Jesus has for us. As in the case of Paul, the expression, 'he loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal 2:20) must be the inspiration for all our thoughts, words and deeds. And this cannot happen unless one consciously fosters it and keeps replenishing the original inspiration for it.

When he says that the true activity of love is within, what Fr. Eymard possibly means is that the key elements of love are shown through obedience, trust, an inner adherence to all that the beloved explicitly expresses as being his choice and so on. Evidently, this obedience would have to be shown through acts done out of loving surrender - little acts of kindness and service to others because of Jesus, patience, resignation, sacrifice, all stemming out of love. Yet when these external actions are joined to a conscious and lively 'dialogue' with the Beloved within, they become much more precious and valuable.

Recalling this love and making it the springboard of all our actions must become almost second nature to us, a cultivated habit or habitual approach only then could we be sure that the fire of our love will burn bright and steady!

It would help if we took a practical example: two persons could be celebrating Eucharist, both with the same apparent external enthusiasm. One of

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***“I certainly agree with that preacher, that we must avoid tension of mind and virtue which is only sacrifice. Rather we need to live in thanksgiving which supposes a soul experiencing the joy of the Lord's gifts and blessings.”*** [To Mme Lepage, March 1867]

With the explanation given in the previous reflection, the words of Fr. Eymard to Mme Lepage seem to be clear enough. Avoiding tension of mind and virtue needs to be practiced, but at most that would amount to a sacrifice in the sense that it is something still somewhat negative and contrived. Why would one want to avoid this tension? It could also stem from a self-centred desire to be rid of the stress that this causes. While even this is something good, yet it would not be good enough as far as Fr. Eymard goes. He would like his directee to consciously focus on love which inspires all our activity, particularly thanksgiving, in this case.

Thanksgiving again is not possible unless one consciously refers the blessing back to the benefactor. In the story of the Ten Lepers (Lk. 17:12-19) we notice that only one, the Samaritan, referred his cure back to Jesus and so returned to thank him. The other nine did appreciate the gift Jesus gave them, but were more concerned about certifying their cure and being socially re-integrated into the community at large. Here we see their self-centredness, somewhat legitimate though it is! What they did, therefore, wasn't wrong, but not good enough considering the tremendous gift that Jesus had bestowed on them and the even greater gift of salvation that he

had in store for them!

Now it is worth noticing further, that Jesus here is not complaining because he felt hurt that the other nine did not return to give him thanks. After all, they did hurry to the Temple and would certainly have thanked God there! What Jesus regrets is that they did not see anything new and radically different in what he had done, something which the Samaritan would have received when Jesus said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (Lk 17:19). That something would have freed them further from the shackles of the Old Testament ritualism and brought them into personal contact with the *person* of the Redeemer sent by the Father.

Why did the nine rush off to the Temple? we could further ask. One could argue that they did this precisely because Jesus told them to do so! Yet, in that split second in which they dashed off towards the Temple lay their 'salvation' which only Jesus could give. The Samaritan, having no Temple to go to, returned to the source of his blessing. Further we see a rare kind of selflessness in the Samaritan: rather than focus on his good fortune, he remembers the Giver and returns to render thanks. Every gift is a responsibility and this man perhaps stopped to ask himself, “What does all this imply? What kind of life do I lead from now on as a healed person?” “An unreflected life is not worth living!” said the Philosopher and we see that very clearly in the behaviour of the nine as opposed to that of the Samaritan leper. What Fr. Eymard recommends in practice, then, is that we focus on God's goodness to us in every blessing we receive. Each effort must consciously link us to the Giver of all good gifts and not merely to the gifts received.



***“(Illness) is a hardship which can help you really surrender into the hands of divine Providence, especially in childlike trust in God’s great and fatherly mercy.”*** [To Mme Lepage, April 1867]

Here again we have another profound insight of Fr. Eymard based on his own experience. We know that he suffered from illhealth almost constantly and so he would know better what restrictions poor health imposes on us, especially on those who want to do something special in their lives. Presuming that all will be well, one plans out the day only to be knocked back by a migraine headache which prevents any worthwhile activity the rest of the day. This means that one is behind in one’s schedule and everything planned gets pushed back to a lesser or greater degree. We have seen that several times Fr. Eymard found himself way behind in replying to the letters his directees wrote, expecting a speedy reply from him!

This kind of a challenge to surrender which comes unannounced and perhaps at the most inappropriate and awkward time is the best kind of self-denial that one could offer to the Lord. Through it the Lord simply tells us that he is in charge and will work things out according to *his* plan and not ours! When one can surrender with childlike trust into the Father’s hands and let him be the driver in our car, without offering any suggestions and alternatives, he does accomplish a lot more in our lives than we could ever hope for! But for a self-willed person or a highly determined person, this can be crucifying a real breaking of one’s will

and plan in favour of God’s designs for us.

Now this degree of selflessness does not come easily and so one would have to acquire it by



constant repetition, paying attention particularly to the times one fails, and also by learning from one’s mistakes. In fact, if we can come to the point of genuinely rejoicing when the Lord upsets all our plans and surrender immediately with a smile on our lips and a song in our heart, we can be sure that much spiritual progress has been made. Suffering, especially physical suffering, can be a great asset in such times, because naturally speaking it tends to focus our attention on our own pain and discomfort. Hence, the additional advantage of learning how to carry on working as best one can, without worrying both about the discomfort and the loss of one’s original plan.

Since the Lord loves each one of us immensely, we can be sure that he will provide us with ample opportunities to grow in this virtue by sending us illness at the right time. We need to pray that we will be alert enough to make the most of the opportunities he presents, especially to grow in our love of him. There is another blessing that accrues from such situations when others see us facing our illness with joy rather than with anger or resentment, they too will be forced to ask how this is possible. On reflection, they could come to recognize the love of God and his goodness in their lives and improve in their way of responding to all that he asks of them. Thus, not only do we grow, but we also become witnesses before others drawing them also into the circle of God’s infinite love!

***“The cross is heavy and long but remember that it comes to you from Heaven, and that the heart of Jesus gave it to you as to the Servant of his Passion! Don't look too much at the cross, but rather, look at the hand which sends it, then your heart will make it blossom.”*** [To Mme Camille Chanuet, April 1867]

Once again Fr. Eymard, in giving advice to his directee, seeks to shift her gaze from the immediate cross and suffering at hand to the Person behind it so that one can then taste the love involved in it. Looking myopically at the cross itself doesn't help, especially when it is a heavy one and has lasted for quite some time. Human nature being what it is, we easily tend to get weighed down by any difficulty that crosses our path; we like to have everything move smoothly always, even though we know that this is not possible, and we see that each day brings its own share of the cross, sometimes big, sometimes small.

It is a good practice, particularly in times of suffering to turn our gaze to Jesus who suffered a thousand times more than we could ever suffer and that too in spite of being totally innocent of all the accusations hurled against him! What really enabled him to endure his sufferings? It was purely *love* first for his Father who sent him to earth on a mission precisely because he trusted him and knew that he would never pull back no matter how difficult the course! Besides, there was also love for his brethren of all generations who without him would be lost, drowning in the ocean of self-centredness with no escape at all. Now,

Jesus was fully aware that not all human beings would appreciate his love and make the most of it. Nevertheless, if even a few did, including outstanding persons like Paul and so many other saints all down the centuries, his sufferings would be well worth the effort!



The greater the love a person has, the greater meaning one is able to see in a given situation, the easier it becomes to accept all the setbacks and pain involved in it. Viktor Frankl proved this convincingly as he endured the tortures of the Concentration Camp together with so many others whom he was able to convert to his insight about meaning that makes suffering endurable. Rather, Frankl went further when he stated that it is 'something significant yet to be done in the future' that gives a person the strength to undergo any amount of suffering. So, only when the Christian sees that s/he achieves something worthwhile through his/her suffering, as was so clear to Jesus himself, that s/he will be strong enough to accept his/her crosses.

This is the same as seeing the cross coming from the loving hand of the Father, for the Father is the source and origin of everything in this world, and he it is who has arranged everything, looking into the smallest details, to work out for the good of all his creatures. Hence, nothing coming from God's hands can ever lead to harm or waste! “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). The practice of looking at God's hand as the source of our suffering enables us to bring out the best in ourselves and others as well in the most trying moments.

