



**A Course in  
Montfortian Spirituality**

*Louis Marie de Montfort - gignatim pro miss. ap. 1777.*

A Course in  
Montfortian  
Spirituality



*Louis Marie de Montfort - guignon / pas / 1872 / 1874*

Montfort Missionaries  
2014

## FOREWORD

This course was first proposed by the General Chapter of the Company of Mary, held in Nemi, Italy in 1993. The intention was to create a correspondence course that would be offered to anyone interested in the spirituality embraced and promoted by St. Louis Marie de Montfort, the founder of the Company of Mary. Unfortunately, various circumstances contributed to a delay in completing the various lessons envisaged, and the project was shelved indefinitely. However, a number of lessons had already been written by various members of the Company of Mary who had a certain expertise in the topics they covered. Most were written in French, one or two in German, and one in English. Some four or five of the proposed lessons remained to be written.

In 2013, the Province of Great Britain & Ireland of the Company of Mary, seeking for some new way to promote Montfortian Spirituality among English-speaking peoples, undertook to try to complete the course and make it available through the web site of the Province. Having achieved this (visit <http://www.montfort.org.uk/Course>), it was thought useful to make the course available also as an e-book. This is the result.

The course consists of two parts, comprising 15 lessons in all: the first part (lessons 1-5) deals with the life and background of St Louis Marie, including a short survey of the theological and social influences on his thought, an overview of his writings, and an account of the Religious Family he left behind him. The second part (lessons 6-15) examines the spiritual experience of St Louis Marie himself and the major themes of his teaching, flowing from that experience.

May this course help those who follow it to appreciate more the teaching of St Louis Marie de Montfort, by helping them to be able to read what he wrote and to interpret it for their own lives, contributing to a deeper union with Jesus Christ.



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# 1. SAINT LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT (1673-1716)

## Biographical Notes

Thousands of human beings have peopled this planet since its beginnings. The number of those whose names history has preserved is relatively small. “From the rising of the sun to its setting”, and from pole to pole, a few volumes would be enough to provide an exhaustive list. St Louis Marie de Montfort is found among this number. His influence, after more than two centuries, still exerts itself among those who have followed him in his way of reading the Gospel and living it out. “*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*”, the best known of his writings, had appeared in no less than 387 editions in 1992, and that same year there were already 113 biographies that had been written. The truly amazing thing is the number of languages in which the writings have appeared and the biographies written: around thirty languages, spoken on all the continents.

### CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE (1673-1684)

Louis Grignion was born on 31 January 1673 in Montfort-la-Cane, a small provincial town 23 km from Rennes, the capital of the Duchy of Brittany. His home town is today called Montfort-sur-Meu; it is a small sub-prefecture with about 5,000 inhabitants.

Jean-Baptiste Grignion, the father of our saint, readily signed himself: “Grignion de la Bachelleraye”, from the name of one of his properties, but he was not of the nobility and paid his taxes like a mere commoner. Yet he performed the office of advocate to the Bailiwick, and in 1671 had married Jeanne Robert, a young woman of the Chesnais family, whose father was an alderman of the town of Rennes. Eighteen children were born of this union; seven of them died young.

Louis Marie quickly became the eldest in the family and took on the responsibilities of that situation. His father had a quick temper, but he himself did not suffer much from that, for he escaped his anger by a “wise flight”, as we are told by a friend of his youth, Monsieur Blain. He respected his father, obeyed him and took it on himself to console his mother, for whom he had a tender love. Jean-Baptiste Grignion would say later of his son that he “never gave him any trouble.”

Born a citizen of a small town, he was brought up in the countryside by “Mother André” who was his wet-nurse at the farm of La Bachelleraye. But from 1675 onwards, the family went to live at Bois-Marquer in Iffendic, a neighbouring rural commune, and it was there that the child rejoined them.

He had been baptised the day after his birth, being given the name Louis. On the day of his confirmation, he added the name Marie. All his life he would sign himself Louis Marie Grignion, or more often Louis Marie de Montfort. In this he was imitating another Louis, the king of France, a saint like himself who regularly signed himself “Louis de Poissy” out of respect for the place where he received Baptism, the sacrament that gave him birth into the true life. Posterity would call our hero: Father de Montfort, and often “the good Father de Montfort”.

