

“Protect your moments of silence and solitude; the soul needs them and God wants them to visit souls and converse with the heart which dwells in his love.” [To Ms. Antonia Bost, November 1865]



passion and death, the disciples did not quite understand what he meant. But they were afraid to ask him about it, lest he really tell them what it implied

It is said that the three important ingredients which make prayer possible and successful are silence, solitude and surrender. Realizing the tremendous importance of these Fr. Eymard recommends strongly that his directee safeguard the moments of silence and solitude that are available. These might not easily come by in the life of busy people, but precisely because the rest of the day is taken up in hectic activity, they become all the more precious.

and then they would be obliged to accept and follow it (Mk. 9:30-34). Often, we too do the same!

That solitude too is an important element can be gauged from the fact that when desirous of teaching Israel his Chosen People who he really is, God led them out into the desert, where they would be cut off from all possible distractions. He even put them through deprivations regarding commodities essential for survival like food and water so that in these moments of severe want, their minds would still remain riveted on him alone. But Sacred History shows us how even these extreme measures taken by God failed to produce the desired result. And so we can well imagine what measures we would need to take to prevent our mundane needs from side-tracking us especially during the time of prayer.

Silence gives us the inner freedom to listen to what God says, and since God does not usually shout out his message but rather speaks through a still gentle breeze as in the case of Elijah at the mouth of the cave (1 Kgs 19:9-15), we need to be totally attentive to catch what is being said. Besides, as he himself reminds us, 'My [God's] thoughts are not like your thoughts; as far as the east is from the west,' he tells us, 'so far are my thoughts from your thoughts' (Is. 55:8-12). And so, all the more do we need to be fully attentive to catch not merely the sounds or words, but the real meaning of what God says to us. And this interior silence must include a genuine detachment from the Self. For, the moment God says something that goes counter to the Self or is detrimental to the Self it tends to get agitated and obfuscated and resists with all its might.

Silence and solitude provide us with the right inner atmosphere in which we can listen to what God really says to us, in his great love for us, even if it be something difficult and demanding. We would still need the will to implement all that we have heard God say to us and that is quite another matter!

St. Mark tells us how when for the second time Jesus prophesied about his

“God usually leaves sadness in a suffering soul so that this sadness may lead it to God. Then, when the soul has found a moment's relief with a friend of God, God replaces that sadness with a greater thirst for him so that he may always be the only center of the soul.” [To Mme Lepage, November 1865]

The sadness that Fr. Eymard speaks of here is another means which the Good Lord often uses in order to keep his favourite disciples close to him. Strangely enough, in these times of trial we instinctively seek to find comfort and solace in the company of our friends and others who seek to console us. If these whose comfort we seek are friends of God and know something about God's ways, they would encourage us to accept all adversities with patience and gladness. Our loving surrender is what will enable us to follow God's lead to the next step in which the sadness will be transformed into a great hunger and thirst for a deeper experience of God.

Scripture describes God as 'a jealous God' not in the sense that God fears that he would lose something if we shifted our allegiance to others. Rather, his love for us is so intense that he wants to give us the full benefit of it without losing even the least amount. He wants to be the centre of our lives so that all his blessings can flood our lives. Once this begins to happen to us, God knows that we will automatically become his witnesses and ambassadors of love and make his love spread to others. For, like St. John we will then say, 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we

have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:1-4), and such a witness is always compelling because it stems from personal experience.



However, acquiring the ability to stay with the sadness and deprivation of the things that please us presumes a fair degree of death to self. And this mastery again is appropriated through repeated conscious choices made in favour of God, even when it costs the Self a lot. It grows as a result of a daily acceptance of all that God sends to us, for the more open we are to accept God's will lovingly and graciously, the more we trust him, the more his plans for our benefit begin to work in our favour.

When speaking about the call we receive to be his followers, Jesus says that we need to sit down first and count the cost of discipleship, just as a king going to war with a thousand soldiers would first seriously consider whether he can win against a force of twenty thousand. If he cannot then he seeks for measures to sue for peace. Similarly a person seeking to build a house would need to first ensure that he has enough funds to completely the plan that he has in mind; else he would either trim down his plan or increase his funds (Mt. 14:28-33). Thus, in our personal following of Christ seeking a deeper and more personal relationship with him, we need to be clear from the start whether or not we are ready to pay the full price of our discipleship. What helps us remain faithful is the fidelity of God who never goes back on his word.

“True spiritual activity is the one that takes place in God, or near God, because the soul unites itself through charity to its end and immediate grace. That is why nothing is more active than the true love of God, because it is the action of the flame in its hearth.” [To Mme Mathilde Giraud-Jordan, 1865]

Fr. Eymard's observations in this quotation seem pretty obvious for where else can true spiritual activity take place if not in or near God? However, obvious or not, there are many of us who expect spiritual activity to take place, e.g. while praying even when one is engrossed with the Self. Most persons believe that as long as the mind is active during the time of prayer, everything is going well! However, a little reflection shows us that this is not necessarily true. When we engage in thinking, for example, our minds are occupied with that particular thought singly or in a pattern. Yet, our thought is not God, even though it may be 'about God.'

Prayer is intimate union with God and not with things about God. Now what we say about thoughts could equally be applied to all human activity like memories, fantasies, decisions, emotions and the like. So, as long as we occupy ourselves with these human activities, we are busy with ourselves mainly even when these activities have some link with God. And isn't that what we do most of the time when engaged in prayer? While our thinking and the resultant resolutions and other outcomes are definitely linked with God, they are not God and so our

prayer has been in effect a union with ourselves only, and not with God!

That is why all true prayer necessarily involves a more or less conscious dropping of all self-directed activity like thinking, feeling, willing and so on. Now, if we consciously drop all such human activity, what then are we supposed to do while in prayer? Our activity in prayer consists only in dropping whatever hinders communion with God so that in the end we have only the naked 'me' present to God who then can act undisturbed on the real 'me' and transform me into himself. It is like going to a doctor with a bandaged wound, seeking for a better, faster remedy. If we insist that the doctor apply the new medicine on top of the bandage hoping that it will seep through and heal the wound that just does not happen in real life!

Similarly, we need to be divested of all wrappings with which we shield the Self and want it to continue undisturbed in our lives before we can hope to experience the power of God in our lives. Thus, true spiritual transformational activity can take place only in or near God when our true Self encounters the all-powerful God. When we are filled with the love of God and have experienced this love personally, then we are no longer afraid to be our true selves before God allowing him to penetrate and transform us as he wills and desires. That is when the flame of our lives will burn unhindered in its true hearth which is God himself.



“These sacrifices make love flower in the midst of the desert, guided by the Eucharistic column. What you tell me about your deep peace of soul shows me that love is at work. Very good.” [To Mme Clotilde Tholin-Bost, January 1866]

After having read Fr. Eymard's writings with his repeated insistence on love being the center of our Christian lives, it would be natural to want to have love as the guiding principle of our entire lives. But then, how would we know that we are on the right track? The acid test of the presence of love in our activity is that we are prepared for any sacrifice that would benefit the beloved, no matter what the cost. A further refinement of this principle would be that when there is question of such a sacrifice, we don't even stop to consider how costly or painful it would be – we are ready and willing to do even the impossible. Thus our sacrifices can make love to bloom even in the most arid desert!

Another fairly reliable indicator is the inner peace and calm that one experiences when genuine love is at work. This is true especially when the one who reaches out in love is inwardly secure in what s/he does. In other words, s/he loves not in order to get something from the beloved, or to impress the beloved and make him/her indebted to oneself, or even to elicit gratitude or acceptance. When one is confident that one is genuinely accepted for what one is, then the giving is pretty much selfless and so the result of the giving is a deep peace and sense of fulfillment.

Where this kind of selfless giving is absent, a certain inner restlessness always lingers, and no matter how many signs or tokens of gratitude and acceptance are given by the beloved, these never seem to be enough – one always looks for more. This kind of inner restlessness is like a bottomless bucket – the more one puts into the bucket with a leaky bottom, the more the water runs out and more needs to be poured in! Generally this happens when the person giving love or doing loving acts works on his/her own steam. But where God is given a free hand and is the one initiating the action and accompanying it all along the way, there is a sense of great calm and peace, even when the loving action doesn't meet with a favourable response from the receiver! Or again, when the action doesn't turn out the way it was intended to be, the same deep peace and calm prevail in the doer! After all, 'there's many a slip 'twixt cup and the lip' and so the outcome of our actions is not always in our hands.



