



ST. MANUEL'S EUCHARISTIC LIFE

St. Manuel González was born in Seville, Spain, on February 25, 1877. His father was a carpenter and his mother, a home-maker. His parents were devout and prayerful, immersing the young Manuel in the kind of strong Catholic ambience within which the first buds of a priestly vocation can begin to blossom in safety. Before he was ten years of age, Manuel joined the “Los Seises” children’s choir of the Cathedral of Seville. This famous children’s choir would perform with great reverence before the Blessed Sacrament on the solemnities of Corpus Christi and the Immaculate Conception—a practice that continues to this day. Thus, by joining this choir, he deepened his love for both the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was already beginning to learn that devotion to Mary is the safest, shortest path to union with the Eucharistic Lord.

When he was ten years old, he applied to the minor Seminary of Seville without his parents’ knowl-

edge. It was not until he passed the entrance exams and was accepted that he told his parents the good news. They accepted this surprise as the Will of God for their devout son. Manuel, conscious of his family's economic situation, went on to pay for his formation by working as a servant. He excelled in all of his studies and was held in high regard by his teachers, later continuing his education to earn doctorates in Theology and Canon Law. On September 21, 1901, he was ordained to the sacred priesthood by Blessed Cardinal Spinola. How fitting that the saint should receive holy orders at the hands of another saint!

In 1902 Cardinal Spinola sent him for his first parish mission to a church in the parish of Palomares del Rio. It was there that his life and priesthood were soon to be transformed by a grace that would go on to guide and inspire all of his Eucharistic works. To reach his destination, Father Manuel travelled by boat along the river that leads from Seville to Palomares del Rio. Upon his arrival near the town, he was greeted by the sacristan with whom he journeyed to the parish, riding on a donkey. Father Manuel was excited, having many high expectations of his first mission. He had been told very little about the nature of the parish to which he was being sent, but he dreamed of arriving to find a Church full of souls eager to listen to his sermons, of people fervently praying the Rosary with him each day, and of organizing

a beautiful procession through the streets. He pictured the crowds hastening to Sunday Mass, longing to receive the sacred gift of Holy Communion.

As they journeyed along the road, the excited young priest began to question his traveling companion. Usually, when a new priest arrived in a town for a mission, the little children would come in great numbers to welcome him in front of the Church. When the saintly priest inquired if this beautiful sight was to be expected in Palomares, the conversation went something like this:

“Tell me, does this town have many children?”

“Yes, but now they are in the fields. And even if they were here, they are not interested in the Church. The pastor, because of his aches and pains and what goes on in this place, does not spend much time here. He stays in another town and only comes here on Sundays. He does not want to see children because they are too noisy, and besides, the parents don't come to church either.”

“Then who in this town comes to Mass?”

“Only those who are getting married or those who are baptizing their children. Mr. Antonio and myself also come whenever I do not have to go out to the fields.”

“And do they receive Holy Communion?”

“Holy Communion? Sometimes the people who are getting married get Communion.”

“Nobody else?”

“Not that I can recall. . . . No, nobody else.”

“And the priest, does he have friends here? Because at least his friends must come to his Mass?”

“Friends? The priest cannot really visit with anybody here. The politics are very dominant in this town.”

“But what do politics have to do with a priest having friends?”

“It’s very simple. Because we have so many political parties, if the priest visits somebody belonging to one of the parties, it will mean that the priest favors that party. Even at Mass and in the sermons we have politics. So the priest spends very little time here. And when he comes he talks to very few people so as to finish quickly and leave immediately.”

St. Manuel, lost for words, became quickly aware that his understanding of the religious and cultural situation of the region was gravely defective. Nonetheless, the shock from the conversation with the sacristan was not the greatest shock of the day. Upon arriving finally at the parish church in Palomares del

Rio, his pious Eucharistic heart was pierced by the full truth of what awaited him. The church building looked very dirty, almost abandoned. St. Manuel went immediately to the tabernacle and found it covered in dust and cobwebs. The altar cloths were torn and burnt. Oil was dripping from the sanctuary lamp onto the floor. After observing the dire state of the church, his instinctive reaction was to run from the place and never look back, but he forced himself to remain.