We have few facts concerning his childhood. We know that he used to encourage his sister Louise to practise piety: “You will be very beautiful and everyone will love you if you have a great love for God.” We know that he went regularly to the church and that he tried to catechise his school-mates, to whom he would read pages from books of piety. Through his first biographer, Canon Blain, who was his confidant and friend, we know also that he already showed a tender devotion towards the Mother of God: “he never called her anything but ‘Mother’ or ‘dear Mother’; but what is not so widely known is that even as a boy of tender age he used to go to her with the simplicity of a child ...” (Blain).

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He was 11 years old (1684) (Louis XIV, the 'Sun-King', was then 45) when the family decided to send him to the College of St Thomas à Becket. This school, run by the Jesuits, was in Rennes, the main town of Brittany. Louis Marie took lodgings with his uncle, Abbé Alain Robert de la Viséule. Two years later, the family moved to the capital of the duchy and Louis Marie rejoined them.

### **SCHOOLING IN RENNES (1684-1692)**

The Jesuit college had about 3,000 pupils. They were taught grammar, classical literature, science, logic, history and philosophy. Father Philippe Descartes, the nephew of the philosopher, was to be the young Grignon's spiritual director, and he would receive tuition in grammar from Father Le Camus and in philosophy from Father Prévost.

Louis Marie showed himself to be a good and studious pupil. His uncle Robert, who knew him well in his adolescence and youth, would later state: "All his teachers showed great affection and unusual esteem for him, and he was held up to his companions as a rare example of diligence and application to study. He carried off all the prizes at the end of each year." In fact he went beyond the programme and took an interest in painting and sculpture, at which he excelled; the family budget, however, did not allow him to study these subjects.

Where it was enough to have a heart, he really spent himself: in prayer and the apostolate. He made a number of friends among the students. One of the best was Claude Poullart des Places, who was later to found the congregation of the Holy Spirit Fathers, and who was to die young. We must also make further mention of Jean-Baptiste Blain, his acquaintance, faithful friend and confidant who became a Canon in Rouen and who was the first to write down his memories of his classmate. With a group of pupils who were dreaming of the priesthood, he met periodically with the Abbé Julien Bellier for a common meditation. Afterwards they would go out to visit the poor and the sick.

At an early age, Louis Marie showed a benevolent love for the outcasts, the marginalised, the downtrodden. At the college, there was mockery for a comrade who wore patched clothes that made him look ridiculous and repellent. Louis Marie noticed that his comrades were rejecting him, so he organised a collection to obtain more fitting clothes for him. Then he took the boy along to the tailor: "Here is my brother and yours," he said, "I have begged what I could in the class to clothe him. If this is not enough, it is up to you to add the rest." The tailor let himself be persuaded.

In this atmosphere, he became a man of prayer. Going to or from the college, he would stop in the Church of Saint-Sauveur, his parish, where for many centuries there had been venerated Our Lady of Miracles, the protector of Rennes; he would also go to pray at Our Lady of Good News church: "He would sometimes stay there for an hour," says his uncle Alain. But it was in the church of the Carmelites, before the statue of Our Lady of Peace, that he became certain of his call to the priesthood. This was no doubt towards the end of his studies at the College of St Thomas in Rennes.

### **A STUDENT IN PARIS**

The Council of Trent had prescribed the establishment of seminaries in the dioceses of the Church. A hundred years later, the Church was still a long way from having fulfilled this prescription. A relative of the Grignon family, Mademoiselle de Montigny, put Louis Marie in contact with the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, founded in Paris by M. Olier in 1641. It was, it seems, in the autumn of 1692 that Louis Marie left Rennes for the capital. His brother Joseph and his uncle Alain accompanied him as far as the bridge at Cesson that crosses the River Vilaine at the

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exit from the town. He had refused a mount; he would have to cover the 400 km that separated him from Paris on foot.

There were other poor people on the road as well as himself. To the first one he met he made a present of his purse. To the second he gave his coat. With the third he exchanged his clothing. He then rejoiced in being a poor man among the poor. He was a bit like Francis of Assisi: he relied no longer on anyone or anything but the Father in heaven and his Providence. In Paris, his first lodging was “a little hole of a stable where divine Providence sent him enough to eat without his having to ask anyone for anything” (Grandet).