***“Tempers are so high that the slightest thing may cause an explosion. You must simply finish the whole business and leave, and when you leave, pray for all those men and women who have caused us suffering, even excuse them following the example of our Lord.”*** [To Mme Benoit Richard, May 1867]

In this piece of advice, Fr. Eymard demonstrates that he practices what he preaches. Having advised several of his directees to see God's loving hand in the sufferings they are called to endure, he himself does the same in this great big cross that came upon the fledgling society. In one of the foundations of the Sister Servants which actually began very well, everything seemed to go wrong after some time. Even the Bishop of the diocese turned against the foundress and it all ended up in a very messy business with frayed nerves on all sides. Realizing that the situation had become very emotional and tense, Fr. Eymard very wisely saw that the best option left to them was to terminate the foundation in that place and leave as quickly as possible. However, this was more easily said than done and so he requested Ms Guillot to leave the place but first come to terms with the difficult situation.

We notice that Fr. Eymard never ever sought to blame anyone for this difficult emotional impasse but rather saw in it God's design that they should not have a community in that diocese. There were mountains of hurt feelings on all sides, but he suggests that those most deeply affected should rather pray for all involved the way Jesus himself prayed for

his executioners. After all, it is true that each person was right from the angle of vision that s/he had chosen to adopt. And in that sense, each was justified in his/her expressions of anger at the seeming injustice perpetrated by the others. The atmosphere was emotionally charged with the result that it was difficult to get anyone to really listen to the other and see alternative explanations for what had happened.



Placing the entire situation in the hands of the Lord seemed the only sensible course and so that is what they eventually did and gradually things settled down. To initiate a fruitful dialogue in such circumstances needs people with a particular vision; they need to have the strong determination to seek for a win-win solution so that all parties benefit from the resolution of the impasse. But this is possible only if and when each party is emotionally strong within, is sufficiently detached to let go even what might legitimately be one's own and is committed to deep and lasting peace as the ultimate good. For what does it profit anyone to have won the argument but lose one's inner peace in the bargain? Once we have tasted true interior peace and tranquility, we would not want to exchange it for anything else in the world!

We recall here the parable Jesus gave about the man who had a bumper harvest one season. He tore down his barns and built more extensive ones and when all his grain had been stored carefully, he felt he could relax and enjoy it for the rest of his years. But unfortunately, that same night he was called up to the 'pearly gates' and had to give an account of his life with his vast wealth now left behind to be enjoyed by others!

***“Look not on the cross with its thorns, nor on those who crucify and insult, but (look) on Heaven which wills it so, and on Jesus who desires a place of peace.”*** [To Mme Benoit Richard, May 1867]

This directee was one of the people embroiled in the 'mess' referred to in the earlier reflection and it is not surprising that to her also, Fr. Eymard offers further suggestions focus one's attention on the Lord and not on the particular cross or its sharp thorns! It is amazing how easily a pain can 'disappear' when one's attention is focused elsewhere. Don't we use this approach when a little child is physically hurt and begins to cry? We point out to a colourful butterfly or a moving plane in the sky and pronto, the child stops crying.

However, it is worth noting that Fr. Eymard is not merely suggesting that we distract ourselves from the pain involved so that we forget about it for a while. Rather, he suggests that we shift our attention with regard to the source or origin from a human person who we think is acting unreasonably, to the loving Father who has a beautiful plan in place for the benefit of everyone! Further, he recommends that we see in the cross offered us a special gift from the Lord who seeks a place to dwell peacefully within our lives. For often it is when we are in pain that we are more alert to the presence of Jesus in us. Also when we realize that we are privileged to suffer with Christ in this situation, the cross becomes almost a welcome gift.

Whatever be the considerations we use, we find that suffering is a reality we have to somehow come to terms with, one

way or another. Yet, it is more profitable to use reflections that are the truth or even as close to it as can be. One would not want to have to face suffering



based on a half truth and end up one day realizing that we have been deceiving ourselves with sops instead of making the most of the situation.

All through human history, mankind has been searching for a viable explanation for the presence of suffering in our lives, because it is an ever-present reality in all human lives. Perhaps the best explanation we have so far is to say that suffering is acceptable because it is God's will but then we could still ask, 'Why does God wish that his children suffer? Why does he allow it in our earthly lives, promising us an eternity of peace and happiness?

When Job asks these questions of God, God doesn't really answer them directly. It looks almost as if God is helpless before the reality of human suffering. In one sense that would be true too, for suffering does not originate from God but from the wrong use of free will with which God endowed all human beings. Nevertheless, God does assure us that irrespective of where suffering comes from, it is a time that he, the eternal God, shares most intimately with his suffering creatures! Now we would perhaps appreciate the pathos and irony in the Gethsemane scene where God's own Son sought the company of human beings inviting them to 'watch one hour with me!' (Mt. 26:38). Also, suffering is a time when other human beings spontaneously come to our rescue with great generosity perhaps recalling their own days when they were challenged to suffer alone!

***“It is good to die in the service of Jesus Eucharistic! May our death be the death of a good servant!”*** [To Ms. Marguerite Guillot, May 1867]

Like suffering, death is another reality that we have to contend with and find a plausible explanation for. And understandably so because death is universally accepted as the ultimate result of sin! Way back in Old Testament times, Moses had posed the same question and offered an answer to his people: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Deut 30:15-20).

Death would be most beneficial if it overtook us when we are wholeheartedly engaged in the service of the Lord,

particularly in Eucharistic adoration. However it would be equally beautiful if it occurred when we are engaged in doing God's will as that is the only one



thing that gives value to any of our actions! Luke offers this suggestion to his community, 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves' (Lk 12:35-38).

Yet we must never forget that a person dies as s/he lives. So, if we make it a point to live every moment of our lives in God's presence faithfully doing his will, then we need have no fear about when death will overtake us, or what will be our fate after death! If our greatest and most consistent desire has been to live in the presence of God, in close communion with him, then we can be sure that God will ensure that we will continue this approach even in the after-life. Last minute conversions either way are possible, but not likely. Yet one thing is sure that we are tremendously precious in the eyes of the Lord and he will make every effort all through our lives to bring us back. The moment we show the slightest inclination to return to our God, he grabs the opportunity and meets us more than half way!

***“What hurts me is to think that our Lord will lose a throne of adoration. I can't resign myself to this Eucharistic loss for his service.”*** [To Ms. Marguerite Guillot, May 1867]

Fr. Eymard was so totally committed to the task entrusted to him that it meant more to him than life itself. He passionately desired that as many as possible should be brought into the Eucharistic presence to experience first hand the love of Jesus for themselves. Then, the rest could be left to Jesus to complete. He seemed to believe that if a person departed from the Society he had established then automatically s/he would give up Eucharistic adoration. That of course, need not be true, though it must be admitted that it is more difficult for lay faithful in general, to find the time and the opportunities to spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

In our own day we have seen hundreds of Eucharistic Chapels mushroom in diocese after diocese with a decent number of people spending time regularly in prayer. Granted that this prayer might not always seem to be as fruitful as we would wish it to be, judging from the external effects, yet the Master is vigilant and will touch each person at the most opportune moment. Also, his approach to winning the person over completely is marvelous. Like the sower of the seed, he goes on sowing even when previous efforts proved almost totally ineffective. Yet, his infinite love for each person makes him believe that there is a patch of good soil in every person's life and that some day the seed of his word will fall in that good patch and then the

yield could be 30% or 60% or even 100%.

Today too, nevertheless, we need to bring many more people into the circle of the love of



Jesus as he remains in our midst. Even though most Chapels in our parishes remain occupied with adorers throughout the day, yet the percentage of parishioners that do frequent the Chapel is barely 2%. It is precisely when people are in need that they should be contacted and brought to the Lord who waits for them to shower his blessings on them. Having got more people to come, the next stage would be to enable them to pray more effectively. They have to be brought to understand that the core of all true Christian prayer is our personal surrender of our lives to do God's will. Our prayer must be like that of Jesus at Gethsemane, 'Not my will, but yours be done, Lord!' This is what most Christians would find difficult and need a lot of encouragement to remain primarily on this level.