When therefore, a person enjoys this deep inner peace, one can be sure that his/her life and actions are on the right track and all is going well, even though a lot more would need to be done. All s/he needs to do now is to ensure that Self does not creep in at some later stage and vitiate the entire work from start to finish. One continues with one's gaze on the Lord and with ears attuned to his voice, taking giant strides along the road to spiritual perfection! The occasional mishaps should not be allowed to stop the marvelous progress being made.

“I am consoled to see the good spirit and joyful generosity of our religious here. Each one lends a hand to everything.” [To Fr. Leroyer, February 1866]

One of the great preoccupations of Fr. Eymard in the initial years of the life of the Congregation was to find suitable persons to join as Blessed Sacrament religious. In the first few years, many came and with a variety of motivations and aspirations. The problem then for the formators at that stage of the Congregation's history was to sift and weed out those who did not join with a selfless motive. One of the easiest ways to do this was to observe the generosity with which the candidates gave themselves to the work undertaken by the Society, particularly the 'service of adoration'. The system followed at that time was that every religious got an hour of adoration every eight hours. The reason for this was that at that early stage, almost every Blessed Sacrament community had a 24-hour adoration service.

If the person who had joined did not really have a vocation to this kind of 'work', soon boredom would creep in manifesting itself either in the way one engaged in the adoration or in the criticism one made of persons, the set-up or any other thing connected with it. However, in many, if not most cases what Fr. Eymard found and was pleased about was that the candidates did have a tremendously generous spirit which manifested itself in the generous way they put their hands to whatever was needed to be done, without even a complaint escaping from their lips. The adoration was done with great alacrity and love even

by those who had the nocturnal hours and that too for nights on end without a break. It is worth recalling that in those early days of the Society's life, adorers were not permitted



to sit while making adoration. They had to kneel without resting more than the palms up to the wrists on the prie-dieu. When really tired they were permitted at most to stand at the prie-dieu itself, but never sit, much less lounge in an irreverent manner before the Blessed Sacrament.

Thus one understands why a spirit of generosity and alacrity was taken to be a sign of a good vocation in those early days. Nowadays while paying sufficient attention to one's posture, we are asked to ensure that there is real prayer going on, and not just a kind of day-dreaming or talking to oneself. The quality of the prayer one makes is considered as far more important than the outer gestures or circumstances governing prayer. During one's initial training a fair amount on emphasis is given to right postures and gestures, but the real effect of prayer is understood as being independent of these. In fact, one is encouraged to become adept in these practices like deep breathing and sitting with the back straight, which are done generally as one enters into prayer, so that not much time is wasted on needless distractions and the bodily posture helps the prayer rather than hinders it.

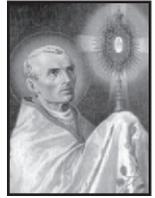
However, the early SSS showed a great generosity in almost every aspect of their lives in community and that is what made it ever more encouraging, especially against the background of so many leaving and the other difficulties they experienced.

“Be at peace about the future of your little Society; it will be great and holy. However, each one of your daughters will make you die twice for her vocation and for her perseverance. Divine life is purchased by death.” [To Ms Marguerite Guillot, February 1866]

Ms. Guillot was Fr. Eymard's close associate in the founding of the women's branch of the Blessed Sacrament religious. A deeply spiritual person no doubt, but certainly not of the same caliber as Fr. Eymard himself, she often referred to him seeking for guidance in difficult moments. Like the men's branch, the Sisters too went through innumerable problems at the start and faced several tense moments, not knowing what the future of the Congregation would be. It is against this background that Fr. Eymard assures her that if this is God's work at all it would certainly survive all the vicissitudes of life. Undoubtedly in giving this advice to her, Fr. Eymard would have been thinking of his own situation which was very similar, and buttressing his own faith which at times also grew pretty feeble when it was battered on all sides!

While Fr. Eymard was confident of the survival, nay flourishing of both branches of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation, he was perceptive enough to realize that there was a price to be paid for this success and that was a 'death to self' particularly for those closely associated with the two fledgling societies. As regards himself, he made every effort to allow Jesus a free hand in

his little work; in fact, the more adversities he faced, the greater was his assurance that God was at work through him. He meticulously sought to



discern God's will and cost what it may, he adhered to it might and main. He gladly offered all the suffering this entailed as being the price for the success of God's work. Having seen how effectively this approach works, he warmly recommends it to Ms Guillot as well.

In his advice, there is another spiritual principle discernible, which again Fr. Eymard would have learnt from his own experience. Generally the cross comes into our lives not from outsiders but from our very own. Just as it was his own Jewish people, the Chosen ones, who put Jesus on the Cross, so in our lives too, it is our very own who will crucify us. And the best part is that all the while they do this, they think they are doing a service to God. Wasn't it in the name of God himself that the Pharisees demanded the death of Jesus claiming that he had blasphemed against God? Didn't the same happen to Stephen and then later to Paul himself and to so many others down the centuries? Thus, here too the candidates themselves would be the crucifiers of their superiors and formators especially when they insisted on quality of response in their lives!

In the Church today when there is so much emphasis on the Resurrection and the brighter side of Christ's work, Fr. Eymard's insight that it is only through death that life becomes possible, is just what is needed to redress the balance and get us back on the rails!

“Nothing for myself in my relations with others. Nothing by myself in my religious life. Nothing in myself in my prayer and thanksgiving. Don't seek your satisfaction in your service of God. Please our good Master, be happy to see him loved and served by your daughters..” [To Mother Guyot, February 1866]

Once again Fr. Eymard waxes eloquent when dealing with the paschal mystery in our lives as he advises yet another directee of his. It is amazing how easily we forget this great spiritual principle when we are caught up in the hurly-burly of daily living. It is only one who is deeply schooled in these principles who easily detects that this important principle is lacking in a person's life when s/he begins to speak about his/her spiritual difficulties.

What is noteworthy is the way Fr. Eymard specifies areas in which the principle needs to be applied. Generally a person going through difficulties looks for emotional support and reassurance of one's self-worth by entering into and focusing on such supportive relationships. Thus, we expect our good friends to rally round us especially when we are emotionally down. But if in such times we can hold on to our resolve to seek nothing for 'myself' in our relationship with others, a great part of the battle will have been won.

Another area where the Self shows its ugly head is our achievements be they material or spiritual. The tendency is to claim the credit for oneself. But when we keep reminding ourselves that there is

nothing that we can do by ourselves, like the branch that cannot produce any fruit by itself, then again much of our struggles die d o w n a l m o s t



automatically. Yet, the practice of invoking God's partnership (more than help) in everything we do is something that comes only with consciously repeated choices.

The third area Fr. Eymard chooses is prayer in which we tend to feel again that it is we, and our own initiative and actions that are most important for prayer. Yet even a little reflection will remind us that in prayer what **we** do is not as important as what we allow God to do in us. It is he who shapes and moulds us all we need to do is to be like clay in the hands of the potter. When the Spirit has free rein in our lives that is when our prayer is most productive and fruitful. And finally, Fr. Eymard rounds off his advice by insisting that in all our work we seek only the goodwill and pleasure of our heavenly Father whom we serve and no one else's... again something that is very difficult because we seem to be so dependent on human approval and affirmation!

How liberating it is when we can free ourselves of this deep-seated need to have others approve of all that we do! We find ourselves free to think for ourselves, to take risks in trying something new, to experience the thrill of having a new venture succeed! Death to self in all its manifestations is the only means of achieving spiritual success or of spreading God's kingdom, not our own! And isn't taking responsibility for one's action a real sign of deep, inner spiritual growth and maturity?!

“Yes, good daughter, God has really loved you. Your life is a fabric of grace and mercy. You must tell him, ‘My Good Master, since you loved me so much when I did not love you, now that I do love you and desire a perfect heart to love you more, how much more you love me now.’ [To Mme Eulalie Tenaillon, February 1866]

Mme Eulalie was one of the directees of Fr. Eymard and we can presume that he knew her fairly well, particularly the path that she would have followed on her spiritual journey. And even when the exact delineation of the path is not clear to the person concerned, another who stands outside the situation can see clearly the intricacies making up that spiritual path. Thus, Fr. Eymard would have discerned the 'fabric of grace and mercy' in her life. As a matter of fact, this is true of every single person whose spiritual journey begins precisely with a tremendous act of kindness and mercy from God our loving Father. It is he who draws the person to himself and also makes the candidate conscious of his blessings.