Nevertheless it was necessary for him to make the necessary contacts to achieve his aim. Mademoiselle de Montigny was quite surprised to see him arrive in his livery of a poor wretch. She was unable to get him an entry into Saint-Sulpice itself. He was therefore taken in “among those students who live in common, close to the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.” The community had been established by M. de la Barmondière to provide lodgings for poor students. Louis Marie found himself at home there. He enrolled at the Sorbonne: “He wanted to study theology in depth so as to make himself fit for the functions of an apostolic life such as he intended” (Blain).

On the death of M. de la Barmondière, his hostel was closed. Grignon found a place at Montaigu College, near the present-day Pantheon, which was also a community of poor students. This establishment was known for the excellence of its teaching, but also for the severity of its discipline and its inhuman diet: “the most miserable of all the colleges in this corner of Paris”. Monsieur Boucher, who was its director, had to confront the lack of financial means. The winter of 1693-1694 was severe and produced many victims in the capital. The superior proposed to his students that they should take on watching over the dead four or five nights a week, to make a bit of money.

Louis Grignon took advantage of this to prolong his mental prayer and to meditate on the vanities of existence. But, as a consequence, he took sick and was hospitalised in the Hôtel-Dieu, itself a house of the poor. His life was in danger, but he retained his trust and eventually came through. The following year, he was admitted to the Little Saint-Sulpice, a seminary of the second grade, for students of modest means. Nevertheless he was not completely without resources, for, beginning in 1695, he was awarded the revenues of a chaplaincy, and from 1697 his parents guaranteed him a modest dowry.

At Saint-Sulpice, his director was Monsieur Leschassier, who had great trouble understanding this young man who “did not go on ordinary paths.” On his recommendation, Louis Marie left the Sorbonne and continued his theological training at Saint-Sulpice itself, thanks to the evening courses. He was appointed seminary librarian and was to say himself that he had read “almost all the books that deal with devotion to the Blessed Virgin” (TD 118). Monsieur Blain is more precise: “almost all the books dealing with spirituality passed through his hands.”

In spirituality, he will have drawn heavily on the French School, reading Monsieur Boudon, Cardinal de Bérulle and Monsieur Olier. He himself is one of the lights of this school. And H. Brémond would say of him that he was “the last of the great Bérullians.”

After four years at Saint-Sulpice (summer 1699) he was chosen to go on pilgrimage - on foot, of course - to Chartres, with Monsieur Bardou, another seminarian. He went aside from his companions from time to time to speak with the people he encountered, to catechise them, to give them good advice. In Chartres, he went straight to the Cathedral where Mary has been honoured since the far-off beginnings of Christian France. Forgetful of the tiredness he had accumulated, he remained for several hours before the statue of Our Lady of the Crypt. He returned the following morning early and received Communion at the Mass, then he stayed for six hours in prayer, “on his knees, immobile, and as though in a trance” (Blain).

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The following year, Monsieur Leschassier, his spiritual director, judged that he was ready for the priesthood. On 5 June 1700 he was ordained a priest by Mgr. Bazan de Flamanville, the Bishop of Elne, near Perpignan. He had known this prelate in the seminary, and had taught catechism with him. A week later he celebrated his first Mass in the parish-church of Saint-Sulpice. One of his classmates said that he seemed “like an angel at the altar.”

### **SEARCHING FOR A FIELD OF APOSTOLATE**

Various options were offered him; his heart was divided between different attractions. He was to write in December of this same year: “I find myself, as time goes on, torn by two apparently contradictory feelings. On one hand, I feel a secret attraction for a hidden life ... On the other hand, I feel a tremendous urge to make our Lord and his holy Mother loved, to go in a humble and simple way to teach catechism to the poor in country places and to arouse in sinners a devotion to our Blessed Lady” (L 5).

The foreign missions were also a possibility that he looked at. He had come to know Mgr de Saint-Vallier, the missionary bishop in Quebec, and he expressed a desire to go off with him: “By no means, Monsieur; you would lose yourself in the forests of that vast country.” This was the response of Monsieur Leschassier, who proposed also that he should stay at Saint-Sulpice to aid his former teachers in their formation of the seminarians. He could not accept this offer. Everything within him was pushing him towards a mission to the poorest people.