Once doing God's will becomes habitual in the life of a person, the next step would be to lead the person to allow his/her prayer to flower out into action in favour of the needy neighbour. The selfless attitude that prevails during prayer must pervade the rest of one's life for a Christian is one who lives not for him/herself but for others! Once a person understands this s/he would discover a hundred different ways of doing this throughout the day. And the biggest blessing the person receives is, of course, the deep peace and joy of the Lord within. The Lord is never outdone in generosity!

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***“What is happening is a grace, the situation was wrong. It is from God's mercy, we must adore and bless it. As for the rest, the good Master is with us. You must keep praying and be calm forgive sincerely... no retaliations; we must glorify the good Master worthily on the calvary where he has placed us.”***

[To Ms Philomene Couchies, May 1867]

This piece of advice is given to another directee of Fr. Eymard and is possibly linked with the great crisis that arose in one of their foundations. While the situation did lead to a lot of suffering on all sides, Fr. Eymard insists on seeing it in a more positive light, as a grace gifted them by the Lord. And in fact, that is what it was! Every adversity enables us to rise above our own pettiness, to face the situation together with Jesus and bless God and people rather than mourn and groan over the unpleasantness involved.

Yet, this approach is more easily said than done because in such crises, we generally tend to look on ourselves negatively or react in self-defense. We tend to blame the other, and seek some kind of redress, just perhaps to feel within ourselves that it was not we who were to blame after all! However, proving oneself right or wrong is beside the point, in most cases. What is more important is that we remain calm enough to discover what has been our contribution to the situation and seek to correct that, to learn from our mistakes. This approach enables us to grow in humility (which is the truth of the situation), in kindness and

appreciation of others, not viewing them too harshly or negatively. Above all it offers us the chance to forgive as God forgives.



It is worth recalling that when God forgives, the sin which could be numbered as 1 (or whatever number) returns to 0 because God's forgiveness simply eradicates it altogether from our lives. Not even the scar of the fault remains, or to use God's expression in the Bible, 'Behold I cast your sins behind my back!' (Is 38:17). When we forgive, that is the ideal that is placed before us, not in the sense that we are expected to rise to that level on our own, but we are asked to share God's own forgiveness so lavishly given to us with our brethren: 'forgive us as we forgive those indebted to us' (Lk 11:2-4).

It is only when we can generously allow the Lord to take us to this high level that glory is given to God. For anyone witnessing the event will have to admit that it was not through human power alone that this depth of forgiveness was meted out it was purely God's power at work in our lives! Ours was only the effort not to place any obstacle in its path. Difficult as this may seem, yet in actual practice, it is the best way to handle such a tense situation because seeking to apportion blame and responsibility really takes us nowhere. Admitting our own share in the situation diffuses the negativity and allows God's grace to heal us from within! Keeping close to the Lord from whose loving hands this crisis has originated in the first place, is the key then to a successful and Christian resolution of every problem!

***“We must then pray and do penance. I say penance because we surely all have something to blame ourselves.”*** [To Ms. Marguerite Guillot, May 1867]

If at all blame is to be ascribed in the kind of situation envisaged by this piece of advice (see previous reflection), it must be to oneself, even if we were not the ones who really sparked it all off! Love is the one thing in this world that does no harm to another. So, if one acts genuinely and purely out of love, one's approach will be to inflict as little pain as possible on the other, ready even to carry the greater burden or share oneself. The penance Fr. Eymard speaks of here is not meant primarily as punishment for sin, but rather as an inner readiness to pay the price of reconciliation and healing. Rather than impose this on someone else, the generous and loving person is prepared to bear it oneself.

Another positive outcome of this approach is that should something similar occur in the future, the one who has lovingly done the penance and prayed over the previous occasion will be all the more alert to prevent any misunderstanding. Thus, relationships will improve on all fronts creating a more favourable and loving atmosphere for everyone to live in peace. Besides, generally people attack one another only when they themselves feel attacked. Once they are convinced that the other is not out to destroy or hurt them, they generally tend to see the situation in a different light, able perhaps even to see the brighter or lighter side of the scene!

This approach would be a concrete application of what Jesus himself tells us,

'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before



the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny' (Mt 5:23-26). We notice here that it is the 'brother' who has something against us and yet we are the ones who are asked to take the initiative to resolve the difference of opinion else even our offering would not be acceptable to the Lord!

Our Rule of Life has an inspiring paragraph that has some bearing on this kind of a situation where it says: 'A religious community is called to renew itself continually through its trials and weaknesses, in the light of the Word of God and in a climate of listening to one another... Forgiveness transforms circumstances of sin into occasions of grace. Each one shall approach the sacrament of reconciliation frequently, and the community shall celebrate, from time to time, a penitential liturgy. In this way the community allows each one room to develop in a sharing of faith, friendship and life (RoL 9). A truly challenging approach, indeed!

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***“What happened is for the good of the Work. At present all we can see is the trial and the cross; later we will see the mercy and the grace.”*** [To Mme Benoit Richard, May 1867]

Continuing in the same strain, Fr. Eymard persists here in focusing more on the positive outcome of his approach of correcting oneself first. Believing that in his love the Father will not send us anything except what is for our good, he sees this crisis, painful as it was for everyone concerned, as a blessing rather than as a problem. Realist that he was, he nevertheless was aware that what was uppermost in the minds of all at that present moment, was the pain and confusion. Yet, this was not the whole truth there was also the other side which at the moment was not visible. It is faith that enables one to see things as they really are and prompts one to act accordingly.

The Jews were particularly adept in this faith attitude having learnt it from their Exodus experience. In this great event of their national history, they saw that when God decides to bless someone, no one nor anything on earth could succeed in blocking it totally. People might postpone its outcome, impeding it for a while, but in the end the Lord's plan will be fulfilled. Thus Pharaoh had opposed God's command to let his people go; he refused permission time and time again, but in the end he had to let them go when the first born of all the living perished at the hand of the Lord. From then on, the Jews always remembered that adversities were not the last word in God's message to them. Rather, it is his

love and care for every single one of them.

There was besides the Covenant experience backing up the Exodus experience wherein they marveled at the fact that in spite of being a small insignificant nation, yet God chose to make Covenant with them only for a start. He would be their God, while they would be his people! Having entered into this close relationship with his people, God would never permit them to suffer for long. He would come to their help, for he is their 'goel', their blood relative whose bounden duty it is to rush to the rescue of a suffering relative! For the Christian besides these two, there is also the Christ-experience in which we see that 'God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all' (Rom 8:32). How much more then would not God grant us, after giving us Jesus, his greatest gift?! Thus, focusing on the positive even when all we can see is the negative is no wishful thinking, but a profound exercise of love and faith.



The more we train ourselves to focus on the positive in such situations, the easier it becomes when the next crisis arises. We gradually develop this new vision which literally 'sees' God's presence and love in all the untoward incidents that form part of our lives. As Ps 32 puts it, 'The faithful and the faithless both suffer the uncertainties and insecurities of this life, but the child of God can depend always on the love of his Father. It is for this reason that there is light even in the midst of darkness, incomprehensible joy in the midst of sorrow and we can find a measure of happiness and well-being regardless of the circumstances that surround us!'

***“I'm afraid we may still have to settle in the courts. Is it a punishment or a trial? I think it is both ... May God be praised and glorified for everything. [To Ms Marguerite Guillot, June 1867]***

The episode has not ended there are still lessons that can be learnt from it. And Fr. Eymard is keen on pursuing it till the end. Taking the question of whether this financial mess was a punishment or a trial, he concedes that there is something of both in it. It is a punishment perhaps because they did not investigate the matter sufficiently, or that they took the goodness of people at face value, or maybe themselves failed to keep investing into the emotional bank account of people by themselves doing the good that they could there could be numerous areas in which they could have done better or differently.

