



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of July 25, 2015,
Feast of St James

Dear Friends,

“WHAT Heart could be more agreeable, more amiable and more admirable than the Heart of the Man-God, Who is called Jesus?” wrote Saint John Eudes to the priests of his congregation. “What honor does not this Divine Heart merit, which has always rendered, and shall always render more glory and love to God at every moment than the hearts of all men and angels could render Him for all eternity?” (July 29, 1672). In the seventeenth century, Saint John Eudes was an ardent apostle of liturgical worship of the Sacred Hearts of JESUS and MARY.

John Eudes was born on November 14, 1601, in Ri, Normandy, in the diocese of Sées. His father was a humble farmer who had wished to become a priest, but when the plague carried off all his brothers, he had to return to his family home. This is how the saint himself relates his conception: “My father and mother, having been married three years without conceiving a child, made a vow in honor of the Blessed Virgin to go to Our Lady of Recovery, a place of Marian devotion. Following which, my mother, having become pregnant, made a pilgrimage with my father to the same chapel, where they offered and consecrated me to Our Lord and Our Lady.” The Virgin proved to be generous, and John had two brothers and four sisters. One of them, François Eudes de Mezeray, wrote a history of France and was elected to the Académie Française. The old family home in Ri still bears the following inscription, attributed to the other brother, Charles Eudes d’Houay, who became a surgeon: “We are three brothers, adorers of the truth. The first preaches it, the second writes it, and I shall defend it till my last breath.” Marie, the eldest of the daughters, had four children, two boys and two girls. These daughters would enter the Congregation founded by John Eudes—the Order of Our Lady of Charity.

An army of saints

In the previous century, the French Wars of Religion had intensified passions, brought poverty, and opened the door to numerous excesses. The Church in France hardly did better than the kingdom. Despite the contempt for Christianity that spread under the influence of certain streams of thought, the Holy Spirit would bring about a fervent spiritual renewal. This Catholic renaissance in France would be led most notably by Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Monsieur Olier, Saint John



Saint John Eudes

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Eudes, Saint François de Laval, and Saint Marie of the Incarnation, among others.

John’s father was extremely generous towards the poor. His wife, who was deeply pious and had a strong character, took particular care in the religious and moral upbringing of John, a child with a gentle disposition, sharp mind and precocious piety. At a very early age, John took to going by himself to the parish church, which was very near his family home. One day his mother anxiously searched for him everywhere, and ended up finding him there in prayer. Yet he was not at all disobedient. At the age of nine, after having been slapped in the face by one of his playmates, he got on his knees and, according to the advice in the Gospel, turned the other cheek. Five years later, John took a vow of chastity, and already showed this tenacity of will that would become his characteristic feature. However, he was of delicate health and his parents hesitated to send him to the school in a town several kilometers away. But he insisted so much that in the end they saw the will of God in his persistence. On May 26, 1613, John made his First Holy Communion. From that day on, he redoubled his efforts to live as a true Christian. He obtained his parish priest’s permission to receive Holy Eucharist monthly, even though at the time, under the influence of Jansenism, the practice was to go to confession and receive Communion only on the most significant feasts.

Given John’s abilities and his excellent grades in school, in 1615 his father sent him to the Jesuit school

in Caen. At first the adolescent found himself a bit out of place. But his strength of character and his confidence in Divine Providence helped him overcome the difficulties, and soon he was earning excellent grades, without a lessening of his spiritual fervor. During his year of philosophy, he clearly perceived his call to the priesthood. His parents, who had hoped to see him settle close to them, envisioned a beautiful wedding for him. But faced with his resolution, they accepted his vocation. When he received his tonsure at the hands of the bishop of Sées, he saw it as already being a true and total consecration to the service of the Lord. He perceived God calling him to religious life while studying for the priesthood. In Caen a house of the Oratory had been recently established, connected with the Oratory of France founded by Monsieur de Bérulle in 1611, with the aim of contributing to the reform of the clergy. Greatly edified by the fervor of these Oratorians, John obtained, not without difficulty, his parents' consent, and joined their community. He then went to Paris to their house of formation. There, Monsieur de Bérulle began by giving him a deep formation in the practice of mental prayer.

