

Means to Recollect the Imagination¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Tuesday, June 11, 1861

My good Sisters, it's been such a long since I last came, that I won't know how to speak to you anymore. First of all, I will preach your retreat starting Sunday, next week. You will have time to prepare yourselves a little. You must ask God's help, so that both you and I will be well prepared, since a retreat is a very important time of grace.

My Sisters, how can we recollect ourselves? When we are very distracted and preoccupied, when our senses are scattered, what must we do to recollect ourselves? We will examine this problem, which is an everyday occurrence.

There are several kinds of distractions: that of the mind by reasoning, and that of the soul by senses. I want to talk about the latter. First, we must describe it well. We are all familiar with the imagination: St. Theresa calls it the lunatic in the house. We cannot stop it; it comes and goes. All we can do is leave it alone. When people say there's a lunatic in the house, there is nothing more to do. We cannot control the imagination; consequently, when it becomes feverish, it is impossible to stop it. I label as fever of the imagination when we are so upset, scattered in the things of our faith, in the things of the Good Lord, that we don't know how to recollect ourselves. It is impossible to calm a feverish patient full of anxiety. You have to leave that lunatic alone.

What can be done? I will speak about it. The imagination is always trying to sneak in with its own agenda. A rather vivid and passionate imagination finds a way to take over a topic and the mind, and steals everything like a thief, building castles in Spain with it all. At other times, one may have a good thought about the Good Lord, recalling something of the past, when immediately the imagination will recall other events with no reference to God. It will entertain itself, as happened when we were young – and suddenly we are astonished to find ourselves back in our native town.

Again, the imagination will embroider things in an instant! For example, concerning holy places like Bethlehem or Nazareth, if the imagination takes hold of everything, it will make the animals speak, like in the *Pastorales* of Provence where animals are made to speak. It does all that. These things are good in themselves, but the imagination has taken possession of the conversation. How can we regain control of the imagination? We must admit that we have some occasions of very great distraction, for example, when we are worried or tired. That's when the imagination gains its power. If we are indisposed or agitated, since imagination and head are closely related, distraction will come like ignited gunpowder.

Let's be practical; how can we recollect the imagination? I'm not sure: if I knew, I would surely do it. – Each must do what he can. **However, there are some rules.** You will not calm the imagination with arguments. Do not argue with a fool; it's a waste of time. Do not give her a feeling of importance. If what is in our imagination is contrary to our subject, and goes from the supernatural to the human, just let it go. They say that's the best way. I heard of a lovely analogy that happened to me in fact. One day, I met a little boy about four or five years old in the street. He had fallen down, but was not complaining. When he saw me, he started to scream. I went and tried to console him, but he kept shouting and crying. He was spoiled. When I saw that, I just left him there. Hardly had I reached the street-corner, when he

¹ Number 327. *Moyens de recueillir l'imagination.*

jumped up and ran as fast as he could! The imagination is like that. It will start shouting or telling you delightful things. Pay no attention to such a fool. When the imagination goes outside the subject, that's the rule [to follow].

When it stays on topic, we must handle it differently. It has become too sensitive. Bring in the heart and make acts of affection, not reflections. It's too late, since the imagination has taken over. For example, when reflecting on the stable in Bethlehem, our imagination remains there childishly. Without forcing ourselves, we can enter immediately into our subject. Since the affections are stronger than the imagination, we must make acts of affection: like a sewing needle that is no longer in the cloth; it has passed through and the thread remains. The same principle remains: we must not argue with the imagination. We say: You have worked well! It is happy, and our heart comes in. **These are two means:** never argue with the imagination, and allow it to work when it is in line with your subject.

There is another means that is even better than all that: control the imagination by means of the senses when all else fails. You cannot command the imagination, as you can the will – you will not succeed. When you see it happening, you can make a meditation of recollection through the senses. It's amazing that the soul is often more recollected by the senses, than when done only through the heart and the will. Then everything else flutters around us. When we can get hold of this fool, and force it to meditate, the result is a wonderful calm, a reign of peace.