But besides this angle, there is also the angle which says that every problem is an opportunity to learn, grow and be different and new. The trial pushes us to the limits and so often it is this 'do or die' aspect that makes us creative and inventive. Necessity is the mother of invention, it is said. Yet, to benefit from a crisis in this positive manner, we need to believe first of all that God is in charge of everything and never allows anything to happen that is not (at least eventually) for our good. The blessing is hidden somewhere in the mountain of foul-smelling rubbish. If we have the patience to wade through it and discover it, we would stand to gain. Further, as we ourselves engage in this positive activity, we can also involve others, thus offering

them too a chance to learn some of the important lessons of life. Thus we also provide for the future, so that throughout the world there will be some



people who will keep this spirit of adventure alive in our midst.

However, in all situations a very difficult but important lesson to learn is to bless God and people no matter how trying the circumstances are. To bless another means to visualize the good that is really there in his/her life, even if at the moment it does not appear. This calls for a robust belief system based on the Word of God and on one's own personal experience. Yet, it would help to remember that in life we generally find what we are looking for. Once we place ourselves in line with God's positive 'intention' for the Universe, we begin to discover resources that we would never even dream existed so close within our reach! Then, once we begin to utilize these resources we find that we get more and more they just keep pouring in and even the most vexing situation turns out to be a blessing.

Of course, all this needs to be experienced to be really believed in and adopted as a real life option. However, the greatest example we have is the dying of Jesus on the Cross. It was his inner unswerving attitude of faith and love that turned it around and made the shame and ignominy of the Cross into a stepping stone for the glorious resurrection. And he shares this experience with his beloved over and over again.

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***“There is no doubt that we would have liked him to live after his conversion so as to edify and glorify God; but divine Mercy was more powerful than the doubtful or uncertain merits to be acquired. It is better to go to heaven than to risk losing everything.”*** [To Ms Stephanie Gourd, June 1867]

There is nothing like a dramatic conversion to inspire others to try and work out the same in their own lives. Besides, it also shows forth the power of God's love that now shines in the life of the newly returned 'prodigal son.' It is this Fr. Eymard refers to in this little excerpt of his writings. Yet knowing what human nature is like, there is also the possibility and perhaps risk that the person might have a relapse, in which case all would be lost. However, while the possibility is real, we must not forget that the Lord will not easily let go of his precious possession obtained after so much struggle. Each sinner that returns to the Father's love is not only a triumph of God's grace, but also something that gladdens the heart of the Saviour and makes him feel that all the sufferings he accepted so lovingly and with such great hope, were really worthwhile.

The loneliness and dereliction that Jesus suffered as he hung on the Cross must have been extreme and the only consolation he would have derived would have been that his sufferings would be helpful to some sinner to enable him to return some day! So while the conversion itself gives great glory to God, the perseverance too contributes immensely to God's glory. No one who has really

tasted the personal love of the Father and of Jesus for him would easily return to the darkness of sin. However, in the matter of perseverance, the community too has a role to play. What earthly use would there be for the sinner to have returned to the Lord, if the community continues to treat him as an outcast, despising him, refusing to forgive and accept him, constantly reminding him of his sinful past. This very rejection would perhaps drive him back into his erstwhile life of sin.



Luke brings out the point very powerfully in his story of the sinner woman who comes in while Jesus was dining in the house of Simon the Pharisee. She proceeded to wash the feet of Jesus with her tears and anoint them with the perfume while wiping them with her hair! Simon the Pharisee and the others at table looked askance at her as she expressed her love and gratitude to Jesus. Yet Jesus stood his ground: she might have been a woman of bad reputation in the city, but she had resolutely made her way back to him, and he was not going to lose her all that easily. He took up for her before all the guests declaring that she had been forgiven much because she had loved much and that her faith had brought her salvation (Lk. 7:36-50).

A situation like the one mentioned here enables us to appreciate better the tremendous gift that Jesus obtained for us by his personal suffering and death on the Cross. Every conversion must include a personal discovery of Jesus as Saviour and an appreciation of the great gift that Jesus bestows on us when he welcomes us back into the Father's home where he had gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us (Jn. 14:2).

***“...You have all permissions related to the vow of poverty... It is better to be broad. On that point consider yourself as the head of the house who is obliged to do whatever seems suitable, and in case of doubt, lean toward freedom.”*** [To Mme Josephine Gour, June 1867]

Here Fr. Eymard gives practical advice to his directee on a matter of procedure. To start with the person had sought and obtained permissions concerning poverty and so was within the framework of doing God's will. Yet, there would be no point in being narrow-minded or niggardly, possibly out of fear. The whole point of making the vows in religious life is that the genuine and wholehearted practice of them should render the person concerned free and joyous in serving the Lord. If the practice of vows makes the person more fearful or scrupulous, that would end up defeating the very purpose of the vows. Thus the goal of the vow of poverty is not that we be restricted in the use of material goods but that we become free enough to use what is needed for the spread of God's kingdom without placing our reliance entirely on earthly things. It is the kingdom that comes first and that matters most!

Celibacy similarly does not forbid the religious from loving others, but rather encourages the person to love everyone without discrimination as Jesus would have loved them. It makes the heart more expansive and free in sharing God's gift of love with everyone whom the Lord places in the path of one's life, without seeking any exclusivity or particular return of love for oneself. It stems from a heart that is full of love and not from a heart hungering for

love. It is meant for the emotionally strong and stable person and not for the unstable one or the person with a very low self-esteem.



Obedience which is the main vow aims at the root of all our problems, viz. the Self and calls for a generous placing of all our faculties in the hands of the Lord, to be at his disposal whenever he should choose to use them. All the vows are aimed at making the person more fully Christ-like, joyous in serving the Lord in his brethren and at peace in his/her total surrender in to God's hands for the sake of the kingdom. If there is any stretching to be done, it should be in the direction of leniency rather than of strictness. Once a person has tasted the sweetness of the Lord, s/he will determine for him/herself the extent of strictness that s/he would be comfortable with and it is better to begin with that. Later, adjustments could be made according to the growth of the person. Because persons differ in the measure of generosity they bring to a given task, it is always advisable to stay with what seems suitable for the present, allowing for changes as one goes along. After all, love cannot be forced, and if it is in any way coerced, it will have lost its value! It would then be like salt that has lost its taste, fit only to be trampled under foot (Mt. 5:13).

In such matters one could have a stricter standard for oneself while being somewhat mild and lenient with others, especially those just beginning their spiritual journey. It is always better in the long run to appeal to the generosity and good sense of the subject than to impose a harsh discipline on another, lest it break the person and create a dislike for matters spiritual!

***“I am praying for the visit you will have from the Bishop... Give yourself over to Episcopal authority... You need the Bishop more than me. You must put yourself into his hands; that is the wise and prudent way. Ask him clearly to be your Superior... The Bishop would be pleased about that, because a father always loves his smallest children.”*** [To Ms Marguerite Guillot, July 1867]

Once again, we see the practical wisdom of Fr. Eymard at work in seeking to get round an impasse regarding authority. Looking always for what was the best for the directee and her problem in the long run, Fr. Eymard suggests that it would be more practical to submit herself and her community to the direction of the local Bishop. In any case, in the eyes of the Church, he is the one who is directly responsible for the spiritual welfare of all religious in his diocese. Besides, placing the convent under the Bishop would encourage him to take a more lively interest in their affairs, especially their difficulties which at that point of time were on the increase.

Realizing that it is always better to work with one who is on one's side, Fr. Eymard recommends that they choose what would please the Bishop as the head of the diocese. Further, he himself was caught up with so many other problems, that he was finding it difficult to handle all his assignments in a fruitful manner. Herein we see also his humility in accepting his own limitations and genuinely seeking the good of the sister

congregation. In fact, as one grows older, it is difficult to let go control over a multiplicity of projects. One has to be very clear-sighted and



spiritually and emotionally strong to resist the temptation to gauge one's worth in terms of the number of things one handles. Great inner strength is also needed to be able to live with what is not the very best, but to keep working steadily towards improving matters. If one were to seek perfection from the very start, the project might shine as outstanding but the cost in terms of human 'wear and tear' would be enormous, much too high a price to pay for any project!

There is another point worth noting here. Since Sr. Marguerite was put in charge of the women's branch of the Blessed Sacrament group, she would also need to be trained to handle things on her own, rather than refer every single issue to Fr. Eymard, burdened as he was with a multiplicity of assignments. One would have to learn from one's mistakes, provided of course, the decisions are not all that weighty and such that would seriously affect the lives of others.