Montfort was directed towards the community of Saint-Clément in Nantes, where Abbé René Lévêque, who ran the community, had a reputation for apostolic zeal in the evangelisation of the most humble people and for his devotion to Mary. At the end of a few months, Montfort expressed his disappointment: “I have not found here what I had hoped for... My intention was ... to prepare for mission-work and especially for teaching catechism to the poor, since this is what attracts me most” (L 5). And this young priest who had only 6 months of priesthood behind him and had no pastoral experience, reveals the depth of his apostolic dream: “When I see the needs of the Church I cannot help pleading continually for a small and poor band of good priests to do this work (of missions) under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin” (L 5).

While he waited, he spent his time “performing charitable services for the poor.” Madame de Montespan, the converted former mistress of the King, was the instrument used to point our saint in the direction of the hospital in Poitiers. Louis Marie had two sisters in the Abbey of Fontevault near Saumur. The Abbess, Mme de Rochchouart, happened to be the sister of Mme de Montespan who was there when Montfort went to assist at the reception of the habit by his sister Sylvie. She got him to talk about his plans: “I answered very simply telling her about the attraction you know I feel to work for my brothers, the poor...” In reply, the Marquise offered him a canonry that was in her gift and would assure his livelihood: “I thanked her humbly but promptly assured her that I would never exchange divine providence for a canonry or a benefice.” (L 6)

Madame de Montespan was not surprised by his answer. She advised him to go to see Mgr Antoine Girard, the Bishop of Poitiers, to speak to him of his intentions. Montfort had no real desire to go to meet the Bishop: “I obeyed her blindly believing this was God's holy will, which was all I wanted.”

### **THE HOSPITAL IN POITIERS**

He had to wait for four days before the Bishop of Poitiers could see him. The Bishop then suggested that he go to the Hospital, where there lived sick and poor people of the town to the number of about 400. The first visit Montfort made there was for a long period of prayer, of

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four hours, in the chapel, and to serve at table. He was quickly appreciated by the inmates who set about making a collection for this poor priest so like themselves in his garb. "They are going about saying openly that I am to be their priest, that is, their director, for there has not been a regular director in the poorhouse for a considerable time, so abandoned has it become."

The proposal was not finalised immediately and Montfort went back to Saint-Clément in Nantes, where Monsieur Lévêque entrusted him with the preaching of a mission in the parish of Grandchamp, then in Le Pellerin and elsewhere. He was now at ease: "When I am teaching catechism to the poor in town and country, I am in my element." But the call of Poitiers was insistent: "Our poor people of Poitiers continue, Monsieur, to ask for you..." Mgr Girard wrote to him. He submitted despite the reluctance that he expressed to his director: "I do wish most sincerely to work for the spiritual welfare of the poor in general but I am not particularly anxious to settle down and be attached to a poorhouse."

Nevertheless he made a great success of this mission and Providence caused him to meet there a young lady called Marie-Louise Trichet. He made her wait ten years but after such a long and trying novitiate she was to become the first Daughter of Wisdom and the Superior General of the congregation he was to found for "the instruction of children of the towns and of the countryside, in charitable schools, the good governance of the poor in hospitals and outside them... and the conducting of retreat houses..." (Primitive Rule of La Sagesse, 1).

At Easter 1703, Montfort had to give in before a movement of opposition to himself, and to leave the hospital in Poitiers. So he set off for Paris. His aim was to look for collaborators and to establish with them an Institute destined for the missions. Ever determined to put himself at the service of the poor, he made his way to the Salpêtrière: "I am at the General Hospital where there are five thousand poor people," he wrote to Marie-Louise Trichet. "I have to make them live for God and I have to die to myself." He made contact again with his friend Claude Poullart des Places, to whom he confided his desire to found a society of missionaries. Poullart, himself, had opened a seminary: he promised to send Montfort recruits.

Expelled from the Salpêtrière, Montfort tried to make contact again with M. Leschassier, his former director, but in vain. He took refuge in an indescribable lodging "in a small hole in a wretched house" (Blain) in the Rue du Pot de Fer. "It was a small recess under a flight of stairs which let in hardly any sun... He kept so well hidden and so few people knew he was there" (ibid). His life was slipping towards "a real Calvary of rejections, a Way of the Cross in isolation." Monsieur Leschassier would say to Blain: "He is very humble, very poor, very mortified and very recollected. And yet I have difficulty in believing that he is led by a good spirit."

But he was well. It is very likely that it was at this time that he wrote "The Love of Eternal Wisdom" of which Father Huré said: "This is a capital work. It is this, and this alone, that brings us Montfortian spirituality as a whole... essentially centred on Christ the Wisdom of God which he identifies with the Cross and which comes to us by means of Mary."

