

Our Lady of the Cenacle

Some reflections concerning the Feast of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament

Historian of Eymard, Father Lauréat Saint-Pierre, notes that the Founder's First Companion, Father Raymond De Cuers, gave the name "Religious of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament" to his candidates for the women's branch of the Congregation.

He was inspired, it seems, by the representations of Our Lady as the "Virgin-Monstrance" that were well known in his Marseilles tradition as well as in that of the Carmelites and Cistercians.¹

Father De Cuers also dedicated the chapel at Marseilles to Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament.²

Eymard speaks rather of the Cenacle

Eymard's own approach to Mary, however, used a different language, when writing, for example, on the 20th of September 1856 to Marguerite Guillot, the Co-Foundress of the Sisters.

As for the women," he wrote, "it is virtually decided that we do not wish to associate them with any other existing community, with its spirit and its works, but to form authentic adorers of Jesus in the Eucharist on the model of Our Lady of the Cenacle."³

He was accustomed, in fact, to speak regularly of his foundations as "cenacles." He believed anachronistically (as was not uncommon at the time) that the blessed sacrament was kept there in the "Upper Room" and that the Blessed Virgin lived near the tabernacle and practised adoration.

What is more important for us to note, however, is that for him the image and term most congenial to him in his thinking about Mary in relation to the Eucharist was that of the "cenacle;" it appears constantly, in fact, in his writings.

Yet despite this fact, it was rather the title "Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament" that was to become traditional in the congregation. How do we explain this strange fact?

Why did De Cuers' idea replace Eymard's?

The shift of term and accent was due in large part to the determined advocacy of an intelligent young religious called Albert Tesnière, whose influence in the Congregation was predominant in the century that followed the Founder's death.

¹ Lauréat SAINT-PIERRE, S.S.S. *L'heure du cénacle dans la vie et le œuvres de Pierre-Julien Éymard. Étude d'une progression dans l'expérience du mystère eucharistique*. Lyon : Lescuyer, 1968, p. 225.

² André Guitton, *Peter Julian Eymard Apostle of the Eucharist*, Ponteranica: Centro Eucaristico, 1996, p. 134.

³ Lauréat SAINT-PIERRE, S.S.S. *The Hour of the Cenacle in the Life and Works of Peter-Julian Eymard*. A translation of chapters V, VI, VII of *L'Heure du Cénacle* (1968) by Hervé Thibault, S.S.S. Rome: Editions of the General House of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, 1991.

On the one hand, we surely owe Tesnière a great debt of gratitude for having preserved Eymard's documents and recorded many of his conversations. On the other hand, however, we cannot rely entirely on what he has left us, since his contribution is, at times, seriously flawed.

Most important of all, it must be remembered that Tesnière never really grasped in a clear way the difference between Eymard's ideas and those of his First Companion. The Founder himself drew a contrast between his own ever-developing ideas that were often, it must be said, too new for the people of his time, and those of de Cuers, characterized by Eymard himself as his companion's "old ideas."

Many of these "old ideas" Eymard had once shared with De Cuers, but they were to become the cause of conflict between them leading eventually to a painful separation.

They were men of very different cast of mind. The Founder was possessed of a quick and restless intelligence, ever open to richer and fuller understanding; his thinking underwent constant development.

His companion was the opposite: faithful to his first ideas, even to the point of rigidity, his mind was attached to firmness and seems to have been incapable of change; as Eymard himself remarked, being afraid of change he clung to immobility as the guarantee of fidelity.

Tesnière's failure to grasp their differences

Due to his failure to grasp the very real, and today easily discernible, differences between them, Tesnière passed on to history as Eymard's heritage ideas and practices that were, in many cases, more those of Father De Cuers' than those of Eymard himself.

That is exactly what happened in the case of Mary's title. Here it was Tesnière, above all, who made sure that Father De Cuers' ideas, attributed to Eymard, should become dominant in the Congregation.