As things turned out, Fr. Eymard did maintain a close collaborative stance with regard to the Sister Servants, visiting most of their communities often for talks and mini-retreats as also for full-fledged retreats when needed. Yet in administrative matters, he was able to keep a desirable distance while being always at their service whenever needed. While being caring, he wasn't in any way possessive of them as is seen in the advice given in this little excerpt.

***“Whatever it may be, we must always submit everything to our spiritual Director; that is God's law for souls.”*** [Mme Josephine Gourd, July 1867]

One of the most difficult situations in any sphere of life is to have a thoroughly self-willed person to whom a task has been delegated! Where Self reigns one can expect chaos and confusion, especially at the beginning of a difficult project like establishing a new congregation. But where a humble and submissive person is in charge, a lot can be done by way of sharing one's vision and approach. However, submission to a Spiritual Director is a must for anyone wishing to navigate the difficult terrain of the spiritual journey. For one thing, God's ways are not our ways and so, on the spiritual trek one would often need guidance and counsel. It is so easy to mistake the demands of Self for the voice of the Spirit!

Great spiritual giants like St. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales and others have actually chalked out the path one usually traverses on the spiritual adventure back to the Father. However, together with a study of the writings of experts such as these, one would also need actual personal experience in the spiritual sphere before being able to guide others. Besides, God has naturally gifted some persons not only with knowledge and wisdom but also with practical common sense, so that they are naturally reliable guides to those serious about their spiritual growth.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, in this matter of a spiritual partnership in journeying towards God,

the burden will always lie with the directee. Unless s/he is prepared to follow the directions given, even the most experienced director will be able to achieve nothing substantial. In this matter, it is exactly the same as when visiting a physician. If the patient is not prepared to follow the directions of the physician, even the best doctor will not be able to restore the person to health. If the patient feels s/he knows better than the doctor, s/he will end up doing what s/he thinks best and while this approach may be helpful at times, it cannot be guaranteed to succeed always.



So, the ideal qualities in a directee would be: readiness to submit and obey the spiritual director at all times, being energetic and resourceful in carrying out the prescriptions recommended. Further, in the matter of submission, it is helpful to stress that one needs to be candid and transparent in sharing the state of one's spiritual progress. At times, there is the temptation to want to appear to the Director in a better light and so the directee highlights only what s/he thinks would create such a favourable impression. After all, the Director can only guide according to the information that the directee gives him. If important symptoms and signs are either omitted or over-emphasized that could lead to a wrong diagnosis and hence a wrong prescription too!

Spiritual direction works best when the directee him/herself seeks it freely and is keen on making real progress in the spiritual life. Where it is enforced, as happens in our day in seminaries and houses of formation, the results can be disastrous or downright damaging!

***“Here is my prescription: A head free of all worries, entirely given to the Will of God at every moment.”*** [To Mme Josephine Gourd, August 1867]

Once again we see Fr. Eymard at his best in guiding his directees. Continuing on from the previous piece of advice, he now suggests that in order to make real progress, the directee must be free of all preoccupation, especially with regard to progress. If one is obsessed about the amount of progress being made and is constantly checking to see how far one has grown or not since the last meeting with the director, it is obvious that not much advancement will be recorded!

In the Gospels, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a seed that is sown in the field. Presuming that the soil has been sufficiently prepared, ploughed, watered and manured, once the seed is sown one has to leave it to grow at its own pace and according to its own inner dynamism. The two important guiding principles needed at this stage are: obedience to God's will and a serious effort to eliminate the Self! It is to be noticed that both these require that we allow someone else to lead and guide us. We have to recognize that the results are not of our own making, but come from elsewhere. Where the self seeks to shine, disastrous results can be expected. But where the directee can trust God's love to lead and guide him/her and surrenders freely and wholeheartedly, great progress could be expected.

After all, God wants the very best for us and will provide us with everything that we need in order to grow. His love will not allow him to deprive us of

anything that would be good for us, or for our growth. Yet, in everything that he has done, God has implanted a certain law within the very being of his



creatures, a law that needs to be respected and followed if the best results are desired. Thus, in the case of the seed, should one pluck it up every three or four days just to satisfy one's curiosity to see how far it has grown in that period of time, that plant will not last long! Thus, all the worry and anxiety, or even curiosity and enthusiasm about its growth should be left in the hands of the Creator. For all that we can do is to plant the seed and provide it with water sunshine and the like it is the Lord who gives the actual growth.

Our efforts are best directed towards an enthusiastic obedience at every step, especially in times when the going is rough or we don't understand the procedures taken by the Master. That is when our love and trust in him must come to the fore, allowing him a free hand in all that he knows is necessary. Our faith in his love and concern for us should make us want to give of our best no matter what the cost. Several others around us might suggest other lines of approach, but we would be safest when we rely only on the Lord. It is our faith and love that will be our best guides in this period of darkness.

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***“A heart belonging totally to God, to adore, love and serve him as he wills.”*** [To Mme Josephine Gourd, August 1867]

Human nature being what it is, we often find ourselves divided within ourselves, the better part of ourselves wanting one thing, while another part wanting to go in another direction altogether. At times, we believe that we are wholly given over to the Lord, yet sadly discover that this is not so. Realizing the importance of this Jesus himself recommends to prospective followers, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14:28-33).

Having worked this out to the best of our ability, we can trustfully leave our lives into God's hands telling him that we sincerely want to give ourselves over to him totally, to adore, love and serve him as he pleases. In spite of all this, we might find ourselves from time to time wavering between God's will and our own. While not being afraid of such a

situation, we could simply reiterate our desire to belong to God totally and move on to doing what seems to be his will to the best of our ability. It



would be true to say that perhaps till the end of our lives we will never have the complete assurance that we are doing God's will; yet that is not of much consequence. What we need to watch out for is any conscious or deliberate refusal to accept God's will. As long as we are not conscious of any such deliberate violation of God's expressed will, we could continue giving of our best.

If at all we do move away from his will, God in his great love for us would indicate that fairly clearly, either through the Spirit dwelling in our hearts, or perhaps through a friend or a wiser, more experienced person who seeks our good, or through some reading we have done. He will not allow us to go too far astray he will pursue us like the Hound of Heaven, or the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the one sheep that has strayed. Nor will he rest until he has succeeded in bringing us back to the fold! In short, our preoccupation should be to give of our best in every given situation, without worrying too much about our unconscious or hidden agendas. God's love for us will keep prompting us to do our best, and provided we are careful enough to listen to his still gentle voice and are ready to follow him no matter what! We would do well to take each item as it presents itself and give unstintingly even if it hurts, never failing in generosity and enthusiasm! “Do what you do, do well!” should then be our watchword in every situation and we won't go far too wrong!

**“A childlike will.”** [To Mme Josephine Gourd, August 1867]

We continue with the list of recommendations that Fr. Eymard worked out for his directee. After specifying the qualities of the heart that he would like to see her possess, he moves on to the will, which is the next important faculty a person has. Perhaps several adjectives could have been used to describe the ideal kind of will a person should have. Fr. Eymard settles for 'childlike' the closest to which would be 'docile'. The opposite of docile would be 'stubborn', the kind that insists on always having its own way. We certainly know several little children who have this kind of stubborn will, who will throw a tantrum if what they want is not given them and that too immediately. Yet, in general children are rather docile and easily won over.

One of the reasons for this docility would be the fact that children cannot think for themselves and decide what is really good for them. They do not know sufficiently in order to decide rationally. On the other hand, they trust their elders implicitly even to the point of a total surrender. Yet, for the person following God, the reason for docility would not be insufficient knowledge but rather a robust love of the Father which trusts him implicitly and in everything. Even though the human person may not know enough, yet God certainly does; he is the all-knowing God and besides he wants the very best for his beloved children in every situation. So, it is our faith in God that enables us to be like clay in the hands of a potter.

Besides the fact that faith helps the will to make a total submission in loving

obedience, other faculties too come to our rescue. When a person discerns God's love in operation for the first time, s/he cannot but be enthralled by the



finesse of his love the Father looks into every detail and works things out in a way that is beyond even our wildest dreams. No human person would be able to provide for us in this manner and so this is another reason why we would want to follow God almost blindly, once we taste his love!