During this period also he found himself entrusted with a rather strange mission by the archdiocese of Paris: to restore order among the Hermits of Mont Valérien, a community where disagreement was rife. Once agreement was reached there, he went back to the Rue du Pot de Fer, but held on tight to the memory of Mont Valérien and its giant Calvary which would inspire in him the future venture of Pontchâteau.

On 9 March 1704, Monsieur Leschassier received a letter which read: "We, four hundred poor people of Poitiers, beg you very humbly, by the great love and glory of God, to get our venerated pastor, he who so loves the poor, M. Grignon, to come back to us." The message was passed on to the one concerned, who set off once more.

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Montfort had already spoken of what attracted him: the service of the poor in general, but “I am not particularly anxious to settle down and be attached to a poorhouse.” Nevertheless he went back, and the administrators bestowed on him the post of director. He took up the rules and recalled for all those in charge their duties. The establishment began to be cleaner and more hygienic. The chapel was renovated: the Lord was now in charge.

But just like the first time, opposition arose, and the new Bishop, Mgr. de la Poype, while favourable to Montfort, advised him to leave the hospital. Marie-Louise Trichet would remain there: “My daughter,” he said to her, “you will remain at the hospital. Even if the establishment of the Daughters of Wisdom does not come about in ten years, God will be satisfied and his plans for you will have been fulfilled.”

### MISSIONARY WORK

Retiring from the Hospital, Montfort did not leave the diocese of Poitiers however. The Bishop approved his programme: to give missions in the town and its suburbs, and to restore shrines that were in ruins. He even ensured his livelihood and his board by appointing him director of the House of the Penitents. Public opinion was divided with regard to the missionary. But that did not prevent him working. Poitiers would be a source of crosses and difficulties for him. But it was also in this town that he began his foundation of the Daughters of Wisdom with Marie-Louise Trichet. And it was there that he met the first recruit for his future Company of Mary, in the person of Brother Mathurin Rangeard. Mathurin had the intention of joining the Capuchins, but Montfort persuaded him to follow him to help in his apostolic labours. He was to be faithful to this calling right up to his death 44 years later.

On the outskirts of Poitiers, in the suburb of Montbernage, Montfort gathered the children for catechism. The youth of that quarter used to frequent the barn of the Bergerie to dance there. He was going to transform it into a chapel. This was Our Lady of Hearts, which still exists today and retains the memory of the missionary. He would also restore the Baptistery of St John close to the Cathedral.

But above all, he was experimenting with his methods of evangelisation and catechesis. He had people renew the vows of their Baptism. At the church of the Calvary, he decided to gather up all the scandalous publications and bad books near the shrine to burn them publicly. But while he was officiating at a celebration in the church, outside some people placed on the bonfire a figure of the devil. That aroused the hostility of certain people who went and warned the bishopric. The Vicar General came in person to the spot, interrupted the missionary in the middle of his sermon, and heaped reproaches on him. Montfort responded by silence and this invitation to the faithful: “Brethren, we were going to plant a cross at the door of this church. God does not want it, our superiors are against it. Let us plant it rather in our hearts, where it will be better placed...”

For all that, the mission was not a failure; on the contrary. But the enemies of the missionary were not yet finished. They obtained from Mgr. de la Poype an order that obliged him to leave the diocese. This was in the Spring of 1706. He had spent the first 6 years of his priesthood in uncertainty and in seeking a ministry that would correspond to his desires. It was apparently a failure. “I am like the ball in a game of tennis,” he wrote one day. He wondered if this might not be a sign from heaven authorising him to follow up his old dream of going to the foreign missions. He shared his questions with his confessor, Father de la Tour, a Jesuit, and told him of his intention to go to Rome to ask the Pope. Father de la Tour was in agreement, and Montfort set off on his journey.

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### **PILGRIMAGE TO ROME**

At Saint-Sulpice, Montfort had learnt to consider the Pope as his “pole-star”. Neither the Jansenists nor the Gallicans would have approved. For him, the “Bishop of Rome” was “a vicar of Jesus Christ, an organ of the Holy Spirit” (H 147). Before going off to see him, he wrote to the people of Montbernage, “its fishwives, butchers, retailers and other shopkeepers,” a farewell message in which he encouraged them to continue the good example that they were giving to the whole town. And he asked for their prayers.