He succeeded so well that the De Cuersian vision of our life, mission and spirituality was accepted by the congregation as authentic for exactly a century – that is, from the Founder's death in 1868. This remained the situation until the publication of two ground-breaking historical works – that of Lauréat Saint-Pierre's in 1968, followed by that of Donald Cave in the following year.

It was Tesnière, then, who was principally responsible for the text on Marian devotion that the 1874 Chapter inserted into the Constitutions after the death of the Founder.⁴ Coming originally from Father De Cuers, as we have noted, the title of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament is never found in any of the drafts of the Constitutions from Eymard's hand, although he certainly did use it on occasion and even spoke warmly about it at least once, according once again to Tesnière, a month or two before his death.⁵

As on so many occasions, although Eymard would not oppose, and was even willing at times to accept, certain of De Cuers' ideas or inventions – such as the royal mantle – when he acted and

⁴ As a matter of fact, the chapter in the Constitutions on Mary had a somewhat chequered history. The 1888 General Chapter returned to Father Eymard's own text of 1860, which had no special chapter dedicated to Mary at all. Three years later, however – in 1891 – the next General Chapter decided to retrieve Tesnière's non-Eymardian insertion from the version of the Constitutions approved earlier in 1874. So Tesnière eventually won the day. See *La Spiritualité*, pp. 223-235.

⁵ For an example, see Guitton, p. 326: "We shall honour Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament!" This declaration was reported two years after Eymard's death by Tesnière. As Cave has documented, Tesnière's Marian piety was the object of criticism for its notable exaggerations even in his own time.

spoke for himself he did so according to his own sensibility and vision.

Two different approaches to church decor

For the Marseille foundation, for example, De Cuers ordered a monstrance to be made according to his idea of Christ's royalty, so evocative for Restorationist tastes of the time of the once union of throne and altar characteristic of French history for so long. It was surmounted by a royal crown of gold-plated silver with precious stones.

Instead of the simple white canopy, suggested by Eymard, he chose to install instead a royal mantle decorated with the Fleur de Lys (symbol of the French monarchy) unfolding beneath the royal crown, with its white and purple folds surrounding the monstrance.

Though Eymard himself never promoted this device, not only did it become after his death the usual practice in the Congregation for more than a century; it was even the symbol by which the identity of Congregation became universally known and recognized!⁶

Similarly, in the 1860 draft of his Constitutions, Eymard spoke of Mary, as was his habit, in relation to the Cenacle, yet once again, it was the De Cuers model that became the characteristic of the Congregation for the century to follow.

Eymard's own view of Mary in relation to Eucharist

Saint-Pierre's historical work has restored to us Eymard's mature view of the role of Mary in relation to the Eucharistic mystery. In its biblical and theological depth it is a perennially valuable one, provided we understand it as Eymard did, namely, as seeing in Mary a model for those in whom Christ wishes to become incarnate once again through holy communion.

Taken in this sense, its rich content far surpasses the devotional character of our familiar approach associated with the title of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament.

In his latter years, Saint-Pierre writes, Eymard came to see "in the Word Incarnate the model of union with God and in the gift of self, that living without self-ownership, the consequence of the wedding banquet." He goes on:

We find a further confirmation of our contention in the reflection of this period on Mary, Queen of the Cenacle. As in the meditations of 25 and 26 March during the Long Retreat, these reflections stress the interiority of the Cenacle, of the kingdom of God, and of the growth of Jesus Christ in us. Gone are the prolific legends and any reference to the Virgin-Monstrance. Mary's role as spouse and mother is presented to partakers of the broken bread as the model of adoration in spirit and in truth. That basis is enough for speaker and hearers.

Here are some samples of Eymard's very rich texts from the latter years of his life, when his thought had fully developed regarding the role of Mary in relation to the mystery of the Eucharist:

25 March, 1867. In the Incarnation, our Lord becomes our kinsman. He is the child of Mary, our sister, and he became our blood relative in order to raise us to divine kinship. Thus, brotherhood is the stamp of Christianity. Today's feast is all interior, it is a feast of communion. In communion, we incarnate Jesus Christ in us. Communion is the goal of the Incarnation. By receiving worthily, we enter into God's plan to complete it. Mary did not want to be alone in carrying Jesus. May the Lord find in us a fitting dwelling as he did in Mary.

