

Hidden Life in Piety¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Friday, October 19, 1860

My dear Sisters, we have spoken about our hidden life in the virtues; now we will speak about our hidden life in piety.

Avoid extraordinary piety, because you would then leave aside the hidden life. Extraordinary piety consists in doing things that others don't do, which make people say: See how pious that person is; she does what the saints do. It would be wrong for us, for all the more reason, to do unusual things that would draw attention to ourselves. Our piety must be such that it blends in with the common and ordinary actions of the community. The application will clarify this for you, better than all my words.

First, my Sisters, **your piety must be simple.** What does it mean to have a simple piety? That you don't stand out among ordinary pious persons, and that you do things as they are usually done.

In all this, there are three degrees. Avoid defects. For example, bad posture in prayer, or fulfilling your religious duties with indifference is a defect. I don't have to mention it.

There is another degree of piety; namely, to do things exteriorly in the most perfect way – that would draw attention to yourself: either in recollection, in posture, or in the externals of piety. You must not place your perfection in the externals, but in the internal, as I told you. You must become natural and ordinary. **Learn to do heroic things in the most ordinary way in the world.**

The other degree is to do things in an average way, without fuss or exaggeration in your joy to accomplish zealous deeds. That's not for you, not for your condition. Some persons are very joyful in humiliation; others go to pray with great joy. You can go to pray very joyfully, soaring like an eagle interiorly all you want, but externally, let nothing show. When you go to church, I don't want any of this. Some pious persons groan, and others seem to have a flame externally coming out of them. Some might say: Saintly men and women acted like that. You are mere servants. Servants should not be noticed. St. Theresa and the great saints had an external piety that delighted others; but this is not for you. You would no longer be servants; you would have to leave. It's harder to be simple, than to do extraordinary things. If you enter the church and prostrate yourself to the ground, there might be a little sentiment that helps your piety, but that would also nourish self-love. Sometimes, there is some thrill behind extraordinary mortifications; but human nature does not like ordinary mortification – it is the death of deaths.

Your piety must be simple in posture. Keep yourself modestly recollected, but not too much, so that no one will notice your recollection. To remain kneeling is not extraordinary. Evidently, negligence would be a defect that we must avoid. Simplicity in the way you walk and sit, simplicity is the guiding rule. Act like everyone else, like any pious person. May your piety be simple in your external actions – with nothing in your appearance that speaks of mortification, because it would bring attention to yourself. If everyone does it, then do it; if they don't do it, then do it in your room, not in church.

In the South and in Italy, there are certain devotions that call for arms extended in the form of a cross; that would be extraordinary for us. In Spain, and especially in the East, persons prostrate with the

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forehead against the ground; here, it would be seen as extraordinary; Spaniards have a devotion to signs of the cross; they make large ones and small ones. That's their devotion, but it is not common among us. You understand what I mean concerning simplicity in the externals.

If ever you pray your (divine) office in public, in a coach or on the road, you should not make any sign of the cross. Those who are passing by don't make any. Sometimes we see religious women in a train who pull out their breviary and make signs of the cross. That is not an oratory: there's no altar there. If you say the rosary, do it discreetly; that's acceptable. Some seem to think that a religious habit allows them to behave foolishly. My good Sister, your rule does not tell you to recite the office in a train or in a public square. Avoid making the sign of the cross on the streets or in a square – that becomes obvious to people. When there is lightning and thunder, you are permitted to make the sign of the cross when you are afraid in a train. You will see other women doing it, because they are afraid. That's okay, even men do this.

That's your perfection: externally, you must appear like ordinary persons, not perfect. I don't want you to go around with a sad face half-a-meter long. In years past, people went preaching on the streets. This was acceptable in the time of St. Francis. Be modestly modest – that's all. People say I did not open my eyes, I did not see what was going on – and I would add, you are a fool. You might object: But the saints acted that way. They had their gifts and graces. St. Francis de Sales used to say: Look without seeing, act with a modest modesty – that's much better. The other day I was looking at two women religious: one had her eyes open like prunes – true, she was young, and it was excessive; the other next to her lowered her eyes so much I could not see them, as though she wanted to put them in her snuffbox. I said to myself: It would be good to have a third one with them – I would like the third one to be a Servant of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Thirdly, your piety must be simple in externals. Don't take on extraordinary practices. When you are alone, do what prudence, wisdom, and obedience permit you. Just be ordinary and all will go well.

I don't want you searching for external practices – either in prayers, or penances, or external signs of humility – nothing like that. The Blessed Virgin did not act that way. [...] She is your mother and model. If you want to have piety like that of all the saints, some recited one hundred fifty psalms every day: you cannot do that; some made one hundred genuflections: you do not; others knelt down on pebbles: that's not for you; others wore metal instruments of penance and hair shirts – and everyone knew it. That was their devotion.

Use simple prayers: everything that reaches God is simple. Everything that excites the nervous system is not worth much – deep down there is self-love. The love of God is based on truth: simplicity does not have pompous ways. Furthermore, there is no need to invent something new – all the existing prayers are good, and our posture is set by the Church. – But this and that saint did these things. – Did the Blessed Virgin do them? No. She is our model. Do you want to behave so that people will praise you? In fact there is no reason for it. It is a good omen. God made all things, and all is good: everything is fine and works together toward a universal good.

That's how we must behave. This is good for us, too, when we are in a different situation than yours: we must work hard at staying in the shadows, at not being noticed in our service to God and in our piety. The man must disappear, while Jesus Christ must increase. Man is a cloud that disappears in the presence of the sun, like John the Baptist in the presence of our Lord (cf. Jn 3:30). Man must bury himself, and Jesus Christ must be everything. See what stands out in heaven: the saints are distinguished by their love; we don't admire them, because there is only one center of admiration, our Lord Jesus Christ. The saints merely share in our Lord and in his love. The same must happen here. Only Jesus Christ is great. On entering the chapel what catches our attention? There are Fathers and Brothers, and the Superior there, but the center of attention is our Lord. Even the one who presides at Mass is singled out by the Church, not by himself. How beautiful!

Our poor human nature becomes the victim of the sacrifice: we offer it to glorify our Lord. It is not death but annihilation; that is more difficult than doing something extraordinary, than following our own mind. We do many things on our own, things that we choose and desire, things that would be impossible if obedience commanded them. Many people live with the greatest sacrifices, but could not survive in common life: in the things of their own choice self-love is present – that's the real reason.