We know that he had a companion on the journey, a Spanish student, at least for part of the way. We do not know what route he took. Grandet tells us that he stopped in Loreto and spent two weeks there. The pilgrimage to Loreto was internationally known. M. Olier had been there, and so many other great personages. Montfort went there to venerate the mystery of the Incarnation.

At the end of May 1706, he arrived in Rome. We know for sure that he stayed at St Louis des Français between 20 and 26 May. We know also that he celebrated Mass on 6 June in the church of San Biaggio, which today has been handed over to the Catholics of the Armenian rite. This was exactly the day that, according to the explanation he gave to Blain, he had his audience with the Sovereign Pontiff. Pope Clement XI questioned him in French, and Montfort put before him his plans and desires. The Pope listened and then replied clearly: “Monsieur, you have a wide enough field in France to exercise your zeal. Do not go elsewhere, and work always in perfect submission to the bishops in the dioceses to which you are called. By this means, God will bestow a blessing on your labours.” He added an orientation: “In your various missions, teach the truth with power to the people and the children, and get them to renew solemnly the promises of Baptism.”

Montfort left the audience strengthened with the title of “apostolic missionary” bestowed on him by the Pope, but especially with the clarity of the responses given to his questions. He knew in advance that it would not be easy to enter into the practice of what he had heard, but he would be faithful to it all his life, with a zeal and an obedience which still amaze us today.

All this journey, from Poitiers to Rome and back, he made on foot. Brother Mathurin was waiting for him at the Abbey of Ligugé. They met up there on 25 August 1706. Montfort was emaciated, and Mathurin had difficulty recognising him. The Bishop of Poitiers had not changed his mind about him, so he set off with his companion towards his native Brittany.

### **THE ERA OF THE MISSIONS**

By now Montfort was 33 years old. He was now going to be able to realise his dream: “When I am teaching catechism to the poor in town and country, I am in my element.” Having made a retreat at Mont-Saint-Michel, he went to Dinan, where his brother Joseph-Pierre was a Dominican, and offered his services to the missionaries who were working in the town. He had much success among the soldiers in the garrison there. One evening, he found a poor leper lying in the street covered with sores; he took him on his shoulders and carried him to the lodging of the missionaries. The door had already been closed. Then he started shouting, repeating several times: “Open the door to Jesus Christ!” He laid the poor man in his own bed, and spent the rest of that night in prayer.

At the beginning of February 1707, he joined the team of M. Leuduger. He was a celebrated Breton missionary who followed in the wake of Father Maunoir, using pictures and scenic representations to instruct the people. The mission employed a sort of “technique” especially characterised by bringing it to a conclusion, as was the aim, by a renewal of the vows of Baptism. There was a “covenant contract” with God which the mission brought to the attention of the people and had them draw up and sign. All this would help them to remember and to persevere in the Christian life.

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Montfort worked with his fellow team members in the dioceses of Saint-Malo and Saint-Brieuc. He showed himself a master “in word and deed.” In his native town, for example, when invited to preach in the church of Saint-Jean, he presented his big crucifix, which he raised without saying a word. He then came down from the pulpit to get the whole congregation to venerate it, saying these simple words: “Behold your Saviour. Are you not sorry for having offended him?” The effect he produced was unforgettable.

This did not prevent the weakening of relations between Montfort and M. Leuduger’s team. “He had started giving missions in his own way... (and) did not think he should change” (Blain). The two men had to part. And Montfort, who loved to reflect on what happened to him - the “crosses” - went off to make a retreat at Saint-Lazare near Montfort, in the old buildings that were administered by his father, and which served him as a blessed hermitage for more than a year. There he lived with Brother Mathurin and Brother Jean, who had joined them. He renovated the chapel and pilgrims began to arrive. That was enough to alert the bishop, Mgr Demarets, who forbade any ministry for M. de Montfort in the diocese of Saint-Malo. An exception was made for the parish of Bréal where he preached a mission.

It was now September 1708. Montfort shook the dust from his sandals and, with his two companions, set off towards Nantes where he was called by M. Barrin, a friend of his who was Vicar General of the diocese. He preached a mission at Saint-Similien in the town, then in the neighbouring districts, in La Renaudière and other places, at La Chevrollière, Cambon, Crossac and elsewhere.