The rock of prayer

In one of his works, John Eudes would write: "The holy exercise of prayer must be considered one of the chief foundations of Christian life and sanctity, since the whole life of JESUS Christ was but a perpetual prayer ... It is so important and so absolutely necessary, that the earth that bears us, the air we breathe, the bread that sustains us, the heart that beats in our chest, are not as necessary for man to live in a human manner as prayer is for a Christian to live in a Christian manner. Prayer is a respectful and loving elevation of our mind and heart to God. It is a sweet meeting, a holy communication, a divine conversation of the Christian soul with its God, in which the soul considers and contemplates Him in His divine perfections, in His mysteries and in His works; it adores, blesses, loves, and glorifies Him, and gives itself to Him, abasing itself before Him at the sight of its sins and ingratitude. It prays for His mercy, and learns to become like Him by imitating His divine virtues and perfections, and finally asks Him for all it needs to serve and love Him" (*The Life and the Kingdom of JESUS: A Treatise on Christian Perfection for Use by Clergy or Laity*, 1637).

In 1623, Bérulle asked his young follower, who had not yet received Holy Orders, to begin preaching. He said he could no longer keep such a lamp under a bushel. Around this time, John bound himself by a vow to serve JESUS and Mary, committing to refuse them nothing that he perceived to be their will or desire for him. On December 24, 1625, at the age of 24, he was ordained to the priesthood in Paris. He then took a few months off, which allowed him to deepen his knowledge of theology and of spiritual ways. Then he officially launched his ministry, dedicating himself to caring for the people of Normandy, decimated by the plague. He

pushed his devotion to the plague victims so far that no one in Caen dared give him refuge, out of fear of contagion. For several weeks he was reduced to sleeping outside the city in a large barrel.

A necessary work

Beginning in 1632, Father Eudes dedicated himself to the principal work of his life, that of "missions". To remedy religious ignorance and the loosening of morals, he traveled through Normandy, Burgundy, the Île-de-France, and many other places, even preaching before the king in Paris and Versailles in 1671. His popular eloquence and his authentic sanctity exerted a considerable influence on all classes of society. These missions formed a comprehensive work of evangelization. They were sometimes very long; at Rennes, for example, Father Eudes and his confreres spent four and a half months. They preached, visited the sick, catechized children and adults, always and everywhere exhorting their listeners to go to confession. John Eudes himself would testify: "Thirty missionaries would not be enough, so many are they who come from all sides to hear the sermons. Having been powerfully touched, they sometimes have to stay a week, waiting to be able to have their confessions heard. In short, God's blessings on this mission are very abundant" (Vasteville, July 9, 1659). Considering the spiritual fruit produced by the missions, he would write: "Oh, what a great good these missions are! Oh, how necessary! Oh, what a great evil it is to place obstacles in their path! ... Let us pray, my dearest brother, the Master of the harvest that He send more workers... What are so many doctors and scholars doing in Paris, while souls are perishing by the thousands for lack of those who reach out their hand to pull them from perdition and preserve them from the eternal fire?" (letter to Monsieur Blouet, July 23, 1659). It is estimated that during his lifetime Saint John Eudes preached one hundred ten missions.

In our time, Pope Francis exhorts all Christians to be missionaries: "Faith is God's precious gift, which opens our mind to know and love Him. He wants to enter into relationship with us and allow us to participate in His own life in order to make our life more meaningful, better and more beautiful. God loves us! Faith, however, needs to be accepted, it needs our personal response, the courage to entrust ourselves to God, to live His love and be grateful for His infinite mercy. It is a gift, not reserved for a few but offered with generosity. Everyone should be able to experience the joy of being loved by God, the joy of salvation! It is a gift that one cannot keep to oneself, but it is to be shared. ... The strength of our faith, at a personal and community level, can be measured by the ability to communicate it to others, to spread and live it in charity, to witness to it before those we meet and those who share the path of life with us" (May 19, 2013).