He knelt down before the tabernacle, in the midst of the disarray, for a long time, trying to work out how he would conduct a mission in such a place—and in that moment, everything changed. Somebody was looking at him, and that Somebody was in desperate need of a friend. Later he would try to describe what he perceived in that moment of grace:

My faith was looking at Jesus through the door of that tabernacle, so silent, so patient, so good, gazing right back at me. . . . His gaze was telling me much and asking me for more. It was a gaze in which all the sadness of the Gospels was reflected; the sadness of “no room in the Inn”; the sadness of those words, “Do you also want to leave Me?”; the sadness of poor Lazarus begging for crumbs from the rich man’s table; the sadness of the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter,

of the soldier's slap, of the spittle in the Praetorium, and the abandonment of all. All of this sadness was there in that tabernacle, oppressing and crushing the sweet Heart of Jesus and drawing bitter tears from his eyes. Blessed tears from those eyes! The gaze of Jesus in that tabernacle was a gaze that pierced the soul, and one can never forget it. I was trying not to cry, so as not to make Jesus even more sad. His gaze expressed the sorrow of One who loves, but who does not find anybody who wants to receive that love.

For me, this turned out to be the starting point—to see, understand, and feel what would consume the whole of my priestly ministry. On that afternoon, in that moment in which I was before the tabernacle, I saw that my priesthood would consist of a work of which I had never before dreamt. All my illusions about the kind of priest I would be vanished. I found myself to be a priest in a town that didn't love Jesus, and I would have to love him in the name of everybody in that town. I would dedicate my priesthood to taking care of Jesus in the needs of his life in the tabernacle: to feed him with my love, to keep him warm with my presence, to entertain him with my conversations, to defend him against abandonment and ingratitude, to give relief to his Heart with my holy sacrifices, to serve

him with my feet by taking him wherever he is desired, and with my hands by giving alms in his name, even to those who do not love him, and with my mouth by speaking of him and consoling others in his name, and by crying out to those who do not want to hear him, until finally they would listen and begin to follow him. This would be a beautiful priesthood!”

This poor, abandoned tabernacle taught the young priest more about the love of Jesus than did all his years of theological study. Theology had taught his brilliant mind the science of faith in Jesus Christ, but now the tabernacle was teaching him the science of the love of Jesus Christ. This science is learned more by the heart than by the mind, this science often being infused directly by the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The lack of cleanliness in the church was the outward sign manifesting a total absence of living Eucharistic faith and love. Rather than discouraging him, this spiritual crisis only motivated him to work all the more to bring souls to the Fountain of Love in the Blessed Sacrament. He explains:

What did that tabernacle teach me? I do not think that our religion could ever have a more powerful stimulus for gratitude, or a more ef-

ficient principle of love, or a stronger motivation for action than that abandoned tabernacle. Perhaps a weak faith would be scandalized by it, but a faith that meditates and a heart that searches deeply will discover in that tabernacle the Heart of Jesus, who remains there accompanied by only the cobwebs. He stays there day and night, year after year, without ever leaving that tabernacle. He continues to send his sun in the morning, his water to quench our thirst, and bread to feed us, as well as strength and life to all those people who treat him so badly.

This experience of the abandoned tabernacle prompted Father Manuel to found the Union for Eucharistic Reparation. He devoted his early years of priestly ministry to zealous pastoral work and to fostering deep faith and love for the Blessed Sacrament. Later, he was sent to the city of Huelva, where he lived for eleven years. Here he devoted his attention mainly to founding schools and providing teachings about the Sacred Eucharistic Heart of Jesus. He also loved to help the elderly and the working class, providing food for children whose parents worked as miners.

In late 1912, Father Manuel was granted a private audience with Pope St. Pius X. The Holy Father showed a keen interest in his work and especially his insightful devotion to the Eucharist. On December 6,