At the beginning of May 1709, Montfort finished a mission in Pontchâteau. There he unveiled for the people of the district a plan that he had borne in his heart for a long time: to erect an enormous Calvary where people would come on pilgrimage and venerate Christ and his Passion. The Holy Land was far away, and moreover almost impossible to get to: “Alas! The Turk still holds Blessed Calvary / Where Jesus Christ has died,” he sang on this occasion in one of his Hymns; “Christians, we must erect one here. / Let’s build a Calvary here, / Let’s build a Calvary.”

No sooner said than done. The crowd followed him and set to work on the Magdalene Heath. “I regularly saw four or five hundred people working there together,” wrote Father Olivier, one of Montfort’s collaborators. “Some would be digging the earth, others carrying it in wheelbarrows...” The work began in October 1709 and was finished in August 1710. Three crosses were to be set up on the summit of the artificial mound that had been thrown up, from the top of which you could see the flat country for twenty kilometres or so around. From afar, the pilgrim on his way there would also see the cross of his Saviour.

This was not to everyone’s taste. Political interference, personal jealousies, all contributed to bring about its failure. The blessing that had been fixed for 14 September 1710, was cancelled on the orders of the Bishop. “I am neither happy nor annoyed,” said Montfort to M. des Bastières, a good and faithful friend; “The Lord allowed me to have it done. Today he allows it to be destroyed. May his holy name be blessed!” And so, off he goes to make a retreat with the Jesuits of Nantes, to “digest” this business and reflect on it in the light of God.

His missionary activity continued in the diocese of Nantes, where he set up a prayer-group to recite the Rosary, laid the foundations of a hospital for incurables, affirmed an association called “The Friends of the Cross”, for whom he would later write his famous “*Letter to the Friends of the Cross*”, and went to the help of the victims of the flooding in 1711.

Soon he left the diocese of Nantes to turn his steps towards the diocese of Luçon, then on to that of La Rochelle, which always afforded him a great welcome. In Luçon, Mgr. de Lescure even invited the missionary to preach in his Cathedral. But it was above all in the diocese of La Rochelle that he was to pour forth his strength during the last years of his missionary life. Mgr de Champflour who was the bishop there, pointed him in the direction of Aunis where the work

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of evangelisation was manifestly necessary, but an ungrateful task. In the summer of 1711, he preached the mission in La Rochelle itself, where the Protestants were numerous. There were many conversions to the Catholic faith. He was to be found also in the Vendée, the Ile d'Yeu, in La Garnache, and in Saint-Christophe-du-Ligneron. In July 1712, he returned to La Rochelle. He retired several times, between missions, to the hermitage of Saint-Eloi where he wrote, it is thought, his book on *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.

The diocese of La Rochelle was the usual area of the last apostolic labours of M. de Montfort. In 1713, he undertook a journey to Paris, again with the idea of recruiting missionaries for the congregation he wanted to establish. M. Poullart de Places was dead. His successor, Monsieur Bouic, allowed him to speak to the seminarians. But no candidate followed him at that time. Later, from the seminary of the Holy Spirit, there would come forth, with the first Montfortians, a number of valuable recruits who would follow in his footsteps. In June 1714, he set out on another long journey with Brother Nicolas. He visited M. Blain, his friend who had become a canon of Rouen: "He arrived about midday," the latter wrote. "I found him much changed, exhausted and worn out by work and penances. And I was persuaded that his end was not far off, though he was still no more than 40 or 41..."

Louis Marie hoped, perhaps, to finally draw his friend into his orbit and get him to take charge of some of his works. "I began by unburdening my heart of all I had to say or had heard said against his conduct and manner of acting," wrote M. Blain, who was not ready to let himself be drawn. "I asked him ... whether he ever hoped to find people who would be willing to follow him in the life which he was leading." ... And the attack continued, frank and stinging. The canon told him squarely that he "ought ... to relax the rigour of his life ... in order to ... conform to their way of ordinary living."

"By way of answer he showed me his New Testament and then asked me if I could find fault with anything which Jesus Christ had practised and taught, and if I could show him a life more like that of our Blessed Lord and His Apostles than a life which was poor, mortified and founded upon abandonment to Providence..." The conversation continued for a long time on this point, and the canon had to admit in his heart that his saintly friend must surpass him in virtue and in grace. He was not built like him: "The peculiar manners and extraordinary actions of M. de Montfort originated from his burning zeal, from his fullness of the spirit of God and from his genuine virtue... Although they deserve to be respected ... it is a well known fact that the saints have so often acted in such a peculiar and extraordinary manner that it would be unwise to try to imitate them."

