



IV

Historical Development of the Congregation and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament

The same spirituality and same ideal unites consecrated and lay members of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation as one spiritual family.

Where there is a community of the Religious of the Blessed Sacrament, the lay members share with them social and prayer times, mission, gatherings and formation initiatives. As associates, they are part of the extended Eymardian family which finds its identity in the spirit and mission of Saint Peter Julian Eymard.

Rule of Life for Associates (ROLA), 22 a, b

**Associates of the
Blessed Sacrament
Initial Formation Program**

Historical Development of the Congregation and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament

1. Opening Prayer

Leader: Saint Peter Julian Eymard left us these inspiring words as a reflection for all who seek to follow this saint who founded two congregations, one for men, the other for women, as well as an Aggregation of lay people. He was also the initiator of many other apostolates, aptly chosen to arouse love for the Holy Eucharist among the faithful. Let us listen to his words.

Reader 1: “The Eucharist is the life of the people. The Eucharist gives them a center of life. All can come together without the barriers of race or language in order to celebrate the feast days of the Church. It gives them a law of life, that of charity, of which it is the source; thus it forges between them a common bond, a Christian kinship. All eat the same bread, all are table companions of Jesus Christ who supernaturally creates among them a feeling of togetherness. Read the Acts of the Apostles. It states that the whole community of the first Christians, converted Jews and baptized pagans, belonging to different regions, “had but one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). Why? Because they were attentive to the teaching of the apostles and faithful in sharing in the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42)

Reader 2: Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. This is the bread which came down from heaven.

All: The Lord has nourished us with this rich food. This is the bread.

Leader: Let us pray:

All: O God,
you filled Saint Peter Julian Eymard
with your wondrous Love
for the mysteries of the body and blood of your Son.
Grant, we beseech you,
that like him,
we may experience the richness of this holy banquet.
We make this prayer through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. Introduction to the Theme

On May 13, 1856, Saint Peter Julian Eymard founded the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. Celebrating this anniversary might seem to have significance only for the congregations he founded (including the woman's branch). However, his canonization by Saint John XXIII at the end of the first session of Vatican Council II, and his having been declared "Apostle of the Eucharist" by Saint John Paul II and inserted by him into the general calendar of the church for August 2 suggests that he has something to offer to the entire church at this time.

Saint Peter Julian Eymard's search for God was conditioned by the familial, social and religious context of his day – he was a man of the nineteenth century French church – as well as the graces he received from God. Throughout the history of the congregation, Peter Julian's life has shone as a kind of beacon for those in and associated with the congregation as a guidepost for their own search for God and in their personal progress toward becoming ever more authentic witnesses of God's love in the Eucharist.

From the very beginning, the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament has wanted to share its spirituality and Eucharistic mission with the laity. Father Eymard worked on this project from the very beginning. He left a considerable amount of manuscripts that witness his commitment – which lasted until his death – of defining his proposal of eucharistic life for the laity, giving an organization to answer to the different situations of the people interested. He himself adopted the name, "Agregation du Tres Saint-Sacrement" (Association of the Blessed Sacrament).

Anticipating the renewal of the church brought about by Vatican Councils I and II, Saint Eymard had a vision of priests, deacons, sisters, and lay people living lives of total dedication to the spiritual values and apostolic mission that are celebrated and contemplated in the eucharistic liturgy and in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

3. Eymard . . . *In His Own Words*

“...the love of Jesus is really neglected and even humiliated in the Christian world . . . Feed this fire which God has enkindled through you; that is your mission, you can’t have a more beautiful one.”

To Clotilde Tholin-Bost
October 8, 1865

“Be the apostle of the divine Eucharist, like a flame which enlightens and warms, like the angel of his heart who will go to proclaim him to those who don’t know him and will encourage those who love him and are suffering.”

To Mme. Antoinette de Grandeville
July 4, 1859

“The inner gift of self is the real gift, because then our Lord becomes our Savior...by giving us his own form of life.”

To Countess D’Andigne
January 20, 1865

4. Bible Text

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5–11, NAB

5. Conversation – tell us your story

- Religious men and women, lay people associated with and served by the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament have been touched by this gentle saint, Peter Julian Eymard, for over 150 years. Who are some of the people who have touched and shaped *you* in your own faith journey? How have they done so?
- As you read about the brief history of the congregation and the development of the *associate* programs what impressions or conclusions do you draw about this saint and/or the spirit and gift of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation?