But the good procured by John Eudes' missions sometimes came with harsh opposition: "Here I am now in a village, to begin a mission," he would write to a Mother Abbess... "During the last one, I received some very fine epithets. Some called me the precursor of the Antichrist; others, that I was the Antichrist himself; others, a seducer, a devil who must not be believed; and still others, a sorcerer who drew everyone after him. Some of them considered driving me away, and might have carried out their plan, had not our Fathers arrived that very day. All that is but roses; the thorns that pierce my heart consist in seeing poor people sometimes follow me around for a week without being able to go to confession, although there are ten confessors here" (summer 1636). However, the care of souls did not prevent the missionary from attending to physical sufferings. In the larger towns, he established or restored shelters for the poor and infirm, as well as hospitals.

Painful decision

The missions had resounding, but not long-lasting, success, due to the lack of competent and zealous priests to maintain the flame they lit in hearts. Although there were many priests at the time, often they had not been well-prepared for their ministry. Left to themselves, they led an idle, sometimes even scandalous, life, or one animated by a somewhat unenlightened zeal. In 1641, John Eudes began the practice of addressing the clerics separately during the missions. But there was a need for seminaries where these priests would learn the requirements of their vocation. Moreover, although the Council of Trent had required all bishops to have a seminary, in France this directive had never been put into operation. John developed a plan to open a seminary in Caen. Richelieu, the Cardinal-Minister, encouraged him in this endeavor, and the bishop of Bayeux cooperated in it. However, for reasons that are not known, Father Bourgoing, superior of the Oratory of France since 1641, opposed the plan. So John Eudes made the painful decision to leave the Oratory of Caen of which he had become the superior, but to which he was not bound by any vow. On March 19, 1643, he joined a group of young priests who were waiting for him in the house that would be called "The Mission". None of them had been part of the Oratory. On Tuesday, March 24th, they went on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Deliverance, 15 kilometers away. After having spent the entire night in prayer, the next morning (March 25th) they celebrated the Mass of the feast of the Annunciation, and founded the Congregation of JESUS and MARY, the primary aim of which was the formation of priests, and then all forms of apostolic activity, particularly that of missions within the country. They were six in number, and their beginnings were humble. First, they had to receive candidates for the priesthood into a very primitive seminary for several months of spiritual and pastoral formation. Similar foundations were set up in Normandy and Brittany. They gradually extended the time spent in these houses, which became the customary place of priestly formation.

John Eudes' departure from the Oratory brought many false accusations against him—that he was fickle, ambitious, independent, and had been driven away by his superiors. One year before his death, he would write: "The infinite goodness of Our Lord JESUS and the incomparable charity of His divine Mother have granted us numerous special favors... But one of the greatest and perhaps the greatest of all, is to have established our congregation on the Cross. For, who could say what we have had to suffer in this respect, in every manner, everywhere, and for more than thirty-six years? Have we not been abandoned, at times by our closest friends? Have we not been blackened and disparaged by an infinite number of defamatory slanders and lampoons?... Have not the world and hell done their utmost to annihilate this little congregation since its birth? But what can all the forces of the universe do, even against an earthworm, or an atom, that is in the hand of the All-Powerful and under the protection of the Queen of Heaven?... For the more that God's projects share in His Son's Cross, the more they share in the graces and blessings that proceed from it."

First the Virgin

The missions obtained the conversion of many women of ill repute. A modest woman of Caen, Madeleine Lamy, urged Father Eudes to provide these women with the support and direction they lacked. On November 25, 1641, he gathered them in a house in which was first installed a little statue of the Blessed Virgin to ensure the "repentants" the maternal protection of the Mother of God. Thanks to Richelieu's favor, the legal existence of the house was assured. But with time, dissensions arose within the establishment, and Father Eudes decided to place experienced nuns at its helm. On August 16, 1644, three religious from the Visitation took charge of the house, called "Our Lady of Charity". The Order of Our Lady of Charity, on behalf of the "repentants", would be erected by Pope Alexander VII on January 2, 1666. After a century and a half of existence, it would number eight convents.

