

Catching Up With An Old Friend

John Kingston



A Great Chance

One of the pleasant things about my current employ is that I have on four occasions accompanied a group of students to France on exchange. During these times I have had some free time whilst the students were with their host families for Christmas holidays. In December (2007) / January (2008) I took the opportunity to visit La Mure d'Isère after a colleague had invited me to celebrate Christmas with her family near Grenoble.

Grenoble and various places around it have been in my consciousness a good deal of my life, being associated with St Peter-Julian. So this trip south from Paris, I figured, might afford an opportunity to make *un petit pèlerinage saint à la ville natale de Saint Pierre-Julien Eymard*. One of the most striking facts of this man's life is that it formed a not very large circle from La Mure and back: born there (1811) and dying there (1868), supposedly in the same house. Whilst in La Mure, though, I was told that Peter-Julian was actually born next door. But let's not let a brick wall disturb a nicely rounded image, especially since there is a second circle formed: Peter-Julian was baptised and buried (the first time) at the old parish church, which is now the Chapel of St Peter-Julian.

This visit was always going to be a little tongue-in-cheek, coloured with romantic notions of religious pilgrimage and, I must admit, I had one eye on stories I might share with Graeme Duro when I got back. Along with any stories, Graeme also got a couple of votive candles from the present parish church at La Mure. These are in a plastic cup with an image of Peter-Julian on them.

While in the Area

On my return trip to Paris, I had already planned going to Moissac, a short distance from Toulouse and one of the stopping points for those doing the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. Presumably the remaining 1085 kilometres would have a few more stops. So, pilgrimage was in the air. Whilst in the area I was also able to visit La Grande Chartreuse, in part inspired by the recent movie "Into Great Silence" (Le Grand Silence) but more so to pay tribute to Jim Dekker and his time in the Carthusians.

At la Grande Chartreuse a weather-beaten sign reminded us «*On ne visite pas le Monastère* » and also «*Les moines, qui ont consacré leur vie à Dieu, vous remercient de respecter leur solitude dans laquelle ils prient et s'offrent en silence pour vous.* » Outside, other signs declared «*Zone de Silence* », and most visitors respect this.

So, whatever might have been happening on the "pilgrimage level", going to La Mure was a chance to get in touch with a place and the life of a person who has had a considerable effect in my own life. Apart from all that, the snow-covered beauty of the surrounding countryside proved to be immensely impressive.

Setting Out

We were staying at Crolles, a small place just outside Grenoble where Laurence's brother lives and is Mayor. François Brottes also has been a Député in l'Assemblée Nationale for about ten years, and was recently re-elected. We had previously had dinner with him and his partner in la Buvette de l'Assemblée. That was an interesting one, to be in the "Members Bar" of the French parliament. Crolles sits at the base of massive hills including the angular giant "Dent de Crolles" (the Crolles tooth).

Travelling in a small and rather unwell Renault "Twingo", we had promised to turn back should the weather become dangerous (basically rain or snow, as would be more likely, or slippery roads). The methods of clearing roads after snow fall, however, are very efficient and our trip was without incident. Going south-south-east out of Grenoble, we wound our way up the side of a mountain through small villages and, later, some small snow resorts. Travel pre-automobile and sealed roads must have meant that many people would have spent their whole lives without ever getting into the cities. I guess young clerics like Peter-Julian would have had opportunities beyond those of the average person.

After the climb we were in flatter country piled with snow, and then went down a bit into La Mure whose sign proclaims it as «*La ville natale de St Peter-Julien Eymard* ». In itself, La Mure is a pretty unspectacular place apart from the stunning

mountains and national parks surrounding it in the mid-distance. Given that you are up amongst them, you don't get a sense of being surrounded and towered over by the mountains, although there are some high spots just behind La Mure, but they are beautiful and close enough to inspire a degree of awe. Would "our man" have developed a romantic awe of the surrounding countryside, or did mountains and hills and snow represent simply a greater degree of difficulty for daily life? Obviously, he walked (and rode) in the area, and I remember his visits to Les Trois Croix which reminded him of Calvary. These crosses were in remembrance of the Calvary Chapel erected over the protestant citadel destroyed in 1580 during the Wars of Religion. When Peter-Julian was about four years old, in March 1815, Napoleon stopped here before his meeting with the royal troops at Laffrey, about twenty kilometres south of Grenoble.