But then, usually after an initial phase of sweetness during which the Lord showers his blessings plentifully, there comes a period of dryness. This is the time when the faith of the candidate is tested, mainly to ascertain whether the person is attracted to God only because of his gifts or rather because of his goodness in himself. It is during this period that the person feels a distaste for prayer, maybe even imagines that God does not love him/her as much as before. This is when faith must come to the rescue. Fr. Eymard

proposes one good reason for the directee to hold on to God's love during such a period of dryness. And the argument is perfectly logical: if God loved us so



much when we were hardly appreciative of his love, how much more must he not love us (even if we do not feel or perceive it palpably) when we genuinely desire to love him?!? When we can hold on to God, no matter whether we feel his love and goodness or not, then we can be sure that we will take giant steps of progress in the spiritual life.

Another line of thinking that could help in such situations is: God is goodness itself, which means that his very nature is to love. So, whether we respond to him or not, whether we are good or evil, he cannot stop loving us. God's love is like the sun which shines perpetually. Even when we place ourselves outside the range of its influence, the sun continues to shine. Similarly, God loves us always. When we believe deeply in his love, we are the ones who benefit most from that act of faith. Then we would reach the stage when we believe in his love even when there are no visible signs of his love. This is what the prophet Habakkuk says so powerfully in his canticle. 'Even if the olive crop fail... and the stalls stand empty of cattle, yet I will rejoice in God my Saviour; he gives me feet like a young deer and places me on high ground...' (Hab. 3:17-20). Happy is the person who can cling to God through thick and thin s/he will not need reassurances of God's care and concern and s/he can remain calm and tranquil even in the midst of great suffering. What a powerful witness such a person is to all around!

“Let's begin first with Lent. No fasting...if you can do without meat on the three prescribed days, you would do well. But if you aren't well, you should eat meat. It's understood that you would eat meat at both meals. 'But what would my penance consist of?' In the regret of not being able to do like everyone else, in your weakened state, and finally in obedience.” [To Countess D'Andigne, February 1866]

In this piece of advice given by Fr. Eymard we see his humanness very clearly. He adapts his advice according to the situation of the directee. As the person is not in the best of health, he suggests that the fasting could be dispensed with, as obviously the fasting would further injure the person's health. The abstinence part too is mitigated to suit the person's condition. Having dealt with the externals, he then moves to the more important level which is that of the spirit. Even in our own day we see that several people have not understood the real meaning of the laws of fasting during Lent. They take it only as a bodily hardship without much link with the roots of sin within the person him/herself. Thus, a person can observe a very strict fast and abstinence all through Lent and yet make no changes in the sinful life-style which actually needs much more attention and change! Even in the Old Testament the prophets thundered against the people of Israel because their fast turned out to be only external show with no real internal change or return to God's ways.

Further, recognizing that denial of self is about the greatest penance that all

Christians need, Fr. Eymard suggests that the directee offer to the Lord her inability to do anything more or better. To surrender one's inner poverty to the Lord and



clinging to him in sheer faith is far more difficult and at the same time much more valuable than any amount of mere external bodily penances. We could see this situation of the directee finding herself helpless and useless as an example of what the poet said so beautifully: 'They also serve who stand and wait!' Apparently, these servants do nothing as they merely stand and wait, yet if they do this out of love and respect for the Master, ready to obey him when he should need their services, they continue to serve him and in a very effective manner!

This kind of service where the 'eyes of the slaves are on the hand of their master' is far better and more precious than doing a multiplicity of things out of self-love, for such servants show themselves ever ready and obedient to the Master. They do not foist themselves on him with the self-centred desire of obtaining some reward. They recognize their limitedness and the different choices the Master may need to make and so respect his need. Yet, they remain confident that they too are still precious to the Master who some day would need them and then would be most happy to have them respond with joy and alacrity. This attitude speaks of a tremendous selflessness on the part of the slave and also of a certain inner security the servant enjoys which makes of him/her a very special kind of person! S/he is a servant with a difference! And this is what the Master would like most about him/her! After all, didn't he call his disciples friends rather than servants, towards the end of his earthly life? That is what he would most appreciate from us that we can be his 'friends.'

“When Our Lord has taken hold of a man at least once through holy Communion he leaves an indelible memory and the mark of his passage: it is like a conquered kingdom, where Jesus has reigned at least a few days.” [To Countess de Fraguier, February 1866]

Even during the public ministry of Jesus we notice that when a person was somehow brought into contact with him, there immediately resulted a close bond of friendship. We see this particularly when Philip, having himself met Jesus, goes back to his village and tells his friend Nathanael about him. He even offers to introduce Nathanael to Jesus and once the contact has been made, we see that Jesus takes over. When Jesus' comments went straight to the heart of Nathanael they left an indelible memory and he returned for more, even if nothing much is mentioned in the Gospels, which perhaps indicates that it was nothing very striking or out of the ordinary!

We see the same happen to so many others, one notable instance being the people of the Samaritan village from where the woman hailed it was she who went back to the village and told everyone that she had met an extraordinary person who had told her everything about her life... the people streamed towards Jesus but after they had spent a considerable amount of time with him, they said to the woman, 'Now we believe not because of what you told us, but because we have seen for ourselves!' (Jn. 4:4-42). And the same happens in our lives too. In our apostolate of bringing people to Jesus, all we need to do is to put

them in touch with him, maybe through a brief session of prayer, or a witnessing that we do with enthusiasm. Once the person has tasted the goodness and mercy of Jesus directly, we can safely leave him in Jesus' company he will do the rest!



However, we must not imagine that this kind of a fascination for Jesus will occur every time we bring someone to him. At times, there might appear to be no visible change in the person we brought to him, yet we need not worry about it. All Jesus asks of us is to give him a fair chance and while it is true that he will never coerce the person in any way, yet we can be sure that he has his own ways of attracting God's beloved children back to the Father. He can bide his time and strike at the most appropriate moment, which generally is a moment of dire need for the person. For, experience shows us that we are most vulnerable to love when we are in need or in trouble of some kind. Seeing how generously and thoughtfully the Lord attends to our needs, we find ourselves wanting to return to him again and again and before we know what is really happening, we find ourselves captive of his marvelous love.

This love will grow much more rapidly if we then can become ambassadors of his love as we witness before others. Here again, all we will need to do is bring the prospective candidate into contact with God and leave the rest to him. And the cycle will begin all over again. Nothing is easier than being an apostle of love for Jesus! For it is in helping others come to Jesus that we ourselves draw a lot nearer to him than ever before.

“But dear Madame, there are no limits or degrees for the love of God, the gift of self, personal self-denial. We must die daily and be like the sun which always rises as if it were the first time that it is obeying God, and follows its course until its setting. Live especially in the divine Eucharist.” [To Mme Marechal, March 1866]

This statement of Fr. Eymard could possibly be understood in two different senses. One, that there is no limit to God's love of us his love is always infinite as he himself is infinite. What happens, of course, is that we are capable of receiving only in a limited manner and so what we do experience of God's love is always limited and incomplete. Yet, the lavishness of God's love always makes us want to return to the source and fountain of this great blessing.

But the statement can be understood also in the sense that there should be no limits and degrees for the return gift of love that we make to the Father. As a matter of fact, the moment we come down to the level of 'pan-scale love' which means that we are satisfied or limit ourselves to giving only as much as we have received, the love in our hearts begins to grow cold and calculative. This is true also for human love returned to another person miserliness and calculation always stifle true love and it ends up by shriveling and dying out altogether. On the other hand, the more we give and the more frequently we empty ourselves in love, the richer and deeper does our love get both for God and for our brethren around us.

The more joyful and inventive/creative we can be in expressing our love for God, especially through situations and events that cost us something, the richer will



our love become. Love always grows through self-sacrifice and dying to self. Now, while we can be inventive in choosing and working out such self-sacrifices, we must remember that the Lord himself will provide us with ample opportunities for this all through the day. All we need to do is to be alert and attentive to the call and promptly respond without allowing time for calculation and measuring. If our generosity can also be spontaneous, chances are that we will hasten the moment of deep and total union with the Lord. As is often observed, while there is freedom of choice at the start of our love relationship with the Lord, as we go along growing in spontaneity and generosity, we find that we have almost lost our freedom, as it were. We have come close enough to God to be enamoured of him as our greatest good, and while theoretically we could still say 'no' to any of God's requests of us, yet we find that we joyfully and readily 'give in' without too much of effort.

As Fr. Eymard notes so wisely, all this love activity becomes so much more easy and meaningful in the context of the Eucharist celebrated with deep realization of its power and purpose! For it is in the Eucharist that we literally 'see' how much the Lord loves us both as we listen attentively to the Word of God and also as we participate in the breaking and sharing of the bread!