Memory too adds its own little bit in that we are often reminded of how God loved us and came to our rescue in the past. As the paraphrase of Ps. 62 has it: “Like a thirsty child reaching for a drink, I grasp for You, O God. And I have found you. I have sensed Your holy presence in the worship service; and in the hour of prayer I have felt You to be near. I realize now that Your love for me is far better than life itself! My heart is full of joy and contentment. My mouth is filled with praises for You. Even the night hours are no longer lonely as I contemplate Your tender concern for me... Now that I have found you I shall be happy and secure forever...”

To have such a will wishing it alone will not equip us with it; we would need to cultivate docility by using all the helps that the other faculties provide. While God's love is certainly way above any other kind of love, yet we know from experience that our memories are very short-lived and other factors tend to sway our decisions very easily. Once our hearts are set on God as the centre, things become a lot easier!

***“Relationship with our neighbour, limited by propriety and charity simple and Christian, tender and kind towards those who suffer”*** [To Mme Josephine Gourd, August 1867]

Having reviewed all the inner faculties that can aid a person to go close to God, Fr. Eymard now moves to extrinsic factors. Without a doubt, in an enterprise as difficult as following God with fidelity and love, a support group is a tremendous help. It stands to reason that those comprising this group would need to be like-minded, excelling particularly in their passionate love of God and the great desire to respond to him wholeheartedly. The more keen each person in the group is to love God above all else, the greater the inspiration in the group. In fact, if they do share their experiences regularly and candidly, there is perhaps no better incentive to keep moving steadily towards the goal of being totally consumed by God's love.

Besides the support group, Fr. Eymard suggests that the directee pay special attention to relationships with the others around. The qualifications he suggests are that these relationships be limited by propriety which means that they are not extended to any and everyone we happen to meet. One would need to choose one's friends carefully, for not everyone around us is a good influence on our behaviour, especially when we wish to achieve a specific goal! While it is true that 'birds of a feather flock together' it is equally true that one rotten apple is enough to affect the entire basket! Again the basis of these relationships is ideally 'love' a genuine desire to share God's

blessings with those whom he places within the circle of our influence. The foundation is not merely a natural liking, or proximity or frequent contact, but a



genuine desire and effort to transcend oneself for the benefit of the other.

Further he suggests that the relationship be simple and not affected or artificial in any way. Some expressions of affection indicate that the centre of attention is oneself and if not checked in time, this tendency can lead to many unpleasant traits. In no way can a person forget that the greatest enemy in the spiritual life is the Self which seeks to make itself the centre of one's universe. Christian love is always selfless love, shown not so much in words, but primarily in action. The lover always seeks the good of the beloved and is ready for any sacrifice that will benefit the other. The varied qualities of Christian love have been immortalized by Paul in 1 Cor 13 are: 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor 13:4-7).

While this kind of love is shown towards all, there is a special consideration for those who suffer, knowing that they already are at a disadvantage. Associating with the suffering the lover takes on the added quality of sympathy and empathy, that beautiful capacity to suffer with and enter into the hardships of others around. When a person radiates this kind of love, those present instinctively sense that God is with us!

***“Prayer as God lets it be; its basis, the gift of self and thanksgiving.”*** [To Mme Josephine Gour, August 1867]

Another element that Fr. Eymard recommends strongly to the same directee in the very same letter is prayer but with the qualification 'as God lets it be!' A person so strongly attracted to the spiritual life would certainly want to make the maximum progress within as short a time span as possible. But even in spiritual matters what ultimately matters is God's will and good pleasure. If he chooses to permit our prayer to dry up and keep us in that dry patch for a fairly long time, who are we to complain? He knows the exact reason he has given us this difficulty and the specific benefits that will accrue to us.

Now this attitude of total surrender into God's hands needs to extend to every possible aspect and area of our lives only then could we say that we are approaching near his divine heart! What cannot God do with a person who is so generously surrendered into his hands? Such a person would approximate the attitudes of Mary and like her would contribute immensely to the spread of God's kingdom. Like and with Mary the person would be able to sing God's praises, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the

thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever' (Lk 1:46-55).



Mary's is basically a hymn of thanksgiving, 'for the Almighty has done great things for me!' Genuine thanksgiving endears the receiver more to the person of the giver than to the gift for s/he understands that the gift is nothing but an expression or extension of the giver him/herself! The gift becomes only the instrument to unite both giver and receiver, not just temporarily but in the very being of the gift. And so, when the gift is oneself, commonly called the Gift of Self, one can imagine how close and intimate can be the union that results. That is why genuine thanksgiving cannot remain only on the plane of words it has to move down to the level of action, of living. For the same reason it cannot be merely a one time gesture quickly forgotten but serves to cement the relationship and further it through an on-going exchange of gifts.

Mary recognized this when she added, 'from henceforth, **all** generations shall call me blessed!' Mary is for all time God's highly favoured one and no one will be able to replace her. As the beloved daughter of the Father, mother of the Son and spouse of the Holy Spirit she reigns supreme!

***“Holy Communion, bread of strength and life; - go to receive it as a poor, weak, grateful and loving person.”*** [To Mme Josephine Gour, August 1867]

Yet one more recommendation to the same directee! What seems to appear in the order of the recommendations is that Fr. Eymard moves closer and closer to the most cherished goal of total union with the Father. What is available in this kind of communion is evident in the symbolism of the Eucharist 'Take and eat, this is My body (my very self) which is given for you.' United under the veil of the broken bread and shared Cup, the person moves inexorably towards the final consummation of this closeness in the eternal embrace of the eschatological banquet of heaven. Here we will no longer see as in a mirror, in dim figures and images, but we would perceive 'face to face' the reality of God's presence itself.

However, Fr. Eymard is careful to highlight the central quality needed to maintain such a precious gift a humble acceptance of our nothingness. To use Mary's expression again, 'he looked on the lowliness of his handmaid...' The danger with us ordinary mortals is that no sooner the good Lord draws us to himself, we imagine ourselves as having attained something great, and that too by our own efforts, at least by our faithful cooperation. The truth however remains that whatever we might receive, it is always sheer and unmerited gift!

When the recipient seems to forget this important truth, the Lord has to remind him/her by sending a stumbling

block. If the person is not alert and careful, a fall follows which brings him/her to his/her knees forcing him/her to turn wholly to the Lord. While



the Lord in his goodness will repeatedly alert the person in this manner, the sad part is that so much precious time is lost in going back and forth. Yet, when the recipient is serious about making progress and makes a sincere effort to make up for lost time, the Lord reciprocates, as it were, and showers even greater graces thus compensating for any loss, out of his own goodness and love! The lost sheep once found, is carried on the shoulders and brought back home lovingly. At least for a while this lost and found sheep gets some special attention, all of which serves to root and ground him in the Father's love!

The more the person can learn from these faults and failings, the closer would s/he come to the Lord. It is one's sincerity and genuineness in the relationship that counts in the long run. We see this in the dealings of Jesus with Peter. "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers'" (Lk 22:28-32).

While here on earth, all we need do is celebrate Eucharist with great attention and love the rest will follow step by step, coming from God's great love for us, his beloved!

***“Examen on your duties.”*** [To  
Mme Josephine Gourd, August  
1867]

This is the last of the recommendations in this list that Fr. Eymard sends to this particular directee. Coming last, it suggests that from time to time an evaluation be made not just of one's responses, but primarily of all the blessings and graces one has received. If attention is given to the progress made, it should be so that we may praise and thank the Lord and not just glory in what we have achieved! The latter approach would take us backwards and would not be much of a help. Although he doesn't mention it explicitly, we can be sure that Fr. Eymard would want his directees to examine how much love they put into all their actions, particularly during the time of prayer.

Love is the one element that we cannot afford to overlook. The first aspect we review is whether we were open and receptive to all the love that the Father poured into our lives through his Spirit. This love comes to us in a variety of avenues, not all of them pleasant ones. That is where we have to train ourselves to pick out the love amidst all the other bits and pieces of other painful material. And this is something we need to attend to each day lest we lose the skill of focusing on essentials.