Peter-Julian's world was lived against the backdrop of the assertion of Catholic faith, and of the back-and-forth between monarchy and republic to which Don Cave used refer in his thoughts on the development of eucharistic devotion. This was particularly so in relation to the regal trappings of piety and decoration in our churches. Later understanding of Peter-Julian, as I recall it, saw him as broadening beyond this into an essential link between adoration and the "ends of sacrifice", the prism through which the Mass was understood.

Directions

At the La Mure tourist office we were pointed in the direction of our main places of interest: the house in which Peter-Julian Eymard was born and died, and the two churches. Two priests of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation (SSS) were living in the house whilst the local presbytery was being restored, but we were cautioned to remember the French "holy hour" of siesta. The house is just a short walk from the tourist office but, with an eye on our watch, we headed for the parish church and then the (once larger) chapel dedicated to Peter-Julian Eymard.

The chapel (*l'église St Pierre-Julian Eymard*), once the parish church, has a history dating back to the eleventh century, when it was part of a Benedictine priory. The nave and bell tower were reconstructed around 1606, their stones having been needed elsewhere during the Wars of Religion. This chapel, now quite a lovely and simple space, has been dedicated to (the then Blessed) Peter-Julian since 1925. The baptistery and font are there, with a window showing Peter-Julian on his death bed receiving Viaticum: « *Notre Seigneur exige de moi tant de délicatesse que ce doit être bientôt la fin* ». Behind the altar are three more windows dedicated to Eymard. One is a classic image of him in soutane, surplice and stole, holding a monstrance. The other two are scenes from his childhood. In one, he can hear Jesus more clearly by climbing close to the tabernacle: « *Je pense à lui. Ce là que je l'écoute et l'entends le mieux* ». In the other he takes time out to study Latin because he wants to be a priest: « *Je veux apprendre le latin pour être prêtre* ».



Beside the chapel is the parish graveyard where almost immediately inside the gate you find the tombs of Eymard, his sister and their adopted sister. Presumably the sisters are still there (« *ici repose* »; present tense), but of Eymard there's no body; it is now in Paris. The good earth is all that remains beneath the prie-dieu shaped tomb (« *ici a reposé* »; a past tense). On the prie-dieu is a monstrance, a stole and an open book: « *Aimons nous Jésus qui nous aime tant dans son divin sacrement* »: "Let us love Jesus who has loved us so much in his divine sacrament". I was surprised at the haste with which Eymard's remains were translated to Paris: « *transféré a Paris en 1877* », about nine years after his death. Presumably the cause of sainthood would be more readily progressed in the big city than in this relative backwater close to the Isère River. As we were leaving the chapel, an elderly lady arrived and took her place in the pews for a bit of quiet time. I turned for a last look, and her simple image has stayed with me.

Marie Ann Eymard died in 1876, about eight years after her brother, aged seventy-seven. According to her tomb, she was encouraged by her blessed brother to exhort the local clergy to deepen their devotion to the Virgin and to Jesus Hostia. I thought of some of the zealous ladies we have all met, who take it to themselves to "exhort" us in one way or another (and of the reception they often got). Marie Ann (born 1799) lived twenty years longer than her brother, but adoptive sister Annette Bernard outlived them both. She died in 1885, aged 84. Not much of note here, we are simply asked « *priez pour elle* ». I'm afraid I don't know anything about this woman but as we left the graveyard, I thought of her living in the shadow of an intense and saintly brother and his, I suspect equally intense, sister. I wondered if she died an atheist, but I presume she didn't.

Meanwhile, next door, the former presbytery (« *maison paroissiale* ») is being renovated for use by SSS priests who now are in charge of the parish.