“Without mortification, it is impossible to have genuinely religious men: all that sentimental piety, with feelings of joy and happiness, is like a trip in a nice coach. I don't have any more faith or confidence in it. First of all we must form men of virtue; that is, men of sacrifice. After all, our Lord established the basis of evangelical perfection: abneget semetipsum (deny yourself).” [To Fr. Michael Chanuet, March 1866]

This observation of Fr. Eymard is directed to a priest and that too, towards one who was engaged in formation. He returns to the rock foundation of the spiritual edifice which is obedience to God, a self-surrender in faith and love. This is the most difficult part of our spiritual journey as it calls for a real 'death to self.' And incidentally, this is the first condition that Jesus puts to those who express any sort of desire to follow him, 'If you wish to be my disciple, take up your cross and come follow me!' (Mt 16:24). We cannot remain as disciples of Jesus for long, if we are clear that we do not want any kind of inconvenience or difficulties in our following of him. That approach would be like taking a trip in a luxurious comfortable coach even when we know that it does not go to the destination we desire; we choose it simply because of the comforts it promises and offers! The focus in this case, would obviously be on the 'self' and that only makes us go round and round the same spot with the Self as the centre!

The word 'Religion' stems from two

Latin words which mean 'to bind together' the function of religion is to bind people to God. But when such bonding takes place, both parties have to be ready to lose something of their 'sovereignty' or independence. God through the very offer of sharing his 'all' with us shows his readiness to lose himself in our favour. The more concrete expression of this is the sending of his own beloved Son Jesus in human form, placing him totally at our disposal even to the point of allowing us to mercilessly put him to death on a cross! Now this depth of surrender on God's part can only be met with an equally total surrender on our part if there is to be a genuine bonding of the two. But where there is a calculated approach, a miserly counting of the cost and a bargaining attitude, the bond cannot be expected to be either deep or lasting!



Hence, in the formation of those called to the priesthood or religious life, the most fundamental virtue to be inculcated should be this dying to self. But here again, undertaking such a dying to oneself out of a sense of duty, or self-gain vitiates the entire project and it has no chance of really coming to life. But when it is undertaken out of love and perhaps gratitude, it can produce wonders. Whatever may be the starting point of the love relationship between God and a person (and God has several ways of initiating such a relationship a special favour or blessing, a narrow escape from death, a sudden recovery from serious sickness...) it would need to move to the level of self-giving love pretty soon, if at all it is to survive. From then on, the Lord will lead the person step by step into deeper and deeper self-dying with its corresponding experience of God's love and goodness.

“God loves me: that is a truth. In all things he only wants what is good for me, I am all his and I want him alone. My weakness is my claim, my poverty is my treasure, my imperfections are my need for his grace.” [To Countess D'Andigne, March 1866]

Here again, Fr. Eymard returns to the fundamental principle and starting point of one's spiritual life. God invites a person into such a deep personal relationship through various means. Generally he grants the person a profound experience of love, something that really fills the heart and mind of the person. Having tasted this marvelous love of the Father, the person seeks to respond maybe with a certain amount of self-centredness for a start, but would gradually feel the call to let go more and more of the self. When the period of dryness, even in prayer, sets in, which is the normal second level in this relationship, the person faces the choice of following God either for his gifts and blessings or for his own sake, because he is so good and marvelous in himself.

Most people would continue to choose God but as the relationship grows deeper, one becomes conscious of one's nothingness before God. Our human response is practically negligible or even perhaps totally miserable when compared to the magnanimous generosity of the Father. That is when the fear of losing our great treasure, God, could gradually creep in. But if it does, it is simply a sign that the Self is in charge. And in this situation all that the person needs is to be reminded of the total gratuitousness of God's love. God does not choose us because we are great or possess marvelous qualities. Rather he

chooses to love us because **he** is good and loving by nature. In fact, the more poor and weak we are, the greater is God's love of us because his specialty is precisely that he 'stoops down to look on the lowly who are on the dung heap and raises them on high, placing them in the company of princes' (1 Sam 2:8/Ps 113:7).



Yet, if we are ever going to experience this graciousness of the Lord's love, it is important that we wholeheartedly accept out nothingness and place ourselves lovingly in God's hands. This is what Mary did, considering herself as the lowly handmaid of the Lord no wonder she could say that the 'Almighty has done great things for me holy is his name!' (Lk. 1:48-49). Most of the great saints too followed this path of lowliness and discovered God's love in ever abundant measure.

But when a person exalts himself, thinking that he is capable of great things by his own power, that is when God leaves the person aside and chooses someone else less self-willed and puffed up! Jesus summed up this approach of the Father when he said: 'those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (Lk, 14:11). It is those who accept their nothingness who can say, as Fr. Eymard suggests, that 'my weakness is my claim, my poverty is my treasure, my imperfections are my need for his grace.' It is through such humble instruments that the Lord usually works his greatest miracles of grace!

“Dear Daughter, believe me, your prayers of dryness and powerlessness are more pleasing to God than the most beautiful readings and the most sublime thoughts. At least you will be in God's presence like a poor person, a cripple and a child who doesn't know how to say anything, but who loves.”
 [To Josephine Gourd, March 1866].

Dryness in prayer is a fairly common problem that a directee brings to his/her spiritual director not long after the spiritual journey has begun. The reason for this is that having experienced a fairly pleasant period of prayer at the very start of one's spiritual adventure, it is most puzzling to the person to find oneself suddenly in a spiritual desert. During this period it is not only the barrenness in prayer that is stressful but much more the nagging doubt that this difficulty could be the result of one's own neglect or sinfulness. Yet, more often than not, even the most rigid examination of conscience doesn't reveal any willful and deliberate violation of God's will. The Word of God too doesn't offer much help during this aridity and the person feels totally bereft of all help. In this state of confusion, the person naturally looks for guidance and more than that, reassurance that all is well.

As most spiritual directors would say, this period of dryness is meant to be a test of one's fidelity and a strengthening of one's faith in the goodness and love of God. And so, the directee is always encouraged to hang on in faith, particularly if a thorough soul-searching reveals no deliberate wrongdoing or attachment to

anything contrary to God's will. The greater the graces God reserves for the chosen one, the greater can be the intensity and perhaps length also of this dry period. St.



Teresa of Avila is said to have gone through several years of dryness in prayer and yet she remained faithful to every demand of the Lord, no matter how small or insignificant it appeared. It is no wonder then that she received such extraordinary graces concerning prayer in return.

The safest path for the directee to take in this difficult period is to accept one's nothingness and place it before the Lord with simplicity and trust. After all it is God himself who has created us and he knows well our innate weakness and inconstancy. Placing all our trust in him, deepening our belief that he accepts and loves us with all our limitations, continuing to be faithful to the spiritual programme as much as is possible humanly speaking this is what helps in the long run. Further, one needs also to repeat to oneself that pleasing God and doing whatever he wills is far more important than experiencing pleasant feelings in prayer. Along the same lines it is vital that one remains faithful to the time and length of prayer not giving in to the temptation to reduce the period of prayer because it seems such a waste of time. On the contrary it is helpful and advisable to actually increase the length of one's prayer by at least a few minutes each day, enduring the cross a little longer, as it were, out of love for the God we believe in. We need to keep deepening our love during his entire period, even if there isn't much 'feeling' left, remembering that love is a decision more than a feeling. And thus our decision to remain faithful to the Lord will continue to be as strong as ever.

“You must always keep before your soul the beautiful mirror of Our Lord, his virtues which are the beautiful garden of evangelical flowers, but especially the divine motives for the Incarnation, for our Redemption, for the holy Eucharist. Before such beautiful scenes, the soul finds delight, or at least keeps itself delightfully occupied in God’s sight.” [To Countess

D’Andigne, June 1866]

While being especially useful during the period of dryness in prayer, the above piece of advice is useful and should be practiced even when all is going well. For one thing, it stresses the need to keep our gaze off ourselves and our needs and rivet it on God. Besides, this practice of focusing on Jesus enables us to appreciate better how much he loves us and has done for us. This deepens and strengthens our readiness to love him wholeheartedly in return. Given the fact that in general we tend to forget what Jesus has done for us, or even to take all his manifestations of love for granted, this suggestion that we focus on the qualities of Jesus is a great and positive help in the right direction. The more engrossed we can be in the goodness and love of God, the better for us, and for the prayer we make.

Further, the qualities of Jesus are so fascinating that we can never really exhaust all of them no matter how much time we spend in contemplating them. Again God’s qualities are far above our own assets and there is always the element of surprise in noticing how

different his qualities are from ours, that it is not difficult to spend hours just marveling at his love. His sheer goodness and unbelievable love



manifested in a thousand different ways is sufficient to keep us enthralled for hours on end.

