



## St Eugene's Self-description

Late in his life, St Eugene was asked for a description of his personality. He sent the enquirer a copy of a description he had written early in life with the comment that it was as true then as it had been earlier. I quote it in full:

*You will know my interior life better from the few lines I am about to put down on paper than from any number of my spoken words.*

*By character I am lively and impetuous. My desires are impassioned, making me impatient with the least hindrance so that I find delays unbearable. Firm in my resolve, I chafe at anything getting in the way of what I want, and do whatever it takes to overcome even the greatest of obstacles. Solid in my wishes and feelings, I rebel at the mere hint of opposition; if it persists, and unless I am really sure that I am being opposed for a higher good, I become fiery and my spirit seems to acquire new and hitherto unknown resources. What I mean is that I immediately become uncommonly voluble in expressing my ideas that come tumbling forth in a rush, when I would normally have to drag them out and express them tediously. I manifest the same ease of expression when deeply moved by something and really want others to share my feelings.*

*In sharp contrast, if someone gives in instead of opposing me, I am completely disarmed, and if I note embarrassment in a person who tried to defend an untenable position against me, far from gloating and pressing home my arguments, I go out of my way to give him excuses. In either case, if I let slip an ungracious word, I am as upset as if I had committed some serious crime. From all this you can see that I have a generous character - you might even call it just, though it is excessively so, at times, for I am naturally inclined to humble anyone who is too forward, yet I leave nothing undone to extol the merits of the humble.*

*If I am wrong and someone puts me down with a supercilious or triumphant air, I find it hard to give in and can come up with specious reasons to cover my mistake. But if I am corrected in a spirit of good will and friendship, I will not utter a single word in my defence, and will frankly admit I could have done better, been more thoughtful or expressed myself better.*

*I am naturally inclined to severity, very determined never to allow myself the least degree of self-indulgence, nor can I tolerate it in others. Moreover, I cannot accept the least compromise in anything to do with duty. Death - and I mean this literally - death seems preferable to transgressing an essential duty.*

*I hate jealousy and regard it as a vice unworthy of a generous heart. Thus, I am delighted when others display worth, even extraordinary worth. If they shine in some area that is foreign to me I will prod myself on to imitate them. And if I foresee that it would be futile to make the effort, I feel chagrined for having wasted my time when young, and frustrated at being stupidly limited to only certain kinds of knowledge. I have always been exceptionally frank, which causes me to distance myself from giving any sort of flattering compliment that would bring my sincerity into question. In the world, people have come to accept me as I am.*

*Experience having shown me that my judgments are rarely wide of the mark, I must be careful not to dispense them freely when there is really no need to do so.*

*I have never been able to content myself by explaining the actions of others on the basis of their apparent intentions. Experience has convinced me that a sure way to make mistakes is to presume good intentions where someone's actions are bad. I prefer to suspend judgment, that is, not to act on conclusions I am tempted to draw from appearances. Moreover, from my infancy it has been noted that I readily pick up nuances that escape the majority of those who see without truly observing; it has helped me almost unerringly to discern the character, tastes, dispositions, and sincerity of the persons with whom I live.*

*Nature is best observed during early age while it is still evolving with candour. Thus, the attributes of my character, peremptory, steadfast and wilful as it is, can be judged from the following. When I wanted something, I did not beg for it, or wheedle or cajole. Instead, I demanded it in an overbearing tone as though it were my due. If it was refused, I would not cry - with me, crying was as rare as laughter - but would try to take by force what was not given me by consent. When I was four, one of my uncles took me to the theatre. The noise they were making down on the parterre annoyed me and I am told that, standing on tiptoe to discover who was causing it, I sharply berated the entire ground level with these words which made everyone in our box burst into laughter, "tout are se descendil!" - "Just watch out, if I ever come down there!"*

*It was no use trying to get anything out of me by punishment; the only way to do so was to play up to my self-admiration or to get through to my heart. Given the self-portrait I have just painted, it is hard to understand what a sensitive heart I have - too much so, in fact. It would take too long to enumerate all the stories related to me of my childhood temperament, stories that are truly astounding, all things considered. It was quite normal for me to give away my breakfast, even when I was very hungry to satisfy the hunger of the poor; I would take firewood to people who complained of the cold and of not being able to afford buying it; on one occasion I went so far as to give away the clothes off my back to clothe a poor person - and many, many other incidents in the same vein. When I had offended someone, even a servant, I never had a moment's peace until I could repair the damage done with a gift or a gesture of friendship or even a hug for the person who had reason to complain about me. My heart has not changed over the years.*

*I adore my family and would allow myself to be cut to pieces for some of its members; that covers a lot of ground, for I would unhesitatingly give up my life for my father, mother, grandmother, my sister and my father's two brothers. Generally speaking, I love with a passion everyone whom I believe loves me-but their love for me must be passionate, as well.*

*Thus, gratitude is the final element in the electricity of my heart. This feeling is so intense in me that it has never wavered. I have always longed for a friend but have never found one, at least, not one such as I look for. True, I am hard to please, for it is my nature to give generously and expect the same in return. Even so, I do not spurn friendships of an ordinary, less exalted nature, though they are hardly to my taste. In such cases, I give in proportion to what I think I can get.*

*Saint Augustine is a man (here I do not consider him in his capacity of saint and doctor of the Church) whom I love best because he had a heart like my own. He understood what it means to love; when I read his Confessions, where he speaks of his friendship with Saint Lippius, it was as if he were writing in my name. Saint Basil and Saint Gregory captivate me. All such stories from history that recount similar examples of heroic friendship enthral me. At moments like that, my heart longs to meet such a treasure. In a word, my heart needs to love and since, deep down, it knows what perfect love should be, it will never be satisfied with the sort of ordinary friendship that gratifies the majority of people. My heart aims at a friendship that, put briefly, from two beings would make but one. Yet there is nothing carnal mixed with such desires coming from the noblest part of my heart.*

*This is so true that I have always spurned relationships with women, since such relationships between the sexes deal more with the senses than with the heart. Nor does a person's rank in society at all enter as a factor into the feeling to love someone who truly loves me. Proof of this lies in the incredible affection in which I hold servants who are truly fond of me. I find it hard, even wrenching, to leave them; I take an interest in their welfare and overlook nothing to secure it. Moreover I do so, not out of magnanimity of spirit - such motivations influence me only when dealing with people who are cold - I do it out of feelings of tenderness, in a word, out of friendship.*

*You must not, however, think that I feel called to do something only for those who love me. Quite the contrary, whoever suffers or needs me can count on my help. For me, gratitude, far from being a nagging burden, as it is for many people, is one of the things I like best. It calls me to love the person to whom I am indebted, so I am happy to have incurred an obligation to someone who acted out of affection for me. If it is an affection that singles me out and is partial toward me, there is nothing I would not do in gratitude for such friendship rather than for the service. If someone with only common or everyday feelings for me does me the kind of favour they might do for anyone, I still feel obliged to respond as any gentleman would under the circumstances, that is, with an external - show of gratitude, one that does not really come from the heart. It is a disposition to be of service to pay a debt, while in the other case I truly enjoy being indebted to the person. Thus I appreciate a trivial service that comes from someone's heart infinitely more than a much greater one from a person who simply obliges me.*