
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOHN EUDES! (1601-1680)



November 14 will mark the 400th birthday of Saint John Eudes, a missionary with a heart of fire, one of the great architects of Christian renewal in the 17th century. It would be hard to draw a thumbnail portrait of the man, but there is one word that can describe him, and that word is “missionary”. Like St. Theresa of Lisieux his kinswoman (both were from Normandy in France), he never set foot outside his country. His heart was ablaze with love of God and the salvation of souls. For over fifty years he preached and preached parish missions to the people of France who were having a difficult time getting over the Wars of Religion. He preached over 250 parish missions, and these retreats were quite longer than our actual parish retreats: they could go on for as long as three months.

CALL TO HOLINESS

The main object of his preaching was to have these thousands of Christians discover what they were through baptism, to help them see the covenant bond which the Blessed Trinity desired to have with each one, and show them the holiness to which all were called. «It is God’s will that you be holy. Be holy because the Lord is holy.» Saint John Eudes was a practical man; he worked hard at giving the people spiritual exercises to help them become better Christians, more and more attuned to Christ, exercises for each day, each week, every month, every year. One of the most important books he wrote is called *The Kingdom of Jesus in Souls*: it contains numerous spiritual exercises to help one become a better disciple of Jesus and continue to live out his life today. Always concerned with his people’s pastoral needs, he wrote a catechism for his parish missions. Here, too, his aim is the holiness of the baptized.

SHEPHERDS AFTER THE HEART OF GOD

He will show the same concern for priests, and will tell them of the holiness required of them. He tells them that they are the eyes, the mouth, and the heart of Jesus Christ. He reminds them that preaching is letting God speak to tell us of his divine will and urge us to follow it. He repeats time and again what it means to be a shepherd after the heart of God. He tries to pass on to them his great love and zeal for Jesus and the Church. « *Let us pity the many souls who perish each day. Created in God’s image and likeness, ransomed at the price of his Son’s Precious Blood, they are the souls of our brothers and sisters. Let us bemoan the amount of work Our Savior did for them, the many wounds and the pain he suffered, the tears and blood he shed. Let us commiserate with the shameful and cruel death he suffered for their sake. Let us be compassionate with his most holy Mother for her tears and the inconceivable anguish with which her maternal Heart was filed for the same cause. Let us not allow a day to pass without doing some good to someone and let us never tire of doing so.* » [Lectionary Proper to the Congregation of Jesus and Mary, p. 143.]

REQUISITE PASTORAL FORMATION

Through his many missions, St. John Eudes detected a need for priestly formation. Parish missions run the risk of bearing no fruit, where there are no holy pastors. John Eudes, too, wants to contribute his share to the renewal of the Church in France. In 1643 he founds the Congregation of Jesus and Mary – popularly known as the Eudist Congregation, after its founder. The congregation has three ends: the sanctification of its members, priestly formation, and preaching of parish missions and retreats. To them, too, he gives spiritual exercises! Exercises for parish missions and exercises for seminaries. During his lifetime St. John Eudes

established five major seminaries and took charge of a boys' college in the hope of forming future priests. The creation of seminaries had been one of the recommendations of the Council of Trent, but it will take close to two centuries before France would have one in every diocese. At the French Revolution, the Vincentians had 47 major and 2 minor seminaries, and the Sulpicians had four major and eleven minor seminaries. The Eudists were third with thirteen major and three minor seminaries. These houses of studies were meant for priests and future priests, to train them in pastoral life and ministry, as well as for ongoing formation; it is much later that they would evolve into faculties of theology. In the days of St. John Eudes, these schools were rather of the type where one followed sessions which could last between fifteen days and three months, days of retreat prior to ordination to ministries. Their object was to undergo exercises meant to lead both pastor and people of God to holiness. To help the seminary and mission staffs St. John Eudes wrote several books, among which was a book on the good confessor and apostolic preacher. He wrote the Constitutions of his Congregation, and every detail aims at the holiness of the members of the congregation.

BEARING THE MISERIES

In the course of his missions St. John Eudes came across much suffering and pain, notably among women who had succumbed to prostitution. In 1641 he founded the Order of Our Lady of Charity, to come to the help of women in difficulty. This Order would eventually give rise to the Good Shepherd Sisters of Angers [France], a community that would grow to nearly 20,000, in the 1950s. From his early priesthood, St. John Eudes had shown much compassion and concern for the poor and the defenceless. He even ministered to the plague-ridden, and so as not to contaminate the members of his community, he would sleep out in a field, in a barrel. In the Constitutions he wrote, he often reminds his brothers and sisters of the bonds to be maintained with the poor. «He is merciful who carries in his heart the misery of the most miserable.»

DISCOVERING GOD'S TENDERNESS

While France is plagued with fear by the Jansenistic Movement which presents to them a wrathful and avenging God, John Eudes discovers the merciful love of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. As early as 1648 he composed a Mass in honour of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and in 1672, one in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This will deserve him the titles of "author, apostle and doctor of the liturgical cults of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary". He will stress without cease the goodness of these two Hearts which, in fact, make only one. He will tell the people that these Hearts have now been given to us to love Jesus and Mary, and to love like them. Filled with such love, St. John Eudes desired to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. To a member of his community who wants to go to China as a missionary, he writes: "Go in the name of the Trinity, to make it known and adored where it is neither known nor worshipped." This period in history was known for its great missionary thrust. In New France the Ursulines and Augustinian nuns were already there, and the Canadian Martyrs had given their lives to the cause of the Gospel in 1648-1650. Bishop François de Laval, a friend of John Eudes, had just been appointed the first bishop of Québec. The writings of St. John Eudes had already reached New France: the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary had already been celebrated at the Hotel Dieu in Québec, and the feast of the Sacred Heart had been celebrated at the Ursuline convent. There was much religious fervour both sides of the Atlantic, evangelisation by word and action, and zeal for the mission of Jesus.

MISSIONARY ZEAL

May this sketch in honour of St. John Eudes rekindle our zeal and enthusiasm. May we, like St. John Eudes, be evangelisers-formators, in our time!

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