This practice in prayer will become all the easier if we train ourselves while reading the Scriptures to deliberately focus on God’s qualities first, picking them out one by one before we attend to what action the Lord might be asking from us. After all, aren’t the Scriptures like a mirror in which we find the qualities of God/Jesus reflected for us? Each incident in the life of Jesus brings out a particular quality of his, showing us how his heart longs to shower us with all his love and mercy. Unfortunately, we do not often give any time for this, rushing immediately to the applications we can make from the different insights we might have into a given passage. The result is that we do not sufficiently appreciate the marvels of God’s love and the extent to which his approach is different from ours. A clear picture of how far above God’s love is from ours would make all the difference in our response to his love. For one thing, there would be far less of the Self in our prayer because then our attention would be totally on him and his love.

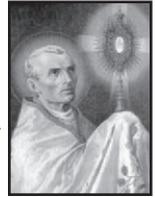
Then, even if we did focus for a while on ourselves, it would be rather to see how we could rise to that level of loving in our day to day activities.

“A state of suffering always comes from God. It is the state which he chooses for our greater good and to grant us some special grace.” [To Josephine Gourd, June 1866]

Before granting us any grace, the Lord first of all creates a great hunger for it within us. He first shows us what this precious grace is like, either by seeing it operative in someone else, or by reading about its excellence, or maybe even by tasting a little bit of it. Having got our attention by this preliminary move, as it were, God then makes us desire it earnestly. After all, God is not going to cast his pearls before swine, when he himself recommends that we, his children, should not do that. Even after we long for that marvelous grace, he will at most give us just another morsel of it, not in order to tantalize us, but to keep our desire for it growing till it becomes almost a passion and obsession in us! This also prepares us to pay the full price for it.

This would generally be some special suffering or cross which otherwise would have seemed unbearable. But now that we have a definite goal in view, and are ready to pay the price with love, we would be more ready and willing to accept it gladly. Fr. Eymard goes further when he suggests that this suffering could possibly be a 'state', a kind of long-drawn suffering. If this is what the Lord wishes for us, we accept it casting out of our minds the usual explanation in such cases, viz. that the prolonged suffering must be the result of some sin or other we have committed. The story of Job reminds us that God can choose to offer us suffering to be borne as

a proof of our fidelity to his word. Of course, when one approaches this entire question out of love, the intensity and extent of suffering does not make any real difference.



In fact, each day's allotment of suffering would be seen as a special blessing, aimed at a specific good for ourselves and for others. As Viktor Frankl has shown us through his famous theory of Logotherapy, when a person has a meaning for his life, he is able to endure any amount of suffering, even the tortures of the Concentration Camp. When this meaning is linked with the eternal good (perhaps salvation) that God wishes for someone, how much more would not the devoted Christian be ready to accept it? And wouldn't the blessing to be bestowed on the beneficiary be enough incentive for him to hang on till the end?

We know well how a mother endures immense suffering out of love for her sick child without even dreaming of complaining about the inconvenience it causes her. Similarly, the Christian who believes that God would never send him/her any suffering beyond his/her strength to endure and that when God does send us a cross, it is always a blessing in disguise, would certainly willingly accept whatever suffering the good Lord sends him/her. In fact, s/he would go even further and like the apostles in Acts 5:41, consider it a privilege to suffer for the sake of the name! It is this manner of accepting the Cross that makes one a witness of the Risen Lord, Jesus.

“May your heart ever belong to God through purity of intention, by attachment to his love, by trust in his divine mercy.” [To Josephine Gourde, June 1866]

The Bible makes it pretty clear that human beings were created by the loving God with the express intention of inviting them to share life with him in Covenant. This covenantal relationship is the deepest bond possible between two persons since each enters into Covenant with the explicit desire to give of one's all to the other. The typical biblical Covenantal phrase is: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people!” Yet, although we human beings were created for this purpose, God will not thrust his Covenant on anyone. He lovingly invites people to enter into this deep relationship with him. In the book of Exodus it is put this way: 'You have seen what I have done for you and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (how much I love you); now therefore, if you will obey, you shall be my special possession!' (Ex 19:3-5).

God first of all proves his love for us, not just giving us words to substantiate his claim but rather doing marvelous actions and that too by saving us out of the snares of death, in situations where no one else would have been able to do anything for us! Having gone out of his way to manifest his special and intense love for us, he then waits for our response. When the person accepts unconditionally, God continues to shower his abundant blessings. However, should the recipient fail to obey, what s/he does is really to shut the doors of his/her life to God who again will

not force his way or plans on anyone. He stands at the door and knocks and should anyone open the door for him, he will gladly walk in and 'dine with



him/her' (Rev. 3:20).

The burden of this magnificent alliance then lies with the human partner. That is why Fr. Eymard recommends to his directee that s/he ensure that his/her heart belongs to God totally. This is done not just with one sweep, but has to be endorsed each day and at each difficult moment when we could be tempted to pull back. Now, in spite of all the goodwill in the world, we humans would certainly falter and withdraw from time to time; but even then, all we need to do is to return to the Father with great love, trusting in his mercy. He knows that we are frail and would tend to fail every now and then, and so is not surprised when this happens, even if it is repeated again and again. All he asks for is a sincere repentance, a genuine desire to return to his unfailing love.

It is this genuineness that Fr. Eymard calls 'purity of intention' because several intentions of all shades and degrees of self-centredness are likely to be mixed up when we humans decide on any given thing. However, what is very important is that in this return of love, we keep our eyes fixed on the goodness of the Lord and not on our own infidelity and inconsistency. It is like climbing up a steep ladder of very great height. As long as we keep looking upwards, we don't experience any great difficulty. But the moment we look down we are likely to feel giddy and the fear of falling could grip us!

"I beg you not to let your peace depend on people..because it is like putting it on shifting sand."
 [To Mme Lepage, July 1866]

Peace of mind is one of the most precious gifts a person can possess. Once a person has inner peace, no one can disturb him/her with regard to any issue on earth. It is not surprising therefore, that before leaving this world, Jesus bequeathed to his followers his own peace, a peace which the world cannot give and the world cannot take away (Jn. 14:27). However, within the same context in which he bequeathed his peace to us, Jesus also warned us, 'do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in the Father and trust in me...' In other words, he reminds us that although he has given us his own divine peace yet we could end up being tremendously agitated and anxious. Thus, ultimately the key to our inner peace and happiness lies in our own hands.

That is why it is so important to check on what is the basis or foundation of our peace. If it is based on human beings, then it is bound to fail, no matter how good or sincere that person be! Human beings cannot offer us that kind of peace and so it is worth recalling that Jesus said to us '*my* peace I leave with you...' (Jn 14:27). Our peace has to be founded on the person of Jesus and on his word, if it is to be lasting and unshakable. God cannot lie, and besides he knows all things and so cannot be deceived or ignorant of disturbing factors around us. So when he offers us peace it is a fool-proof gift to be enjoyed serenely.

Yet, our human tendency is to worry about future negative possibilities which

are beyond our control altogether. Now the best part is that when God assures us of his peace, he does not mean that things won't go in directions we



have not even imagined. Most likely they will storms will arise on our journeys across the lake, others will ditch or disappoint us. But in all this Jesus reminds us, 'Do not be afraid I am with you ... I have conquered the world!' (Jn 16:26-33). So, we can expect negative things to happen in our lives, but the more negative the situation, the more we need to rejoice because only then can Jesus show how powerful and victorious he really is. This then is our victory our faith.

Each time we celebrate Eucharist and hear the Word of God, the bottom-line result of that proclamation must be a deepening of our faith which is then expressed both in the Profession of Faith and the Prayer of the faithful. But if this fails to happen during the Eucharist and in a conscious manner, then we could expect all kinds of storms in the course of the day that unfolds before us. We see this happen after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand the Apostles thought they were seeing a ghost when it was only Jesus walking on the waters (Mk. 6:51-52). The reason is that they did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God during the miracle (Eucharist) and so could not recognize him later either! When our faith is strengthened at the Eucharist then we are ready to live out what Paul says in Romans 8, 'If God is for us, who can be against us? What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?' (Rom. 8:31-39).

“Because you are innocent of it all I can understand you suffering at being accused. Unite it all to the calumniated Jesus; it is the right moment to unite yourself to him and to find your peace in submission and patience.” [To Countess D'Andigne, July 1866]

In this advice to his directee Fr. Eymard has the opportunity to apply what he has said several times in other contexts to a very concrete situation. She has been falsely accused of something she did not do and was not responsible for. Yet, human nature being what it is her mind must have been racing within putting forward all kinds of arguments to show that she is innocent of the crime attributed to her. If anyone has gone through such a situation one would realize how harrowing it is the mind races non-stop day and night, and there is never an end or a peaceful moment. Each moment a new angle is reviewed and the process goes on endlessly.