6. Teaching – drawing on the following reading

- *Historical Development of the Congregation and the Aggregation* by Jim Brown.

Historical Development of the Congregation and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament – Key Points

- Today we notice a resurgence of movements and church groups that bring to the church a new dynamism of life and activity. Some of them are new, because the Holy Spirit is constantly stirring initiatives corresponding to the needs of our times. Other movements are grafted on the trunk of spiritualities and institutions that have existed for centuries. Among these latter ones, the “aggregations” linked to the spiritual tradition of religious congregations have an important place. The word “aggregation” expresses precisely the link that exists between an association of lay people and a religious congregation, by reason of its “association” with this religious community from which it draws its inspiration and often even its organization. The Province of Saint Ann opted to use the word “Associates” as a good English translation of the French word *agregation*.
- It is of primary importance that an aggregation – or association – whose existence goes back to the founder of a religious congregation, rediscover the precious insight of its charism, that is, the inspiration that led the man of God to desire to associate laypeople to the life and mission of the religious congregation. Equally important is to discover and interpret the transformations that the associate programs experienced in the course of its history. Finally, it would always be important to renew its spirit within the context of the church and today’s society while finding new forms for its realization.
- It should also be remembered that the Second Vatican Council inaugurated a new period regarding the role of the laity in the life of the church. The establishment of the associates program is an integral part of the eucharistic renewal taking place within the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament and also a part of a broader movement in the postconciliar church where religious communities have actively sought ways to involve committed lay persons meaningfully in their life and mission.

Reading

Historical Development of the Congregation and the Aggregation

by Jim Brown, Associate of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament

The History

Saint Peter Julian Eymard was born February 4, 1811, in La Mure, France. He was ordained a priest for the diocese of Grenoble on July 20, 1834. Feeling the call to religious life, he was welcomed into the Society of Mary (the Marists) on August 20, 1839. He remained a Marist priest for 17 years. He held many important positions in the order, including provincial superior and assistant to the founder and superior general, Father Claude Colin. In December 1845, he was named the director of the Third Order of Mary, a group of lay men and women eager to lead a Christian life in union with the Society of Mary. He was asked to revitalize the group, he wrote their Rule and eventually secured approbation from Rome.

During these years as a Marist, Father Eymard developed a love and appreciation for Christ in the Eucharist. (He already had a reputation as the “Marist priest with a eucharistic inspiration.”) By 1856, Father Eymard was increasingly moving toward founding a religious congregation dedicated to promoting perpetual adoration and a eucharistic apostolate. When Father Eymard presented his idea for a new foundation to the archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Sibour, he initially rejected the proposal because in his mind the idea of a religious community dedicated only to adoration was “too contemplative.” Father Eymard assured the archbishop that in addition to promoting adoration, his new community would also dedicate itself to the ministry of catechesis for First Communion for adults. The archbishop was won over and approved of Father Eymard founding a new religious community. The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament was born.

By 1856, seeing how many lay men and women were committed to perpetual adoration, Father Eymard thought of the idea of an Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament, a group of laity he wanted to associate with his work, who wanted to make the Eucharist the source of their whole life. The aggregation was inaugurated in Marseilles and quickly spread throughout France. They were dedicated to promoting the knowledge and worship of

the Eucharist as the source of spiritual renewal in the church and society. The laity, as associates, thus formed the third branch of the bigger Eymardian family. In 1859, the aggregation received its official canonical status.

The Development of the Aggregation

As indicated in II, by the time Father Eymard founded the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, he believed that Catholic lay women and men should have fuller access to spiritual writings and should be involved in Eucharist centered catechesis. In other words, he believed that his aggregation, while centered in adoration, should have an apostolic expression and through an intense Eucharistic spirituality he aimed at the formation of *the entire life* of the associate.

Following the death of Father Eymard in 1868, the Blessed Sacrament religious developed various forms of eucharistic associations, particularly after 1881 with the start of National and International Eucharistic Congresses. In 1875, the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament received approbation by Pope Pius IX.

Over time, these associations spread to all parts of the world where the congregation established communities. It could be said that the spirit proposed by Father Eymard for the aggregation was the very same as that which animates the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament: *“the gift of oneself to God and to our neighbor out of love, as Jesus has given himself and still gives himself to us in the Eucharist.”*

In 1957, the Holy See approved the last statutes of the congregation. This began a process of adaptation to the times of the church and of the world. Through the years of the Second Vatican Council and the renewal General Chapters of 1971, 1975, and 1981, the *Rule of Life* was reformulated for the congregation which was now spread over five continents.