14 June, 1867. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... What happened in Mary at the Incarnation also happens to us in holy

⁶ Guitton, p. 161.

communion. To make us other Christs, the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus in a single body. The more perfect assumes the less perfect, and thereby we become changed in God. The Holy Spirit forms the Lord Jesus in our body by placing in us an earnest of the resurrection which will make us like the risen Christ. In our soul, the Spirit forms Jesus through union of interests. Allow the Holy Spirit to transform you into our Lord who seeks only to give himself and, for that, likes a large and well-aired Cenacle.

26 March, 1868. And the Word was made... bread. We receive Jesus Christ. In that way, the Eucharist is the extension of the Incarnation: and he dwelt among us... We need not envy our Blessed Mother. Our Lord gave himself to us to satisfy his love. And if you love our Lord in return, as Mary did, you become like a mother, begetting Jesus in you and able to engender him in others.

Commenting on these texts, Saint-Pierre goes on to point out how deeply the vision that inspires them draws upon the riches of our tradition.

Such language may sound forced, but it is only an echo of the words of Paul and of Augustine. The Letter to the Galatians, or that to the Ephesians, spoke not only 'of building up the body of Christ... unto the perfect man,' but even used the language of expectancy: "until Christ is formed in you."

The constant influence of Saint Paul

The author goes on to point out Eymard's reliance on the teaching of St. Paul whose writings he read and meditated on assiduously, citing a number of the Founder's texts.

5 July, 1967. In holy communion, we receive Jesus Christ... He comes in us to form his virtues in us, to fashion us to his own likeness, to change us into his image. He accomplishes this education to his resemblance in us, so that he grows in us as well as we grow in his likeness "until we reach the state of the perfect man" as St. Paul says.

6 December, 1867. Our Lord does not form us so much as he forms himself in us. He comes in us in communion to grow in us and foster his union with us. I have a guest in me whom I must feast by serving him with the virtues which he likes. He will live in you and you will prolong his earthly life in you: "my children, I am in travail with you until Jesus Christ is formed in you" (Gal., 4:19), that is, until our Lord is conceived, born, and grows in you.

8 May, 1868. Our Lord unites himself to the faithful, forms a partnership with them through his presence, leads them to action. He is always active, he is still virtuous in his members: he is poor, chaste, obedient in us. We complete him, we fulfil him, we prolong him on earth. "Until Christ is formed in you," as St. Paul said. He lives in you. As proof, he asked Paul: "Why do you persecute me?" We are his members, he truly lives in us. And our actions are his as well as ours. That is our model of love. Never cease to maintain that union from which you will draw the greatest fruits and give God most glory.⁷

The reader may perhaps ask whether it really makes so much difference whether we think of Mary as Our Lady of the Cenacle or as Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament. So let us explore this question for a moment.

What difference does the cenacle image make?

We will see the difference if we ask what each title evokes in the reader. The image of the Cenacle calls to mind the Last Supper, but also the gathered believers of the first community, about

⁷ Saint-Pierre/Thibault, pp. 79-80.

Mary the Lord's Mother, awaiting in prayer the coming of the Spirit. It then brings to mind the Spirit's powerful outpouring upon them with loud wind and enkindled flames, empowering them for mission. Thereafter it will be the place of gathering for the breaking of the bread in community, where the members are refreshed in their faith, deepen their union with Christ and one another, and are empowered once again for their mission.

The title Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, by contrast, is purely devotional in nature, simply linking Mary and the Sacrament without any special content. It carries none of the dynamic meaning we have suggested above, being incapable of awakening any of these powerful echoes so important for our understanding of our life and mission as believers. For that reason, the evocation of the Mary in the Cenacle is to be preferred.

Tony McSweeney, SSS