The Other Church

Nearby, the parish church (*l'église Notre Dame de l'Assomption*) presently looks a bit of a mess around the front entrance due to damage during an earth tremor in 1962. There were a couple of straggly Christmas trees out front, looking like they were fighting a losing battle against the elements. Then there was a protective structure to lessen the chances of worshippers being hit by falling bits of church, and loosely stretched across this a white banner exhorting support for a « *souscription publique* » for the restoration of the church.

Inside is quite nicely kept; painted in a light blue and white. There are the usual objects of devotion: *St Jeanne d'Arc*, *St Thérèse de Lisieux*, *l'Archange Michel*, and *la Vierge* under the title of *Notre Dame de la Salette* (appearances in 1846, during Peter-Julian's lifetime). This image of Mary is sometimes of her sitting and weeping into her hands; but here she is standing with her arms wrapped close around her, looking into the distance. My less pious side always thinks she looks like she is in a strait-jacket. There is a window dedicated to Peter-Julian, and an altar with his statue, towards the front of the church. One window had me puzzled: a young chap in three-quarter grey coat, with eyes looking down, arms folded and holding a green three-cornered hat. He has a rosary and a one-knotted white cord which to me suggests he took one vow and I suspect this was poverty. His stance and look have something of a slightly disdainful young male model.

From the church we went back up town to get a bit of lunch and again settled for *le plat du jour*, a piece of steak that I thought was considerably overdone (most unusual in France, where most of our exchange students send their steak back "to be cooked". "You can't take them anywhere", as they say). The place was pretty crowded and the waitress / owner blonde and entertaining. When she gave us our coffee, I looked at the sugar wrapping and asked if she didn't have some with Peter-Julian on them. She quickly came back with, "You should go over to la Salette; they are very good with that sort of thing".

Le Musée Eymard

We headed back into the main street and Laurence phoned the priests in the Eymard house. It was OK to drop in any time, even right then, which we did. We were welcomed into a long room on the ground floor of a smallish three level terrace house. Laurence introduced herself and then me as someone from Australia with an interest in Peter-Julian. I explained that I knew the provincial superior of the Australian province, but had a momentary blank spot when he asked me Graeme's name. Along the walls of this room was a modest display of images and texts associated with Peter-Julian and his life.

The priest, Gian-Carlo (?) went through the display in a rather matter-of-fact way. Occasionally I slipped in a question or a quote that suggested I had at least read the man's life story. The biggest surprise for me was when we made our way along the second wall to see a couple of photos from which people I knew were smiling. There was Tom Knowles at a formateur's meeting in Rome, and not far from this, the entire group of Sisters in Australia. It was a few years ago, because a couple have died in the mean time, but they were all there. I couldn't help myself and started naming them, but our host was obviously not terribly interested and keen to move on to the next series of images.



We left without having seen the bed Eymard died in or, for that matter, the one he was born in, or anything beyond the ground-floor display. But, we were unlikely to be admitted to the inner areas and we had a mountain or two to descend. I walked out feeling a bit of a cad, having played "smartie pants" with my quotes and references to Eymard, as well as my "I know this one and I know that one" but not having been up-front about my little "secret". Maybe it would not have made any difference, anyhow, but that's one of those things I still haven't quite sorted out.

At least, though, I now stand alongside Louis XIII of France and Cardinal Richelieu who (in 1629) stayed in La Mure on their way to wage war in Italy. I am also there with Pius VI. Expulsed from the Vatican by French forces and made to surrender Avignon and other territories, this pope spent a night in La Mure in 1799 on his forced journey which ended in Valence (to where I had taken the train from Paris). Pius VI died about six weeks after his night in La Mure. No connection, I am sure. I am there also with Napoleon, as mentioned previously, who arrived with his troops in 1815, stopping on Calvary hill. We have all been to La Mure, but only I of this group, have paid some homage to the life and legacy of St Peter-Julian and the profound impact he has had in my life, giving me some of my best years.