As a result of the Second Vatican Council’s mandate to re-examine the charism and mission of their founder, the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament set out on a program to:

1. Return to their sources and to the initial inspirations of their founder. This resulted in an increased interest in studying the writings

of Saint Peter Julian Eymard, facilitated by Blessed Sacrament scholars who through their writings guided the congregation through a rediscovery of the “authentic Eymard.”

2. Deepen their understanding of the theology of the Eucharist as expressed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and to update the congregation in line with the church’s own *aggiornamento*.
3. Expand their appreciation and understanding from the Second Vatican Council of the laity’s baptismal and vocational call to serve the church and the world.
4. Study the teachings on evangelization by Pope Paul VI (and later Saint John-Paul II) as expressed in *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*.
5. Welcome a growing number of lay women and men to join with Blessed Sacrament religious in eucharistic evangelizing, especially in their participation and leadership in *Life in the Eucharist* programs and the founding of the Center for Eucharistic Evangelizing.

Increasingly, these lay women and men involved in the *Life in the Eucharist* ministry, welcomed an invitation by the religious of the congregation to see themselves as “Associates” of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. *Life in the Eucharist* teams spread throughout the United States and into countries where the Blessed Sacrament religious had foundations. Lay parishioners in the various Blessed Sacrament parishes began to join the religious for the Liturgy of the Hours and adoration, many of whom saw themselves as responding to the call of Saint Peter Julian Eymard to foster a eucharistic piety in their own lives and engage in the mission of making known the love of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and drawing others to the sacrament.

The idea among the Blessed Sacrament religious of sharing their life and the mission of the congregation with the laity was seen as being connected with a broader movement in the postconciliar church where religious communities have actively sought ways to involve committed lay persons meaningfully in their life and mission.

An authoritative set of guidelines was formulated in 2005 for the aggregation to express a renewed vision of associative life for the laity that takes into consideration the *Rule of Life* of the congregation. The document was called *Project of Life* of the Congregation and has been re-titled in the Province of Saint Ann, the *Rule of Life for Associates of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament*. It stems from the long tradition of our religious family which, starting from Father Eymard, gave life to a “public association of lay faithful” called Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament, in order to share the eucharistic mission with the laity.

Conclusion

As associates programs are developing in Blessed Sacrament and other parishes throughout the United States, the leadership of the congregation and their lay colleagues see the challenges and opportunities before them to follow in the footsteps of their founder, Saint Peter Julian Eymard. Father Eymard himself knew how to use the very different starting points to realize his mission inspired by the Eucharist: the military prison of Toulon, the slums of Paris, along with the middle class areas of Lyons and the Paris region. The establishment of the Association of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament heralds a fresh starting point for the congregation. Like him, the religious of the Blessed Sacrament today are committed to adapting their charism to the energy found in their lay associates “so that Christ’s reign may come and the glory of God is revealed to the world.” (*Rule of Life*, 1)

7. Closing Prayer

A Psalm in Honor of the Eymardian Charism

Broken bread we offer, Christ's thanksgiving sign.
 Cup of wine is given, fruit of David's vine.
 Jesus remembered and all he has done,
 sacrificial banquet gathers us as one.

Peter Julian Eymard, him we now proclaim.
 Open to the Spirit, led him to exclaim –
 Jesus is there in eucharistic bread,
 bring all people to him and let them be fed.

Eucharistic mystery seized his mind his heart.
 All this mystery promised he sought to impart.
 His life was centered on this mystery –
 sacrificial presence, lived reality.

Awakened understanding of this covenant
 led to adoration, in acknowledgement.
 Prayer to the Father, in the spirit done,
 for the world's salvation with and through the Son.

Now we remember Eymard's love and zeal,
 we make known this mystery and seek to reveal
 how Jesus daily feeds the poor and weak,
 raises up the fallen, welcomes all who seek.

Let us then faith's mystery joyfully proclaim
 and with Peter Julian constantly remain
 centered on Christ, in eucharistic sign,
 prayer and word in action, Jesus we are thine!

8. Additional Reading Material

- *Saint Peter Julian Eymard, Apostle of the Eucharist – His Life, Times and Religious Congregations.* Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (2011).
- Pelletier, Norman, SSS. *Father Eymard in the History of the Congregation*
- Bernier, Paul, SSS. “150 Years.” *Emmanuel*, May/June 2006.



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