



The Eucharist: Disciples and Adorers throughout the Centuries (Mary's Role in our Living a Eucharistic Life)

Saturday, June 18, 2022

The life and charism of St. Peter Julian Eymard; Jesus
living in the Eucharist: the virtues according to St.
Peter Julian Eymard

I want to begin with a story from St. Peter Julian Eymard's youth. He grew up near the parish church and was used to making visits to the Blessed Sacrament with his mother from a young age. One day, the family could not locate 5-year-old Peter Julian. When they found him, he was in the church and had crawled onto the high altar. He had his ear pressed against the tabernacle. When asked what he was doing, he said, "I am close to Jesus and listening to Him." This is the person who would become known as the "Apostle of the Eucharist."

St. Peter Julian Eymard was born in France in 1811. His father had a walnut oil business, which he hoped Peter Julian would take over, and this plan contributed to his father's opposition to Peter Julian's vocation. His first attempt at the priesthood was with a religious order called the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, which ended after four months when he was sent home to die from an illness. His health was fragile all his life and he was thought to be on his deathbed numerous times. His father died a year and a half after this, which left him free to follow his calling. He entered the diocesan seminary and was ordained at the age of 24 in July 1834. His first two assignments were in parishes. In 1839, after a visit from a priest friend, he left his parish with the blessing of his bishop to follow his growing desire for religious life, and he entered the Society of Mary, or the Marists. He was quickly made a spiritual director of the seminarians and a few years later, among other duties, provincial superior.

There were three important graces he received during his time as a Marist. The first one was during a Corpus Christi procession in 1845. Fr. Eymard had a profound experience of faith in and love for the Blessed Sacrament. About this experience, he wrote, "My soul was imbued with a lively faith and love for Jesus in His Divine Sacrament," and of his desire to "bring all the world to the knowledge and love of Our Lord; to preach nothing but Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ Eucharistic." The second grace he received was more directly related to his vocation. He was asked by Our Lady to devote himself to making her Son honored in the Eucharist.[1] These are his words: "All the mysteries of Jesus and Mary have their own religious group to honor them, keep them, perpetuate their virtues, spirit, and life. And why would the greatest of all mysteries not have its own?"[2] He was, of course, speaking of the mystery of the Eucharist. At first, this "Eucharistic project" took shape as a Third Order of Marists with a Eucharistic emphasis. He tried to bring this idea to fulfillment during the first half of the 1850s, but after repeated attempts, nothing came to fruition. This grace was expanded in 1853 when St. Peter Julian was given the interior strength to persevere in his call to found an entirely new religious congregation. His Marist superiors had decided that his Eucharistic project was outside the scope of the Marist charism, so he had to decide between it and the Society of Mary. As a result, he was dispensed from his vows to have the freedom to pursue this calling.

The actual founding of the community was full of trials. They were plagued by intense financial and social conflicts that made life difficult and vocations scarce. The Archbishop of Paris gave his approval to the new community in 1856 when St. Peter Julian explained to him his vision of the active work of the community, including catechesis and the promotion of Holy Communion for Paris' working class, because common practice and lack of catechesis made reception of the Sacrament rare.

[1] St. Peter Julian Eymard, SSS. *Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament* (Cleveland: Emmanuel Publications, 1930), 58.

[2] St. Peter Julian Eymard, SSS. *Life and Letters of Saint Peter Julian Eymard*, Translated by Sr. Catherine Marie Caron, SSS (Rome: Digital version full series, 2010), 576.



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The small group of priests immediately began working among the destitute. A female branch of the congregation was founded in 1858, and Pope Pius IX approved the Society of the Blessed Sacrament on May 8, 1863. A third order was founded so laypeople could also share in the charism of the community.[3]

St. Peter Julian Eymard died on August 1, 1868. At the time of his death, there were eight houses of priests and brothers in France and Belgium and two houses of sisters. Today there are almost 900 priests in the congregation.[4] He was canonized at the end of the first session of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.[5]

For St. Peter Julian, who, as I said, is called the Apostle of the Eucharist, the Eucharist was everything. He learned from Our Lord's presence in the Eucharist how he should live his life and what virtue should look like in the life of a Christian. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines virtue as "a habitual and firm disposition to do the good" and says that "the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God" in paragraph 1803.[6] Human virtues are those that are acquired through the effort of man with the help of grace. In paragraph 1804, the Catechism says that these are "firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtues are what guide us to do morally good acts."

