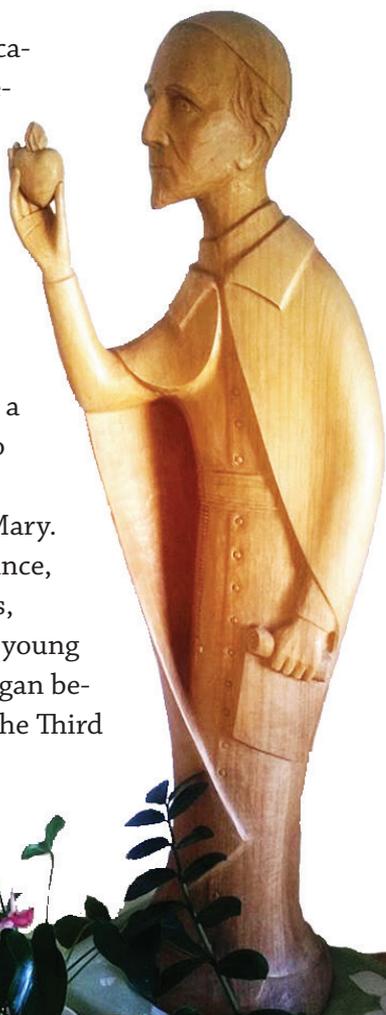


St. John Eudes,

*A missionary of mercy
for troubling times*

Each Advent and Lent our communications team produces a video series related to the liturgical season. Back in January, before any of us realized we were about to be overtaken by a pandemic, we chose to focus on St. John Eudes, entitling our Lenten series, *He Gives Us His Heart*. One of the great spiritual figures of 17th century France, John Eudes was a prolific missionary and preacher who championed priestly formation and devotion to the Heart of Jesus and Mary. Ever on the move in the north of France, he established religious communities, seminaries and lay movements. As a young woman our foundress, St. Jeanne Jugan belonged to one of these movements, the Third Order of the Admirable Mother.

St. John Eudes taught that Christ continues his earthly life through his body, the Church and in each



believer, and that it is up to us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in His work of forming Jesus in our souls. He taught that each of us is tasked with discerning in the life and mysteries of Christ the singular part that is ours to play in building up his Kingdom. To enable us to continue his life in our own day, he said, Jesus gives us his very own heart to be our heart and the source of the charity and zeal he counts on us to spread in the world. He called the heart of Jesus in us our “great Heart.”



We filmed our series and finished editing it well in time for Ash Wednesday, still unaware of how much our everyday lives were about to change. By the time we sent out the last episode of the series during Holy Week, and then celebrated Easter the best we could in the midst of so much death, the choice of St. John Eudes for our Lenten series seemed truly providential.

How so?, you might wonder. Delving into John Eudes’ life story in preparation for our video series, we learned that Father Eudes’ first mission as a young priest was to minister to victims of an epidemic that had broken out in his home diocese. When this fact surfaced in January it seemed like just a random bit of trivia, but by March it seemed quite providential! St. John Eudes seemed to be knocking on our door as a willing companion and role model during these difficult months.



Opposite page: Church of Notre Dame des Vertus in Aubervilliers, where Father Eudes spent two years in rest and prayer immediately after his ordination.

Above: 17th century wood cut depicting townspeople fleeing to the countryside to escape the plague.

Left: Plague victims in Caen were quarantined in a field, where they sought shelter in cider barrels like these.



This page: Alamy stock photos.

Missionary to plague victims

Let's take a step back in history ... all the way back to 1623, when the young John Eudes entered the Oratorian seminary in Paris under the spiritual direction of Cardinal Bérulle, himself a major figure in the French Church of that era. Bérulle's spirituality centered on the Incarnation. Christ's life on earth, he taught, teaches us how to live daily life as Christians. Priests are called in a special way to imitate Jesus, "who emptied himself, ... becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7-8). The priest's vocation is to imitate Christ, who totally poured himself out in love for humanity.

This demanding evangelical call resonated deeply in John Eudes' young heart. In the seminary he poured himself into his studies and various pious activities. He was such a good stu-

dent that he was given permission to begin preaching before he was even ordained. But his fervor also led the young seminarian to the point of exhaustion. His first assignment upon being ordained in 1625 was to spend two years resting to regain his strength.

His health restored, Father Eudes returned to Paris, where he found a letter from his father begging him to return to his home diocese to minister to plague victims who were dying without the benefit of the sacraments. Eudes took the letter to Cardinal Bérulle and the two discerned that the young priest should see in his earthly father's appeal the will of his heavenly Father.

Father Eudes took a small portable altar and a Mass kit and left for Normandy as a "missionary of mercy," a title he would use throughout his life. He did everything he could to relieve the sufferings of plague victims, ministering the sacraments to them in the last moments of their lives.

In 1631 Father Eudes moved on to Caen, where the plague had also struck, to continue his work as a missionary of mercy. There he found the sick quarantined in a field outside the city, sheltered in huge barrels normally used for making cider. Rather than living with the Oratorian community in the city, Father Eudes moved out to the field and lived in a barrel just like the plague victims. He did so to share the conditions of those he served and to prevent his brother priests from being exposed to the contagion.

Living in a barrel among plague victims was hardly the priestly life John Eudes had envisioned for himself, but he believed this mission was the will of God for him. During this period he met two individuals who were to remain lifelong friends: Gaston de Renty, a young, devout married man who was known as Vincent de Paul's right arm; and Madame Laurence de Budos, the young abbess of the Benedictine convent that owned the field where Eudes ministered to the sick. Unafraid to risk contagion, she brought meals to his makeshift shelter during the plague.