Another aspect of love to be reviewed is whether we have been generous enough in sharing this love with all who crossed the path of our life; if special mention is to be made, then it must be of persons who have hurt us in some way, or people whose ways seem to get on our nerves! If we have been eager

and successful in sharing our love with such persons that is something we need to be grateful for. St. Paul puts it forcefully when he says to the Romans, 'Bless



those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Rom 12:14-21).

Occasionally we could also take the hymn of love of St. Paul and review whether we have been attentive to its various facets in our dealings with others. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7). When we excel in loving our neighbour and even more our 'enemies' then we can be sure that we are progressing along the way of the Lord!

***“What desolation for good priests to see their brothers in the priesthood fall on the field of battle, and lie there without help for their wounds. Let us admit it is their own fault; but, really, because a man is a priest is there to be no charity, no mercy for him? (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)***

As a result of the French Revolution and in its aftermath, the group in the Church that was most badly hit was priests. Not only did several leave the priesthood, but even those that remained faithful were largely disillusioned and apathetic. True, several did heroically try to be faithful to their priestly commitments yet the general atmosphere was thoroughly Jansenistic which left very little enthusiasm for the Christian way of life. It is against this background that Fr. Eymard laments the tragic situation of those priests who had fallen away. They got very little sympathy from the Christian people they served earlier, and much less from the authorities in the Church.

Moved with the very compassion of Christ for his brother priests, Fr. Eymard was keen on doing something for their uplift and betterment. He found a friend and ally in Fr. Arthur Dhe who had similar dreams of working for fallen priests. While admitting that the situation of fallen priests was largely of their own making, he does not seek to apportion blame; rather he asks what could be done to help such priests, even if only a few benefited from their efforts. After all, these priests had gone through their seminary training, meager and superficial though it was at that time compared to what is available now. There must have been some love for God and the kingdom as they

went through their training and early years of their priesthood. Could this not be rekindled in some way?

Fr. Eymard would have been asking the question: 'If Jesus, the Good Shepherd, were here in person, what would he do? How would he address this dreadful situation?' Basing himself on the attitude of Jesus as shown in the Gospels he was convinced that a more positive approach would prove effective rather than neglect or abandonment. The heart of Christ would bleed for every priest that fell by the wayside. Having himself been a diocesan priest for five years, Fr. Eymard had first hand knowledge of the hardships of their situation: isolation, loneliness, lack of support and incentive to deepen their spiritual lives, rejection or a lack of cooperation by their flock and the like. In that kind of situation it was so easy to give up and walk the broad road that leads to perdition. Fr. Eymard worked out several possibilities in his mind and even though eventually nothing much came out of all this, yet his heart was in the right place and he points out the way for us to be more inventive and creative in this matter today!

Several SSS Provinces today have initiatives that aim at helping priests in need. In general any priest in trouble is always welcome at any of our SSS communities. Yet, the important point would be to foster the kind of thinking that Fr. Eymard had and seek to do something concrete about priests. 2009-2010 was proclaimed as the Year for Priests, during which several initiatives had been taken up to support the spiritual growth and holiness of priests all over the world. Surely, SSS too will have made a significant contribution in this regard not only in this year, but continuing always in the spirit of our founder who had a special love for all priests.



***“It is said that these fallen priests are without resources and have no sincere repentance. Alas! Is it not because they are rejected and despised on a par with thieves and murderers... He who is without mercy for his brothers, does he not deserve to be treated in the same way?”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

While it is difficult to say when a person has true repentance, we need to remember also that God has his own time (kairos) in which he touches the heart of a person inviting him back to the Father's house where there are many mansions. It seems that the basic element that keeps blocking the way back home is our Ego which shows itself in terms of pride, resentment, resistance to any help offered and the like. However, no matter how 'rebellious' a priest (or for that matter any human being) has been, we realize that most of this negativity stems from hurt feelings. Without wasting time analyzing who exactly is to blame for this situation, we remember that emotional hurts can only be healed by an emotional approach to recovery. Intellectual arguments and analysis will not help much in such situations.

The point then is to develop and foster the attitude that Jesus had towards all sinners. Jesus saw them rather as 'lost sheep' needing help rather than admonition or isolation. It is sad to see that oftentimes in such situations, Canon Law and other regulations are invoked to address the situation. Granted that there is the question of public scandal to be also kept in mind, nevertheless, what the follower of Jesus should stand out for is

his compassion and forgiveness. Many a time, it is simply the effort and goodwill to offer the fallen priest time to listen to his version of his story that makes all the difference.



St. Augustine's practice seems to be inspiring in such instances. When Augustine saw a 'public sinner' walk down the road, he would remind himself, 'There, but for the grace of God, goes Augustine!' Through such a statement he acknowledged that the seeds of similar sinful behaviour are present in every human person. If many of us have not ended up the same way, it is because God's love and grace have kept us safe.

Gratitude at least for this protective grace of the Lord should inspire us to reach out to those who are in need. What would help in these situations is the realization that we too are sinners and so we approach these needy priests as our brothers and companions, not as superior persons, or great saints handing out a dole. That would be the highpoint of arrogance on our part. But when we can offer them genuine hospitality and kindness, things will begin to happen. How long the entire process of returning will take is anyone's guess, but when we persevere in our efforts, the Lord will do his part as well. "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Lk 15:7). All that the Lord asks of us is that we lend him our hands and feet, in fact our entire person so that he can work through us and invite such persons in need of help, in his own inimitable manner. The more selfless we are, the better will be our cooperation with the Lord in this magnanimous effort!

***“Ah! if there were only a few who were brought back and reinstated, would that not be a huge victory over Satan, and a stroke of grace to delight heaven and earth?... Our Lord surely has more mercy for his priests than for the faithful.”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

Realist that he was, Fr. Eymard was sure that neither he alone nor even the group of priests he wanted to gather would be able to rescue and rehabilitate all the fallen priests in the whole world, leave alone in Paris. Yet, he would have been happy to see at least a few of them brought back and what is more, an awareness and a new way of regarding them created among the Church, hierarchy and lay faithful as well. That objective would be far more valuable than the actual number of priests rescued. What is more, if his group could have been formed and a permanent group set up to look into the needs of fallen priests, that would have been a great gift to the Church for all times.

As a matter of fact, he was aware of such a group operating in Rome and he even encourages Fr. Dhe to visit them and learn their approach and how they manage things. The problem was a massive one and prevalent in all the great cities of the world and to find priests who are zealous and Christ-like enough to undertake this work would be a miracle in itself! For evidently, priests who would work for the rehabilitation of other priests would themselves have to lead exemplary lives; they would need to be close to the heart of Christ, men of deep prayer and of great self-sacrifice. Seeing it in terms of

a battle against Satan and his craftiness in ensnaring priests who are leaders of God's people, Fr. Eymard would have reason to rejoice if even a few of



these unfortunate priests could be salvaged.

Besides, he would certainly have subscribed to the dictum, that 'seeing is believing!' If at least a few priests could have been restored to the Church, several others would be inspired to follow their example, just as many would have been encouraged to leave seeing the example of others around them defecting and abandoning their calling as priests. The final statement that Jesus would have more mercy for priests than for lay people might not be all that true. That Jesus would have more concern for them is certainly admissible, but God's mercy is the same and is extended to all with equal generosity. But in a sense, it is more difficult for priests to choose to return because they are more aware of what they have turned their backs on. Further, on returning they would have to once again administer to the very lay faithful they had abandoned, and who in the face of similar difficulties managed to remain faithful to the Lord.

All this would make it very difficult a task to bring them back effectively. Yet nothing is impossible to God and where there are willing and energetic collaborators, much could be expected. Unfortunately, Fr. Eymard's dream was never realized, though personally he did his best for the priests he knew, going out of his way to help them financially, spiritually and otherwise.

***“See what was done in Rome for these poor priests: a respectable house, paternal ministration, a private retreat in some way offered to them. There, they are rehabilitated progressively. There the Holy Father resides through the heart of his fatherly charity.”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

What encouraged Fr. Eymard to pursue his dream was the scenes he himself had witnessed in Rome where efforts were being made to rehabilitate fallen priests. And that too in a discreet and prudent manner without embarrassing the victims, or endangering their future ministry! Further, recognizing that this was a lengthy process, the steps in this Shelter were spaced out, allowing each one enough space and time to make a definitive comeback. What is more, this enterprise had the blessing of the Holy Father himself who took a keen interest in all that was being done for priests there.