If you ask, how does that work? I'm tempted to answer: Look for yourselves, my poor Sisters. However, **I will tell you what I have found.** When I am distracted because of dealing with so many people – everything goes wild. If we want to be recollected, it will have to be by means of the imagination itself. We are so tired. When I come before our Lord, I begin with the senses. I imagine seeing our Lord like St. Thomas, like Magdalene especially, who was a good adorer – I prefer her to the others. I see her adoring our Lord beginning with his feet – she found everything in his humanity. She kissed his feet, adored them, and wiped them with her hair (cf. Lk 7:38).

I imitate Magdalene: she adored with her eyes. She saw the holes in his feet, and, since our Lord is risen, these holes are filled with light. I pause there. I take as my model St. Magdalene, or St. Thomas, or any saint who had a similar experience; but especially St. Magdalene – she's my saint. After the resurrection, the holy women kissed the feet of Jesus, and she also kissed them (cf. Mt 28:1-10). Your eyes focus on the wound made by the nail: you must take the head of the nail, you must take the blood, and from the blood you go to the soul, and from the soul to the divinity – to our Lord's entire person. This keeps the imagination busy; then we go to the soul. Once the senses are fed, they fall asleep, while we go to our Lord. From there, we go to his hands. I don't know, but that's what I do. From the feet, we come to adore the humanity of our Lord, his hands are his goodness that gives. We must adore, kiss the wounds in his hands, these wounds from which flow streams of goodness and charity. We must take his hand and place it on our head and ask him to bless us – we place it on our heart and tell him: I love you! Whatever attracts you: the soul is recollected and at peace. From there, we go to the crown of thorns – here, the Blessed Virgin is a big help.

Some like to see the Blessed Virgin adoring our Lord taken down from the cross: in each wound she found a virtue. She knew why our Lord had received each wound, and what he had said. When we are somewhat united to the Blessed Virgin, we enter with her in veneration, in adoration of the body of our Lord. In this way, we become a little recollected, and the imagination has something to do. And we find that we have benefited from it all.

If the Good Lord wants you to be recollected without passing through the senses, that's better. Otherwise, the best way is to put the senses to sleep: like a mother, once her child is sleeping, she can

work. Some say that the imagination sleeps; but my poor Daughters, it will always precede you; you cannot get rid of it.

There is a fourth way to recollect the imagination. This happens when the Good Lord attracts us to himself by an internal grace of divine goodness that affects even the body. Now the senses are fed. We cannot attain this by ourselves; it is the Good Lord's work. By means of the virtues, we go from below upward; but here it is from above downward – a heavenly dew. There's only one thing to do when the Good Lord puts us in that state: do not do what I just told you. Be careful, because if you do, you will go towards the senses rather than towards God, resulting in the loss of his grace.

Normally the first way is preferable, as much as possible, in order not to allow the imagination to take the initiative ahead of grace. This is obvious every time a soul is caught off guard, and starts giving thanks like a beggar looking at the hand that is giving. The temptation is to look at the gift and to withdraw within oneself; nature is very quick. We must return to our first grace by means of the virtues. The soul does what it can – we must express some act of love from it, so that everything will be used to express love for God.

My good Sisters, do you understand? Good! It would be too bad if you didn't! If you say: I want to pray like Fr. Eymard; the Good Lord will say: You are not Fr. Eymard! And if I wanted to make your kind of meditation, he would tell me: You are not your poor daughters! We each have our own prayer. However, **the experiences of others can help us perfect our virtues.**

I tried to be understandable, because this is very practical, something that happens every day. In the morning all goes well; at night, nothing happens. By then we meditate like fools: Note well. Those who are ignorant merely listen to others. Morning prayer is easy, but after ten o'clock in the evening, I say: My God, do not pay attention to me; see my good will.



Points for reflection:

What are the guidelines offered here to recollect the imagination?
Fr. Eymard shares his personal experience. Can you relate it?

What do you think about it?