One could suggest in such a situation that the best remedy would be to go and have it out with the person concerned explaining the situation from our point of view. But again, experience shows that somehow this does not work, often because the other party is not prepared to accept responsibility; they will not just listen to whatever arguments we might bring forward, and ultimately the situation gets worse. That is why Fr. Eymard suggests that it is more effective and fruitful to place the entire situation in the hands of God, accepting it as coming from him for a higher purpose. It also helps to realize at this point that Jesus too

was unjustly accused and his explanations weren't accepted either. Having placed the situation in his hands, we then leave it to him to resolve it in his own



inimitable manner, at his own appointed time. If our faith in Jesus is strong, then we will enjoy a measure of peace because we know that he will handle the situation in the best possible manner.

However, holding on to him in faith is not easy in such circumstances, especially if the other keeps on taunting us, interpreting our silence as an admission of culpability. If this happens, it is imperative that we have a support group, no matter how small it be, who would help and support us in remaining firm in our faith approach. That generally makes a difference and enables us to tide over the difficulty.

Another helpful suggestion is to bless God, to bless the person/s accusing us unjustly in as sincere a manner as possible. When we bless others in such negative situations, what we seek to do is to focus on the positive or good in the accuser (which certainly is present and visible if we cared to look deep and long enough!). This practice somehow releases a steady flow of positive energy which not only helps the offenders but also the offended parties in a marvelous manner. While this approach doesn't seem reasonable at all, yet it has to be tried out to realize how effectively it works. Again, it is based on faith and where a person is strong enough in faith to attempt it miracles can and do happen. It is the depth of our faith that is the measure of what is possible in such circumstances.

“The silence in the countryside recollects the soul naturally, and when we know how to read in every pure creature the good which God has placed in it for human beings and for his own glory! Oh, what aspirations we can send back to God, the author of every good.” [To Mme Natalie Jordan, July 1866]

This particular recommendation of Fr. Eymard can be appreciated only when we actually experience it. But most of us today who live in big cities where Nature has been vandalized for material gain would not realize how noisy and polluted our cities are until we get out into the countryside. The first thing that would strike us on arriving there is the peace and stillness that engulfs us, precisely because such deep peace is not easily available in the city we have come from. However, while God's peace and tranquility are present all around us, we have to place ourselves in the mood to allow it to affect us, to calm us down and pervade our inmost being. For true peace is not merely something external its roots lie deep within the human person. Jesus himself warned us, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled...' (Jn. 14:1).

Having got a truly peaceful atmosphere around us, we would then need to pause and reflect on God's goodness in Nature. The more consciously we focus on God's goodness reflected in Nature, the more deeply will it affect us. If we can sit beside a rippling stream or a cascading waterfall or even the waves breaking endlessly on the seashore, we can well imagine the effect that would have on our agitated minds

and hearts. Even the apparently monotonous breaking of waves on the seashore tends to soothe our minds admirably. If we can add to this external



calm the words of an appropriate psalm or Scripture passage that would help immensely. Or even a poem by an outstanding poet for that matter would help produce the same effect. These gifted people have the ability to capture what is most essential and beautiful in Nature and what is more, they possess the skill to express it in a way that touches the heart!

In such situations, even if an explicit prayer is not uttered, yet our hearts would be singing God's praises within in the most marvelous and meaningful manner much more perhaps than when we gather together for the official Prayer of the Church each day! Such experiences fostered from time to time, enable us to get back to our daily routine with a refreshed mind and heart and find deeper meaning even in ordinary mundane activity. If we are not particularly contemplative by nature, it helps to have friends who are open to this dimension and who help us appreciate it better from time to time.

If prayer is ideally done 'in spirit and in truth' and is much more than a mere recitation of words from a book, then such sorties into the heart of Mother Nature are a must for everyone desiring deep communion with the Lord. In such situations, one learns to pray from and in the heart and not so much in the head! And most of us city folk need this remedy very urgently in our times, addicted as we are to the jet-set pace of life we have accustomed ourselves to!

“You have been Martha, a good and gracious Martha, that is fine. Now you will be Mary, a good and devout Mary at the feet of Our Lord. It is so good to be at his feet, when he speaks to our heart and opens his own to us!”
 [To Countess D'Andigne, August 1866]

All down the centuries there seems to have been a rivalry between the roles of the two Bethany sisters, Martha and Mary, and the question always posed seems to be, 'which of the two roles is the better one, which is the one more pleasing to the Lord?' The answer cannot obviously be one or the other, but rather a judicious combination of the two, either worked out one after the other or simultaneously. In the Indian tradition of spirituality the householder after living the busy life of the provider and head of the family, at a given point of time, leaves everything and goes off into the forest to live the life of a hermit; he now renounces everything and dedicates himself exclusively to the service of the Divinity. In this we can see a kind of combination of the two roles of Martha and Mary, one following on the other.

However, the more difficult combination is to have the two simultaneously but properly balanced, and one enhancing the other. It could be that this kind of combination is more easily accessible to certain types of personalities and is more difficult or perhaps even impossible to others. Yet, the common element that binds the two together is the focus on the Lord present in both situations but in different ways!

The clash between the two seems to arise when during the Martha stage one focuses entirely on one's own resources and plans (all done for the Lord undoubtedly, but not so much 'with the Lord'). If at this time the person could insist on focusing on the Lord rather than on Self, both for the initiative or ideas and also for the execution of those plans, then the balance would be far better.



So, at rock bottom the opposition is not between hectic work and no work, but rather rests on the degree of attention given to the Lord present in every situation. In the Gospel story, Mary took the stance of a disciple, placing herself at the feet of Jesus. This does not necessarily mean that she did no work, but rather that just as the disciple is fully concentrated on the Master, so was Mary focused on Jesus and him alone. Martha, on the other hand, 'was distracted about too many things!' What held the attention of Martha was the things she was preparing for the Lord. Thus, we see that 'purity of intention' alone (doing a work solely for the Lord) is not sufficient; we need to train ourselves to work together with Jesus.

Jesus himself reminds us, 'without me you can do nothing!' It is worth noticing that he does not say that without him we would do less amount of work, or work of inferior quality. Rather he emphasizes the truth that without him we are just not capable of doing anything, no work at all! When we remain close to Jesus, it is he who works in and through us and thus our work becomes truly fruitful.

“The one who loves gives everything; the one who is loved possesses everything. How fortunate you are to be filled with this divine flame. Fire is self-sufficient, it seeks only to be fed more and more. It is fed by love itself, for God is all love and all goodness.”

[To Mme Eulalie Tenaillon, September 1866]

The characteristic of love is that it reserves nothing for itself but gives all unto the very last drop of blood. We see this so forcefully in the total self-giving of Jesus on the Cross. Because of his desire to obey the Father completely and to serve his brethren selflessly he gave unto the very end. When we too return our love to God in this manner we must ideally be ready to give all: 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready!' (Ps. 57:7). And since when God gives he gives us his all, we who receive possess everything. It is the common experience of all great saints that when they come really close to God, they feel less and less need of material things and all other comforts, even the support of friends and near ones. God alone seems to be their one and only need. Truly, one who is blessed with this level of intimacy with the Lord is filled with every blessing and lacks nothing.

God's love is here compared to a flame of fire. While it is true that it burns expressing thus its ardent, all-enveloping nature, it still needs to be sustained and what maintains it and keeps it going is love itself, even though our response of love is of a far inferior quality. The very efforts we make struggling to respond at our very best, make God reach down to us with even greater love. Our innate inability to love

well makes him supply what is lacking in our contribution. His goodness and generosity outdoes every little effort we make. It is like a mother who



understands the babbling of her little child, recognizes its needs and hastens to fulfill all its requirements. What is more the mother is overjoyed at hearing the meaningless sounds the child makes in its effort to communicate something; to others it is no more than babbling, but to the mother's ears it is sweet music.

Against this background how ridiculous it must appear to God when we try to mimic the learned and read to him high-sounding words and phrases from a book - which might be very meaningful in themselves, but make not much sense to us nor befit our lowly condition. A few babbling sounds of our own would be more pleasing to the Father than all the high sounding rolling sentences of the experts! That is why it is always better to say a little but let it come straight from the heart, rather than make a long prayer in which our heart has not entered at all! We need to remember always that it is love that makes the difference between a good prayer and a perfect prayer. The good prayer comes from the heart and is transfused with love even if badly expressed while the perfect prayer is grammatically and otherwise perfect, but not necessarily filled with love, the one thing necessary!