John Eudes loved to establish confraternities, be they in honor of the Most Blessed Heart of the Mother of God, or dedicated to the Sacred Hearts of JESUS and Mary, into which he enrolled a great number of persons from every rank and station. Some members of these confraternities, unable to embrace religious life, wished nevertheless to live the spirit of religious life in virginity or perpetual widowhood. John established for them a new society in which they would find means of sanctification appropriate to their situation, the "Society of the Heart of the Mother Most Admirable". This association was comprised of two bodies, one for men, both ecclesiastical and lay, and the other for women. Its goals were to glorify the Hearts of JESUS and Mary, as well as to work for the salvation of souls by spreading the love of, devotion to, and imitation of the Sacred Hearts. During the French Revolution, more than one priest would owe his

life to members of the Society. When no more priest was available, these lay people would gather their neighbors in a barn or deep in the woods to say the Rosary or sing hymns. They would catechize the children, accompany the dying, and visit prisoners.

John Eudes' apostolate was nourished by liturgical worship of the Sacred Hearts of JESUS and Mary, a devotion which had already been practiced by Saint Bernard in the twelfth century, Saint Mechtilde and Saint Gertrude in the thirteenth century, Saint Francis de Sales in the sixteenth century, and others. From the time his congregation of priests was established, John Eudes had his sons celebrate the solemn feasts in honor of the Sacred Hearts, and he himself composed liturgical pieces for them. The first was the feast of the Heart of Mary (1643). "The heart of Mary is indeed the harp of the true David, namely Our Lord JESUS Christ," wrote John Eudes. "For He fashioned it with His own hands... The strings of this holy harp are all the virtues of Mary's heart" (*The Admirable Heart of the Most Blessed Mother of God*, 1681).

For all seasons

Total confidence in the love of God revealed to humanity through the priestly Heart of JESUS and the maternal Heart of Mary is, in fact, the foundation of the way of holiness that John Eudes traveled. "JESUS did not come to conquer men like the kings and the powerful of this world," declares Pope Francis, "but He came to offer love with gentleness and humility. This is how He defined himself: *learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart* (Mt. 11:29). And the significance of the

Feast of the Sacred Heart of JESUS... is to discover ever more and to let ourselves be enfolded by the humble faithfulness and the gentleness of Christ's love, revelation of the Father's mercy. We can experience and savor the tenderness of this love at every stage of life: in times of joy and of sadness, in times of good health and of frailty and those of sickness" (June 27, 2014). In 1673, one year after the first public solemn celebration of the Feast of the Sacred Heart by John Eudes, Saint Margaret Mary would be favored by her first revelation of the Heart of JESUS, in her cloister in Paray-le-Monial.

The final years of John Eudes' life were marked by such a redoubling of external opposition that the work he had accomplished with so much trouble and effort seemed endangered. However, thanks to the positive influence of his friends, the storm passed. But John's health, which had always been feeble, was deteriorating. In 1678, he had to undergo painful operations on his abdomen. He stepped down from his duties as superior and had a successor elected, and then prepared himself for death, first with a personal retreat. In his last days, he was often heard saying or murmuring, "My JESUS and my all! My Beloved is mine! Come, o my lovable JESUS!" In moments of full lucidity, he talked about eternity with those around his bed, consoling them over his impending death and exhorting them to peace and fraternal charity. He died peacefully on August 19, 1680, around three o'clock in the afternoon, at the age of 79. John Eudes was canonized on May 31, 1925 by Pope Pius XI. His liturgical feast is celebrated on August 19th. In 2014, there were 380 Eudists in the world.

Saint John Eudes told priests: "Give yourselves to JESUS, in order to enter into the immensity of His great heart, which contains the heart of His holy mother and those of all the saints, and lose yourselves in this abyss of love, charity, mercy, humility, purity, patience, submission and holiness" (*The Admirable Heart*, III, 2). Let us engrave in our minds the motto left by the saint: "To honor God and to do His will with a great heart and a great love!"

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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