St. Peter Julian Eymard says that "to define virtue is a good thing...but in order to understand virtue, and especially to reproduce it supernaturally, we must study it in Jesus Christ." [7] Our lives are to be modeled on the life of Jesus Christ by our practice of virtue, which "the Apostle of the Eucharist" tells us is shown in the Blessed Sacrament. We can see Our Lord continue to practice what He preached even today because He exemplifies it in the Eucharist. He is waiting there for us to ponder and study His way of life. He is the means and the model for our pursuit of holiness: the means, since He gives us the grace to act, and the model, since He shows us how to act. But since He has taken on the Eucharistic state, Jesus Himself can no longer perform acts of virtue. It is up to those who make up His Body to perform these acts, and, in Fr. Eymard's words, "complete our Lord." [8] St. Peter Julian is drawing on St. Paul's theology of the Church as the body of Christ, when, for example, he says in Colossians 1:24, "I am filling up what is lacking in the affliction of Christ on behalf of His body, which is the Church." Our response to grace is how Jesus lives in us and continues His life on earth. We become members of His body through our baptism, at which point we are baptized into the life of Christ. Again, from St. Peter Julian: "He thereby constitutes one mystical person with us. We are His acting members, His body, of which He is the head and the heart; so that He can say, 'I still live.' We complete and perpetuate Him." [9]

When we are in the presence of Our Lord, then, our Saint counsels us that we will do well to remember that His presence here is active. He said that oftentimes, we treat the Blessed Sacrament like a statue. We think His job is to forgive our sins and listen to our prayers. But this is wrong. His presence is not static, if only we learn His method of communication. The first idea that might come to mind is learning how to listen through the silence to hear God communicating with us. Another way He might speak with us is through Scripture. But St. Peter Julian preferred to observe the life of Our Lord in the Eucharist. He says it's as if Jesus in the Eucharist says to us, "I am your way, today; I Myself am your way!" St. Peter Julian then moves from the Eucharist to Scripture, because "you shall have before your eyes the continuation of what you are reading. This Eucharistic revelation must be the starting point of all our virtues, because in the Blessed Sacrament you have [any given virtue] right before your eyes." [10]

[3] Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. "Saint Peter Julian Eymard, Apostle of the Eucharist: His Life, Times and Religious Congregations." (La Mure, February 2011). blessedsacrament.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/09/Eymard-Exposition-Web-version.pdf.

[4] ssscongregatio.org/en/about-us/the-congregation.html

[5] Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, "Saint Peter Julian Eymard."

[6] Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second edition (1997), 1803.

[7] St. Peter Julian Eymard, SSS. *In the Light of the Monstrance* (Cleveland: Emmanuel Publications, 1947), 67.

[8] *Ibid*, 38.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] *Ibid*, 41



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To look more closely at what he means, I've chosen three virtues as an example. These virtues are from our other preeminent model of Christian life, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our community wears a badge of her heart as part of our habit. If you look closely, you can see three roses on her heart. These roses symbolize her three primary virtues: humility, purity, and obedience. St. Peter Julian has a lot to say about each of these virtues of Our Lady through the lens of the Blessed Sacrament.

The first virtue is humility. From “the Apostle of the Eucharist”: “In the Eucharist, Jesus makes humility His royal virtue. It is the form of all His actions.”[11] How exactly does Our Lord exemplify humility? In the first place, the Eternal Son of the Triune God took on human flesh in the womb of a young woman. God became man, which itself is almost unfathomable. Next, we can look to His public ministry to see how to live humility in our daily lives, since He walked this earth just like we all do. “He did not boast, or seek to shine, or be witty, or to seem better informed than others,” and, “He said that He only repeated the words of His Father.”[12] Humility has been defined as truth. In imitation of Jesus, we should let others see our true selves, nothing more and nothing less than we are. St. Paul reminds us that everything we have, except for our sins, is a gift from God. He says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”[13] Therefore, we have no reason for pride.