If we are among the number of those who feel that pre-composed prayers are better than our own heartfelt expressions, we might need to review our understanding of what prayer is all about. We do not pray to impress God, or appear as great before him. All we need do is bare ourselves before our loving and understanding Father, who knows it all, anyway!

“The work of God begins at Bethlehem, is tested at Nazareth, and flourishes in the shadow of the Cross of Calvary.” [To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November 1866]

While the order outlined by Fr. Eymard in the above quotation follows the time sequence of a person's life span it also indicates the three different stages of growth. Whenever a new work or enterprise begins, it usually starts with a flourish there is a burst of activity and everything seems to go well... it moves forward with great promise. Those who join are full of enthusiasm and work hard to further the aims and purposes of the work. That is like Bethlehem in the life of Jesus, with angels singing and shepherds falling down in profound adoration! It is a period of great rejoicing and positive action. The same is true of the prayer life one engages in this first period is one of many consolations and pleasant gifts that the Lord showers on the candidate.

But soon comes the period where all these 'highs' gradually level off and routine seems to set in. The initial fervour seems to die down and the drudgery of daily monotony creeps in. In prayer, this is the period of dryness when the very coming to pray is a great effort. Numerous difficulties and obstacles are encountered during this period and if the person's faith is not strong (and being further strengthened constantly) the person gives up and abandons the project altogether. This is compared to the public life of Jesus during which he was challenged by the Pharisees and others, often put to the test and even rejected by quite a few! Faith and fidelity to one's commitment are the key virtues needed to

get through this stage.

While reason would like to have a period of sunshine following on this dry period, what usually happens is that Nazareth



opens out on to Gethsemane and the Cross of Calvary. It is in this period that the person is asked to make the highest sacrifice of Self, a complete living out of the 'dying to self' so vital for God's work to flourish. The Cross can be more or less painful and death-dealing, but we must never forget that Calvary is followed by the glory of the Resurrection. It is worth mentioning that the measure in which we share in the dying of Christ is the measure in which we share also in the glory of his rising. This is easily understood with the help of a simple example. If a glass is filled to the brim with water and one pours oil into it, then no matter how much oil we pour on top of the water, it will all spill out nothing will enter the glass which is already full.

But if we remove a certain measure of water from the glass, then it can take in only that same measure of oil... the more one removes water from the glass, the more oil can one put into it. Similarly, the more we empty ourselves of the Self, the more would we be capable of sharing in Christ's glory. We notice this pattern (called the Paschal Mystery) not only in the course of events, but also in the lives of people, especially those seeking to follow Christ. This was the pattern of Jesus' own life, and so will it be the pattern of our lives too.

“The mason who dies after laying the foundation of a colossal building is more of a founder than the one who completes it”.

[To Fr. Arthur Dhe, November. 1866]

That one of the dreams of Fr. Eymard was to work with and for diocesan priests is known to all. At one stage he even dreamt of starting a kind of Third Order for priests dividing them into three different categories. When Fr. Dhe offered to assist particularly in the work of rehabilitation of fallen priests, or priests in trouble with their superiors, Fr. Eymard was overjoyed to find someone whose thinking was in unison with his. Similarly he wanted to join with Fr. Antoine Chevrier (founder of the Prado) who had himself already begun a work for abandoned and neglected children, because he saw a great similarity between his work for the ragpickers of Paris and this enterprise of Fr. Chevrier. Though both these dreams were never really realized, yet Fr. Eymard's heart reached out in all directions so that the love of God in the Eucharist could touch all.

In all these ventures, he was never preoccupied with the technicalities of who would be considered the founder and things like that. He saw such ventures as a response to God's call to do something that was lacking in the kingdom of God here and now. It would not be far from the truth to say that the above quotation has some reference to Fr. Eymard's own life and to the 'colossal' work that he had undertaken. His task was to lay the foundation for this work and establish it on a firm footing that was all that occupied his mind at this stage. That was

not only the need of the moment, but also the most important contribution Fr. Eymard could make to this venture. If it was indeed established on a strong



foundation, it would last the ravages of time; else it would crumble with the first gust of adversity.

He also foresaw the possibility that someone else might be called upon to complete the work he had begun. He certainly would have remembered the example of Moses whom God used as instrument to lead the people out of Egypt and guide them for forty years as they wandered through the desert. These were the formative years of the people of Israel, and there is no doubt that Moses gave of his best in season and out of season till he had brought the entire nation to the very threshold of the Promised Land. Yet, it is precisely at this moment that the Lord informed him that it was not he who would lead the people into the Promised Land, but Joshua, the junior whom he had been grooming all along. Moses himself would not have the privilege of entering into the land flowing with milk and honey nor of enjoying its fruits if only for the few remaining years of his life!

Like Moses, Fr. Eymard might be set aside before seeing his work reach a successful climax yet that would not prevent him from being the founder, for it was he who had laboured to give it a strong foundation. It was his job to cooperate with the Lord as long as his services were needed. Having given of his best on each occasion, Fr. Eymard was then ready to let go and enter the real Promised Land of heaven whenever the Lord thought fit!

“What I wish for you is a love for our Lord and his glory which are as great as your graces, as great as his heart.” [To Edmond Tenailon, January 1867]

It is quite evident from all his writings that the one thing that mattered to Fr. Eymard throughout all his life was the love of God, not just as an acquisition, but as the dynamic centre of one's Christian life. It is the most priceless treasure that a person could have here on earth. It is like the treasure the farmer chances upon in the field he was ploughing (Mt. 13:44). Realizing its worth, he immediately went and sold all his possessions and obtained that field and with it the treasure as well. To obtain this treasure of God's love, no price is too great to pay.

But the one price that everyone would have to pay to obtain this love of God is a decisive war on the Self unto the end. Self-centredness and the love of God cannot co-exist in a person's life, since one cancels the other. So that is what Fr. Eymard wishes for his directees in abundant measure as much as the Lord wished to pour into their hearts. While not expressed explicitly, he at the same time prays that their renunciation of the Self will also be to an outstanding degree. He does acknowledge that this directee was very generous in opening himself to the Lord and had received some marvelous graces, yet there was a lot more that he could have the measure he should aim at is the greatness of God's own heart which is as great as infinity!

God had already shown us how generous he can be in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In her Magnificat

she exclaims: “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!” (Lk 1:46-53). And what God did for Mary is an example of what he is prepared to do for any of his children who wish to collaborate with him in the great work of redemption.

Unfortunately, it is we who restrict the generosity of God by our fear-filled approach to his love, especially when it demands difficult things from us. But where a person can be fearless and generous as Mary was, the sky is the limit to what God can and will do in such a person. History provides us with numerous examples of such people, and undoubtedly there are such people present even among us today... And so we need to continue praying that God may find many such brave and generous persons who then can serve as beacons leading us into the Promised Land of God's abundant love! And if we ourselves could volunteer to be such beacons, that would be even better, as the Lord would find willing and eager assistance in our generous cooperation.

“Work to love by [means of] divine love. Be set on fire in the Cenacle as you prepare for your priesthood. Be moulded on the divine model of the eternal Priest, on Jesus.” [To Edmond Tenaillon, January 1867]

If love is one's greatest treasure on earth, how does one go about acquiring it? First of all, we need to remind ourselves that the love we speak of here is not human love which inevitably is limited and conditional. It is only God's love that is truly precious because it is unconditional and freely given. So, that has to be the starting point of our adventures in love. We begin by allowing ourselves to be loved by God, to be caught up by his love, taken possession of, as it were, so that it becomes truly a passion in our lives. This is the gift that the Father invites each human being to receive he is the One who loves us first. It is only after tasting and experiencing this love that we begin to accept ourselves as lovable.

That is when we are set on fire, as it were, and if we can remain faithful to the one condition that is needed now, viz. a genuine dying to Self, then there is no saying how far the love of God will lead us. Scripture is filled with examples of simple ordinary persons, even persons with several glaring faults who yet remained open to God's generous love and were transformed beyond measure. It is fascinating to see how a total non-entity like Abraham was transformed into the father of a large nation of believers all because of his simple yet genuine openness to God's action in his life. Even when the most difficult sacrifice was demanded of him, viz. that of sacrificing

his only son, the son of his old age, yet he did not cringe or doubt God's love and power.

