



CONSTANT IN FAITH CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF MELBOURNE

'Now you have heard the good news of your salvation and have believed it. May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give you a spirit of perception and wisdom of what is revealed to bring you to a full knowledge of him' (Ephesians 1:13,17)



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Melbourne News

In the footsteps of St Peter Julian Eymard



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Christine Heffernan with Damien Cash

OVER 16 days in April and May, a group of seven Australian pilgrims followed in the footsteps of the French saint, St Peter Julian Eymard, the founder of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation.



Their pilgrimage was sponsored by the Blessed Sacrament communities of St Francis', Melbourne, and St Peter Julian Church, Sydney, and is the second of its kind (the first was in 2011). For the pilgrims, all of whom are actively involved in the ministries of the congregation, it was an opportunity to come to know in a deeper way the life, faith journey and spirituality of the congregation's founder.

Peter Julian Eymard, a priest who lived through the middle years of 19th-century France, was known as the 'apostle of the Eucharist'. A tireless proponent of frequent Communion, he opposed the common thinking of his day wherein the Eucharist was to be received rarely and only by the virtuous. 'You take communion to become holy, not because you already are,' he preached. His very first apostolate was to prepare poor, young, rag collectors for their First Holy Communion. The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament carries on his mission of teaching people to centre their Christian lives on the Eucharist.

St Peter Julian's road to the priesthood, as well as his life as a priest, was marked by the cross. He had to overcome many difficulties, including poverty in his family, his father's initial opposition to his only son's desire to be a priest, years of serious illness and pain, a Jansenistic striving for inner perfection, and exhausting, conflict-ridden procedures for getting diocesan and later papal approval for his new religious community. St Peter Julian himself was a pilgrim, journeying long distances to places that brought him closer to God and returning to them often to reflect and pray, give thanks and be restored by his experience of God.

What the pilgrims knew about St Peter Julian before their journey, through biographies and other literary and historical works, is now known in a deeper way through their journey to 'Eymardian Places' in France—the churches and shrines he loved, the villages and cities where he lived and worked, and where events occurred that were important in his ministry.

A highlight for all pilgrims was their time at La Mure, a small town in the south of France surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the French Alps. La Mure is where St Peter Julian was born in 1811 and where he returned to die in 1868. It was a moving, privileged experience for pilgrims to actually stay in this ancestral home and experience the welcome and hospitality of its current stewards.

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Other significant sites visited were Grenoble, where St Peter Julian studied for the priesthood, was ordained (in 1834) and where he celebrated his last Mass (at the Chapelle de l'Adoration). At Lyon, pilgrims journeyed to places where St Peter Julian lived and worked as a priest and as a close collaborator of the founder of the Marist Fathers, Fr Jean-Claude Colin. There he began to lay the groundwork of his future Eucharistic congregations for men and women.

In Paris, the itinerary included visits to St Sulpice Church, where St Peter Julian went to give thanks after the Paris bishops had approved his proposal to establish the Blessed Sacrament Congregation (in 1856); the sites of chapels where St Peter Julian began public Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament; and the sites of some of the earliest congregation houses.

For the pilgrims of 2013, the journey was an immersion experience of place, time, story and spirit. The historical, social and economic influences that shaped St Peter Julian's beliefs, expectations and life direction were illuminated and illuminating. As Fr Tony McSweeney SSS, the tour leader, said: 'I think each of us has found, in quite a new way, that it makes St Peter Julian, his journey and his charism, more real for us.'

Another pilgrim, Elizabeth Marron, described the experience as 'a time of spiritual breathing. It enabled us to dwell in the places that were significant to St Peter Julian and immerse ourselves in learning about his life and his spiritual journey. He was a fascinating and inspiring person and an excellent spiritual guide.'

Interested readers are warmly encouraged to learn more about St Peter Julian Eymard on the website Eymardian Places, eymardianplaces.com

Photo: Pilgrims at the statue of St Peter Julian Eymard, St Francis' Church, Melbourne, before their journey to France.

From left: Deacon John Pugh SSS, Fr Philip Watkins SSS, Elizabeth Marron, Fr Herald Thamel SSS, Fr Alfred Yap SSS, Kathleen Kruger, Fr Tony McSweeney SSS.



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