But Jesus wanted to lower Himself still more. He has become our food. He gave us His lasting presence, His true, real, substantial presence in the Holy Eucharist. God has hidden Himself in our midst in the Blessed Sacrament. It's easy to get used to this profound mystery, but it's something we should call to mind often. St. Peter Julian tells us, “The Eucharist veils His glory, His majesty, His power, His unceasing action in souls, and leaves in evidence only...His love as our Savior.”[14] When we look at the Eucharist, we don't see God. We don't see glory or the angels adoring Him or rays coming forth from the tabernacle. We see the appearance of bread. But we know it's much more than that.

Humility is also fostered when we place ourselves before God, such as we will do during holy hour. We fall short of God's desire for our perfection. We sin. This knowledge of our sinfulness humbles us but should also inspire trust in God's overwhelming mercy.

Our priest says that another way to practice humility is to accept from God whatever good He sends or evil He permits.[15] Our Lady expressed this attitude when she gave her fiat to God's will at the Annunciation. She said, “Let it be done unto me according to your word.”[16] Another way to say this is “I take what is set before me”—which is the motto of our community—or even, “Jesus, I trust in You.” These are short and simple aspirations we can repeat throughout the day to remind us that God is in control. He is God and we are not; His providence guides our lives. He knows what He is doing and he knows the best path for us to sainthood. Humility reminds us of this.

The second virtue we'll look at is purity. Fr. Eymard comments that “Jesus is the essence of purity itself in the Eucharist: so pure that He unites Himself with no substance, not even that of bread, since He destroys it in order to take its place; not even to the visible accidents, for He is not one with them either substantially or personally. He desires only a form without substance and which cannot touch Him.”[17] He is referring here to the doctrine of transubstantiation. That word means “a change of substance.” A review might be helpful: when a priest celebrates Mass and consecrates bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the entire substance of the bread becomes our Lord's Body and the entire substance of the wine becomes His Blood.[18]

[11] Ibid, 75.

[12] Ibid, 70.

[13] New American Bible Revised Edition.

[14] Eymard, *In the Light of the Monstrance*, 75.

[15] Ibid, 74.

[16] Luke 1:38

[17] St. Peter Julian Eymard, SSS. *The Eucharist and Christian Perfection I*. Translated by Amy Allen. (Cleveland: Emmanuel Publications, 1948), 104.

[18] See CCC 1376.



What remains of the bread and wine are only the visible and tangible accidents. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, the senses of sight, touch, and taste fail us; all we can believe are the words we hear.[19] Listen again to our Saint: “Jesus is the essence of purity itself in the Eucharist: so pure that He unites Himself with no substance, not even that of bread, since He destroys it in order to take its place.” He desires us to imitate His purity, and not only in our bodies, although this is essential. We must be pure from all sin. Fr. Eymard says that purity is the unnegotiable condition for heaven,[20] because nothing unclean or impure can be in the presence of God. This is why purgatory exists. Sometimes I think it can be easy to think of mortal sin as “bad” sin and venial sin as “okay” sin. But venial sin is still a sin, still an offense against God, and we should not be okay with this either. It's easy to slip into venial sin; Father says, “We offend the good God rather than displease one of His creatures, rather than cause one of [His creatures] momentary pain, and even at times please him. But nobody deserves that you should please him at the cost of a venial sin.... Your whole Christian and eucharistic life must have this aim: to purify you more and more. The love of God is the fire in our lives; its first and last effect must be to purify us.”[21]