The Gospel

personages, however, are closer to us in that we can identify with them more easily. Peter's was certainly a multi-faceted character generous, spontaneous, recklessly impulsive and daring up to a point, yet at the same time weak and inconstant in the face of suffering and rejection. Nevertheless, there is no doubting his passionate love for Jesus; he managed to remain reasonably close to Jesus and allowed him to transform him step by step into the great apostle that he was. While it is difficult for us to act the way Jesus did, nevertheless, we need to keep him always as our model. He inspires us particularly in his total commitment to God's mission entrusted to him, reminding us that nothing is too great to surrender into God's hands when done out of love.

In our relationship with Jesus, again, it is important to remember that it is not we who mould ourselves on him, but rather all we do is to allow ourselves to be moulded by him. Our part is to respond to his call at each moment as generously as we can. We need not fear the difficulties involved in this, because Jesus himself will lead us step by step; he transforms even our failings into stepping stones when we truly place ourselves into his hands as clay in the hands of a potter. One needs to experience this to believe how true it is! When Jesus undertakes a job, he does it to perfection and that would be true also when he takes upon himself to mould us into his own likeness as priests!



"I am not telling you to work to acquire knowledge. You are doing so with constancy and courage. But add to these combined elements one which will make them all divine, a spirit of faith, that is, the divine reason for things and the spirit of love which is its holiness." [To Alphonse Tenaillon, February 1867]

Faith and love are the two key virtues or gifts that the Church prays for in every Eucharist as these are the basics on which our spiritual journey is built. However, it is worth noticing that Fr. Eymard was able to single these out 150 years ago when Eucharistic theology wasn't all that developed and clearly expressed. A deep and lively faith ensures that a person looks at reality and responds from God's point of view. One reminds oneself that God's ways are not our ways, that his thinking is totally different from ours. One of the consequences of this is that we will not always find plausible reasons for the things that occur in our lives. Several mysteries will still remain inexplicable and mysterious, yet nevertheless acceptable out of love and in faith.

While this situation would disturb others and perhaps lead to an inner rebellion, the devout adorer will have learnt to take things in his stride. S/he believes that for those who love God everything works together for their good and so, even though the loving plan of God may not be visible on the surface, s/he believes that things will work out for the best interest of all concerned. And

hence, the cooperation offered is maximum and enthusiastic. Faith shines best against a background of darkness and uncertainty and the person



of faith sees God's presence and power where others would see only disaster and doom!

But again, all this could be done out of a sense of helplessness or inevitability but not so in the case of the adorer. For him/her, it is love that governs all the responses s/he gives because it is love that s/he sees in everything that happens in his/her life. As Psalm 32 puts it so forcefully, '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 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.' (Leslie Brandt, *Psalms Now*, p. 52).

This approach of love is what makes the life of the faithful 'holy' in the original sense of the word *different* from all others. While all people here on earth suffer pain, the faithful do not have to endure suffering, that 'angst' that a person goes through because s/he does not understand the reason for the pain; they experience difficulties but never have 'problems'. Life therefore, is lived on quite a different plane and the adorer can stand out as 'stars shining in the darkness!' (Phil. 2:15). Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends nor does it ever give up in despair! (1 Cor 13:7-8).

“...God is teaching us a good lesson that way: we don't gain anything by getting angry or speaking too emphatically. Let us try to see Our Lord in all these difficult situations, and to prefer gentleness to strength, patience to rudeness.” [To Fr. Michel Chanuet, February 1867]

When a person's life is guided by these two great fundamental virtues, faith and love, then his/her responses to life's situations are different (holy) from that of others. S/he is not afraid of not being in control of every situation around him/her. For most people, not being in control is absolutely intolerable and possibly frightening and stressful. But the adorer believes that his life is held securely in the palm of God's hands and that therefore he is safe and protected. He does not need to get angry or upset. Anger simply indicates that we resent not being in control of the situation!

His faith reminds him, 'You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the

punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will



command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways! On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.' (Ps 91:1-16).

When the adorer is convinced that God is around, like the watchful shepherd, s/he can go about his/her day peacefully. For, 'He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore' (Ps 121:3-8). With this background, the adorer can afford to react calmly, speak gently and live peacefully. His life is truly a beacon in the dark inviting others to stop and think why they need to endure so much unnecessary suffering in their lives when the haven of peace and love is so close at hand!

"...you must receive Communion, with your eyes on the Heart of our Lord who is calling you, [listening to] the voice of obedience which is telling you: Go! Not with your eyes on yourself in the mirror of your actions or virtues..." [To Ms Antonia Bost, February 1867]

This excerpt, taken from advice given to yet another directee fits in with what we have said in the previous reflection. When faith and love direct one's journey through life then it is easy for us to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord who not only knows the way, but IS the way himself. When we are ready to obey the Lord wholeheartedly we have a situation like that in the desert as Israel journeyed towards the Promised Land. 'It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites would keep the charge of the Lord, and would not set out' (Num 9:16-19).

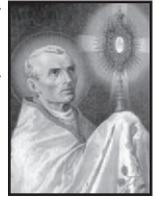
It is no wonder that the Israelites led by their Lord and Master did not go astray in the desert where it is so easy to lose one's way. For the Christian too, the world may be full of dangers and difficulties, but as long as s/he keeps his/her eyes fixed on the Lord and is prepared to obey in faith

and love, there is no fear of getting lost on the journey!

The temptation, of course, in this situation is to want to find out repeatedly how much progress one has made in the spiritual life.

Often this is gauged in terms of one's feelings of comfort, security and peace. While feelings can be good indicators, one cannot rely entirely on them, nor should one be preoccupied with them as they take our gaze away from the Lord and involve us more with the Self. Once a person begins to get fascinated with the Self and the apparent progress achieved, one can be sure that one would find it very difficult to take one's eyes off the Self for long. It is not progress that is important in the spiritual life as much as effective union with the Lord and this is a pure gift given us by the Lord because of his goodness and not because of our virtue.

However, it is precisely in such times and matters that we need the expert guidance of the Spiritual Director, an experienced guide who foresees the traps that lie in our path and warns us in good time. For often we can mistake the voice of Self as being the voice of the Lord calling us to a particular task. Add to this the fact that Satan can cleverly disguise himself as an angel of light apparently bringing us a divine message of love and peace but in fact deceiving us completely! And since we are generally not experts in discerning God's ways, we would need to seek the experienced wisdom and guidance of seniors ready to guide and help us. It is important to add that seeking guidance is not enough: one needs to follow it conscientiously and report back periodically if one's project is to progress smoothly!



“God has taken your esteemed and very kind Father from this world to take him with him in Paradise. It's the hour of the blessed harvest for him. The death of the Just is precious in the sight of God, a gentle sleep on the heart of our Lord. Oh! May ours at least be one of love!” [To Ms Virginie Danion, February 1867]

Writing a letter of condolence to his directee on the occasion of her father's death Fr. Eymard offers her the Christian vision of death a 'being gathered into God's loving arms to enjoy the peace and love he has prepared for the faithful follower'! If that is the best that we humans can and would offer to our loved ones, how much more will not the heavenly Father have prepared this for us when he calls us out of this world? The devout person has waited patiently for so long, precisely for this moment of total unhindered union and so grieving inconsolably for the dead does not speak of faith in the love and goodness of the Father.

Having lived his whole life striving to make love the guiding principle of his life, it is not surprising that Fr. Eymard would want his death also to be suffused with love. What a blessed heaven it would be when we are able to drink deeply of the infinite love the Father has for us. Nothing else would fill us as much as his love which is our very life. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that while the Father desires to smother us in his love, we can receive only as much of this love as we have prepared ourselves to receive!

Every event of our lives is a

challenge to increase our capacity to love. At birth this capacity is almost zero, but keeps growing as we face life's difficulties and trials positively and in love.



But the opposite too is true when we fail to respond in love our capacity to love decreases. So, when our time of departure from this world comes, we take with us the capacity that we have developed up to that point of time and that is the capacity with which we will enjoy God's love for all eternity. From this viewpoint, how important it is then that we avail ourselves of every opportunity to respond in love. We could certainly use that harsh and angry expression, but instead if we catch ourselves in time and insist on giving the more loving response how much greater will be our joy here on earth and our fulfillment later in heaven!?

However, how few think of life's obstacles in these terms? How many see it as a precious opportunity to develop our spiritual muscles and keep stretching and increasing our capacity not allowing it to diminish even slightly so that we attain the maximum by the time we are called into eternity. If this was our vision would we not earnestly entreat the Lord to give us more and more opportunities to expand our capacity for love? Would we not thank him for the human and other instruments he uses to send us these precious opportunities? This approach would enable us to have very fruitful and positive relationships with those who do us wrong consciously or unconsciously, since our focus is not on the human instruments but on the Lord who trains us to draw ever close to him in love through every difficulty we encounter.