This period of Father Eudes' life receives only scant mention in the biographical materials available in English, but as anyone who has been directly involved in caring for victims of COVID-19 knows, experiencing so much death and one's own powerless to stop it is a life-changing experience. His time in that quarantine field, during which he so fully imitated Jesus' self-emptying and spirit of humble service, must surely have marked him in a deep and lasting way.

*It's okay to grieve,
Jesus wept too*

John Eudes was a prolific letter-writer and much of his correspondence has been preserved and published. The oldest letter in a collection edited by Bishop Clément Guillon, a member of the Eudist Fathers, is one written to Madame Laurence de Budos not long after his plague experience. As she grieved her brother's untimely death he urged her to accept her loss as the "most Holy and lovable Will of God," but he also confided to her that he was filled with sadness at the thought of her anguish. "I cannot think of you and the pitiful state



Jesus weeps at the death of his friend Lazarus (Alamy stock photo).



Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, based on Luke 19:41; Enrique Simonet, 1892. (Alamy stock photo)

in which I see you, without pain and tears and that, I believe, I am allowed,” he wrote.

He went on to explain how he identified his own tears with those of Jesus at the death of his friend Lazarus. “I see Jesus, the joy of heaven and earth, giving way to profound grief and sighs at the sight of the tears of Martha and Magdalen bemoaning the death of their brother. Why, then, may I not be allowed to weep on a similar occasion? I want to weep with Jesus, that I may honor his tears. I want to ‘weep with those who weep,’ in the words of St. Paul. (Rom 12:15). I wish to weep with the same emotions and sentiments as Jesus wept. I wish to offer Him a sacrifice of tears in homage to His Divine and adorable tears. Let us, Madam, offer Him our tears in honor of His. Let us implore Him to sanctify and bless them through His. Let us beseech Him to unite them to His...”

Eudes encouraged his friend to remain close to Jesus. “Behold Jesus within your heart. He is there wishing to bear with you the harshness of your trial. But He neither can nor does He wish to bear it without you. Unite yourself, therefore, with Him that you may bear your sorrow with Him. Unite your spirit to His Spirit, your heart to His Heart and your will to His....”

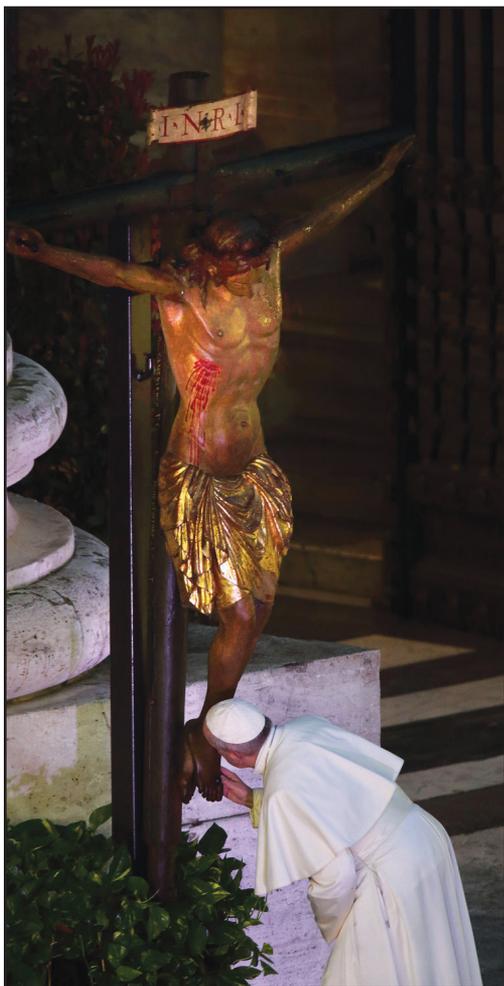
It is beautiful to see how Father Eudes empathized with his

friend in her sorrow, and how he validated both her tears and his own by reminding her that Jesus, too, wept at the death of someone he loved. He did not admonish her for giving in to her emotions or failing to stoically move on from her brother’s death as if she felt no pain. After all, he wrote, since Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, shouldn’t we be allowed to weep and mourn for those we have lost?

“There is hardly any action of your ordinary lives that does not find some counterpart in the actions he performed during his time on earth,” John Eudes would one day write. The thought that Jesus experienced all that we experience — and is present in both our joys and sorrows — can be a real source of strength for us as we try to persevere through these days of isolation and fear. “Behold Jesus within your heart,” Eudes might say if we interviewed him today; “He is there to bear with you the harshness of this current trial, if only you remember to unite yourself to Him.”

(continued on the next page)

Pope Francis venerates an ancient crucifix during his March 27th prayer vigil to pray for an end to the pandemic. (Alamy stock photo).



Blessed are they who mourn

It's hard to believe that our season of social distancing has lasted through Lent and Eastertide, and we have already settled into Ordinary Time. Even as we thank God that the worst days of the pandemic seem to be behind us, it appears we are entering into another dark season — one of social unrest — with new fears, anxieties and sorrows. If St. John Eudes were here today he would no doubt remind us that Jesus weeps with us. He is with us and knows our needs because he too experienced harsh trials during his earthly life, from poverty and homelessness to abandonment by his friends and death at the hands of his enemies.

As we worked on our Lenten project and learned a little more about St. John Eudes, God was reminding us of a fundamental Christian truth: Christ desires to live the mysteries of his earthly life in us and through us. He desires that we spread his love right now in the midst of our present trials. If St. John Eudes were alive today he would surely remind us that Jesus gives us his very own heart to be our “great Heart” and the source of the charity he wants us to share with our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. “For if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor 12:26). And as Jesus promised us, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5:4). ♡

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