The best example of purity, again, is Our Lady. She was totally pure by virtue of her Immaculate Conception and thus Our Lord was pleased to come to dwell in her. We should strive to imitate her purity. In this regard, “the Apostle of the Eucharist” writes that “Jesus should experience the same joy when He comes to us in Holy Communion. He should long for the moment when we cause Him to be taken from the Tabernacle; He should be able to come to us with the same delight as though it were again to Mary that He came. He will, if we are pure. He expects nothing else of us but this preparation of purity. ... O Mary, lend us thy mantle of purity: clothe us in the whiteness, in the glory of thy Immaculate Conception! It behooves the mother to adorn her child for festive occasion. Clothed by thee, O Mary, Jesus will welcome me; He will come to me with pleasure, for He will see thee in me, and He will find His delight in dwelling in my heart.”[22]

The third virtue I'd like to focus on is the virtue of obedience. Our saint says that Jesus shows us perfect obedience in the Blessed Sacrament. He shows willingness and passive, blind, absolute submission without condition or reserve.[23] At Mass, God obeys man. The Son of God who rules the universe comes down to the altar at the command of the priest. He also obeys those who approach the altar to receive Holy Communion, when and each time we present ourselves. “He comes to you when you wish: you choose the hour, you yourself measure your dispositions, you present yourself and He is already there.”[24] In His obedience, He makes Himself available to us. In our obedience, then, we should make ourselves available to Him for the carrying out of His will. How do we do that? God's will comes to us through diverse instruments and most often through the ordinary events of our daily lives. Fr. Eymard tells us, “The man of God waits for the hour of divine providence, responds to the impulses of grace, devotes himself to the entire will of God, for the present and the future, and he does so with a filial self-surrender that leaves the whole care and glory of everything to God his Father.”[25] His will is expressed in our lives according to our states or vocation. For me, it comes through my superior; for a parent, it is often expressed by a crying child. This is the faithfulness to our daily duty that Our Lady of Fatima asked for. To be able to discern the will of God throughout the day requires openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to follow His inspirations, no matter how they are manifested to us. Humility and purity aid us in our obedience, because by humility we open ourselves to the will of Another and through purity we cultivate a desire for only what He wants.

[19] St. Thomas Aquinas, Adoro te devote, hymn for Office of Corpus Christi.

[20] Eymard, *The Eucharist and Christian Perfection I*, 184.

[21] *Ibid*, 188-189.

[22] *Ibid*, 18-19.

[23] Eymard, *The Eucharist and Christian Perfection I*, 105.

[24] *Ibid*, 105, 107.

[25] Eymard, *In the Light of the Monstrance*, 123.



The Blessed Virgin, again, shows us how to be obedient through her fiat. As soon as she knew God's will, she accepted and acted on it. We see this too in the Annunciation. St. Peter Julian comments on the scene and Our Lady's fiat in response to the angel: "And Mary replies: 'Ecce ancilla Domini'—'Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Be it done to me according to thy word!' O word full of deep significance! O admirable word full of humility! How much is contained in that one word: 'Ecce!' When the priest presents the Sacred Host to us before Holy Communion, he says: 'Ecce Agnus Dei!' [Behold the Lamb of God!] When St. John the Baptist wished to point out our Lord to his disciples, he exclaimed: 'Ecce!' In that word is contained the total oblation of one's self: Here I am, all ready; entirely at God's service!"[26] In the Gospels, Jesus tells us that we cannot get to heaven without being obedient; let us look to Mary to learn how to follow God's will ever more perfectly.

These are just three of the many virtues required for a Christian life. St. Peter Julian says that all virtues can be found and studied in the Eucharist, whether it's courtesy, generosity, mortification, or any of the others. I'll close with one last thought from our saint. "Through the Eucharist only, may we realize all the force and actuality of our Lord's words, 'I am the way.' Let our sole spiritual concern be to contemplate the Eucharist, to find in it the example of what we have to do in all the circumstances of Christian life. That is what constitutes and fosters our life of union with our eucharistic Lord; that is how we become eucharistic in our life and attain holiness through the eucharistic grace."[27]

[26] Eymard, *Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament*, 41-42.

[27] Eymard, *In the Light of the Monstrance*, 41-42.

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