Fr. Eymard's remedy of course was unique: he would work to enable the priests to taste the love of God, particularly as enshrined in the Eucharist. Once they were put in contact with the very source of their healing, they would definitely find their way back to their Master. The problem of fallen priests was not peculiar to the post French Revolution times. It is present in every age. Even in our own day, the Church has had to face enormous financial and other difficulties in trying to address the scandals that were unearthed, some of them going way back into the past. What then would be the lasting solution to this

problem?

Perhaps over the years in the matter of the training and education of priests there has been an undue emphasis on numbers as opposed to quality. Again, a very high premium is placed inevitably on academic excellence rather than on a deep personal encounter with the Risen Lord... resulting in a high incidence of 'career priests and religious.' They come into the priesthood looking at it more as a profession or career and feeling that all it takes to be effective priests is to be good organizers and administrators! However, when we recall the reason why Jesus himself called men to himself, we have Mark reminding us that, 'he went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve' (Mk 3:13-16).

Jesus kept those he chose close to him as the inner circle of his close friends and he shared all his blessings with them. Only when they were sufficiently clear about what the Kingdom of God was all about he sent them out to continue his work. He sent them out on a trial mission first and later when they returned, he corrected some of their basic misconceptions so that when they finally went out after his death-resurrection, they would do things correctly right from the very start. After all, he was not going to be physically with them any more and so they would need to know how to operate on their own, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, yet keeping in close touch with himself.



***“One goes in, remains, goes out; and the world does not know who lives there. This is because honour is part of charity, as charity is of God's love.”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

This statement describes the anonymity prevailing in the Home for priests established in Rome. Shielding their wounded egos and allowing them sufficient time and space to recover is very important in this process of rehabilitating priests. We can never afford to forget that the priests themselves would be the first to condemn their own failings and look upon themselves as 'good for nothing.' Breaking out of this cycle of self-condemnation and acquiring a healthy self-image was the first major task to be accomplished in this rehabilitation home. Secondly it would be very important to provide them with the freedom they needed. They obviously could not be treated as school children with a strict discipline and timetable.

Ultimately, it is only when each one of them freely chose to change would there be lasting improvement in their condition. Hence they were offered complete anonymity and freedom to determine for themselves what they would do and how much they would enter into the programme of the house. Coercion of any kind would only be counter-productive. They were left free even to walk away from the home and return if and when they felt safe and comfortable enough. What these priests would value most is the fact that in spite of their failings they were still respected and accepted as persons in their own

right.

One of the errors that those seeking to help these fallen priests would need to avoid is that of posing or acting as superior to them.



The ideal approach would be that of St. Augustine who was always aware of his past failings and against that background appreciated what the Lord had done for him in welcoming him back. Fr. Henri Nouwen has a powerful and useful expression that covers this aspect well: he calls the priest 'a wounded healer!' As long as one remembers that all of us are sinners undeserving of God's love and mercy and yet favoured so marvelously by his love, we would be able to offer our fallen priests some hope and comfort. This was one of Fr. Eymard's plus points that he had lived as a diocesan priest for five years and so knew their difficulties from the inside, as it were. In his present approach to them he would not have that superior attitude that can be so offensive in such situations.

It would help to recall here Jesus' own approach when dealing with the woman caught in adultery. "When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'" (Jn 8:7-11).

***“Go and see for yourself that fine and holy work which is still lacking in France. We still give bread to these poor ones, but we leave them in despair or degradation. Then they feel the pinch, and sell themselves to iniquity or attach themselves to some Herodias.”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

Fr. Eymard here encourages Fr. Dhe to visit Rome and get first-hand experience and knowledge of the kind of work done there for fallen priests. In this regard Rome was ahead of France where no such home had been established so far. At most in France, these priests were helped with handouts of food and drink, but nothing much was being done to restore them to wholeness and to their former ministry. After all, it is far easier to dole out bread (praiseworthy though this be) than to become involved in the history and problems of these unfortunate priests. Some of them, of course, would need professional help to enable them to function again as priests, but in all cases, a fair amount of time and money would also be needed if any worthwhile help were to be given.

Unless the help given to these unfortunate priests extended well beyond food and shelter, their miserable condition would continue. What they found happening in their midst so far in France was that the desperate situation of these priests drove them back into their misery getting them more deeply entrenched in it than before. They remind us so forcefully of the situation of the Prodigal Son consenting ultimately to stoop to the level of being ready even to feed pigs and eat

what they ate and even then he did not get enough to eat. But priests in this desperate condition are more likely to say like the dishonest steward, “What will I do, now that my master is



taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes” (Lk 16:3-4). They would then accept the first helping hand extended to them, no matter whose it is; they would want to retain their honour and dignity above all else. And that is a big challenge to those seeking to help them.

Given this situation kind hearted priests and others seeking to help would need to go all out to do their utmost, being as inventive as possible. What could be done, at least on a one-to-one basis, is to shelter individual priests known to them while preparations are made for long-term help on a wider basis. To be effective, it would have to come from the topmost level, either that of the Bishop of the diocese or perhaps even higher from a regional or national platform. For one thing, the financial expense of such a venture would be quite high which itself requires an establishment of a broader based effort. Besides, the professional help needed would require such an establishment to be near or within a large city where such professionals are easily available.

Further, the personnel to staff such a place would have to be, at least in part, professional or paid employees, making it a formidable and demanding project. Yet, nothing would be too great for the compassionate heart of the Father who waits to welcome his prodigal sons back home and to celebrate their return.

***“You know that two or three years ago there were as many as 900 on the streets of Paris. I know some of these poor human beings who ask no more than a charitable refuge. They are terrified by the [idea of the] Trappists. This is because that remedy is usually too strong for their weakness...and brings dishonour even in the Christian world.”*** (To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866)

The figures mentioned here are really staggering what a colossal loss to the Church of France and how abandoned must the Christians have felt to see so many of their shepherds and leaders forsaking them, not perhaps because of malice or ill-will but simply because they could not handle their own difficulties in a reasonable manner. Perhaps aware of their faults and wrong choices, they would come back to the very Church they had abandoned and all they would ask is a word of kindness and maybe some food and shelter. One would need to have experienced some of these deprivations in order to understand what goes on in the mind of such priests. In the best of circumstances, all that filled their minds would be despair regarding the hope of a bright future. What they would need most and look for most eagerly would be a little understanding and acceptance.

However, on the part of those who remained in the Church there lurks a fear of associating with such priests either because they themselves might be contaminated and drawn away, or again because of the scandal this would cause among the lay faithful. Yet perhaps what is needed most is the compassion and love of Jesus himself for all his brothers and sisters, but especially for those who have strayed. For the Good

Shepherd who literally laid down his life for his sheep, wouldn't each one of these priests have cost him dearly?

Fr. Eymard claims to have known some of these



priests, possibly companions of his in the seminary where they all studied for the priesthood. To have known them personally would make the situation all the more painful, for one cannot help thinking how high some of these priests could have risen in the Church, had they been more steadfast and fortunate. Some no doubt would have had difficulties in the area of faith and doctrine, while others might have grappled with moral problems, and still others would have got entangled in financial liabilities and would find it difficult to get out of them. With so many of them congregated in a relatively small area, it would be difficult for them to hide their identity, or even to find adequate employment and shelter.

Proportionately the numbers are not very different today, yet in our large cities at least it is easier for the straying priest to lose himself in the midst of a crowd and somehow eke out an existence even if far from the Church. Would the thought of God, or prayer or service to one's neighbour even cross their clouded minds once they found themselves drowning in that desperate situation? Or would they be engrossed only in their own problems and miseries with little time to think of anything else? In responding to their silent cries, one thing is for sure that those who have remained in the Church cannot afford to take the stance of the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. It would have been bad enough if they were to adopt an attitude of indifference towards their unfortunate brothers; worse still if they actually condemned them to their pitiful state.