It was certainly not Blain who would imitate Montfort. Blain would stay on in Rouen, while Montfort set out again for La Rochelle. In 1715, he met Monsieur Adrien Vatel there, a young priest who was leaving for Canada. Montfort took him on and he was to become one of the pillars of the congregation dreamt of by Louis Marie. The mission in Mervent, near Fontenay-le-Comte, deserves special mention, for the town was close to a forest where the saint dug out a hermitage for himself, where he wanted to retire to pray and make his retreats. In Fontenay-le-Comte also, he met a sick young priest who came to ask him to preach a mission in the parish of his brother, who was the parish-priest of Saint-Pompain. "If you will help me during the Vouvant mission," Montfort replied, "I will go to Saint-Pompain immediately afterwards." The other argued that his health would not allow it; he was afflicted with a chest weakness and with migraines which prevented him from sleeping and caused him to suffer night and day. "All your infirmities do not stop me from telling you, Monsieur, as our Lord said to Saint Matthew: follow me... All your illnesses will disappear the moment you begin to work for the salvation of souls" (Grandet). René Mulot obeyed the call, and was to become the first Superior General of the two congregations founded by Montfort, and his first successor.

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It was from Saint-Pompain, where he repaired after other preaching engagements, that there set out for Notre-Dame des Ardilliers, in Saumur, a strange procession consisting of the 33 members of the association of “White Penitents” of the parish. Montfort sent them there, accompanied by MM. Mulot and Vatel, for a very important purpose: “To obtain from God good missionaries.” He had composed an astonishing prayer, the “Prayer for Missionaries” or “Prière Embrasée” (Burning Prayer) with the same aim. He himself laid down detailed instructions to guide the pilgrimage, which lasted a week. At the same time, he wrote to the seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris to ask yet again for men who would be “desirous of being associated with his labours.” For fifteen years, he had been carrying this project in his heart: “a small and poor band of good priests.” Until now he had only two with him. But, he said to the Lord in this famous prayer: “It is you alone who must, by your grace, make it a living reality... it is your work, great God. Make your divine purpose a reality” (PM 26). The pilgrims from Saint-Pompain had no other aim than to continue this prayer.

### **THE DEATH OF AN APOSTLE**

At the beginning of 1716, Montfort was still in Saint-Pompain where he was finishing the mission. He then began another in Villiers-en-Plaine, after which he took some rest with the parish-priest of Saint-Pompain. Then, by way of Cholet, he went to Saint-Laurent, where he arrived on 1 April, to preach in the parish for a few weeks before Easter. On Palm Sunday, which was 5 April, he opened the mission. But he felt ill. Nevertheless he preached and was assiduous in hearing confessions, where his goodness was much admired. Mgr. de Champflour (the bishop) announced that he would visit on the 22nd. Montfort wanted to lay on a specially solemn reception for him.

That very day, he was unable to join those invited at the presbytery. His strength was failing; yet he went up into the pulpit and spoke of the gentleness of Jesus. Then wracked by fever, he had to take to his bed. He got M. Mulot to come and hear his confession, and begged him to “continue his work.” He dictated his will and gave up his soul to God on 28 April in the year of Our Lord 1716. He had enough strength to sing: “Let us go, dear friends; / let us go to paradise. / Whatever we may gain on this earth, / Paradise is much more valuable!” He held in one hand the crucifix that Pope Clement XI had blessed, and in the other a small statue of the Blessed Virgin. He was heard one last time, saying in a loud voice, clearly and distinctly: “You attack me in vain! I am between Jesus and Mary... I have come to the end of my life: it is all over; I shall sin no more.” About 8 o’clock in the evening, he gave up his soul to God. He was 43 years old, and in such a short life he had done great things for God and his brethren in the human race.

### **THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF A SAINT**

It is not an easy task for either historian or psychologist to trace the contours of such a rich personality. Montfort admitted that he had a quick and violent temper, saying that he would have been “the most terrible man of his century”... if the grace of God had not prevented him and enfolded him. The missionary who died just after speaking of the “gentleness of the Incarnate Word,” was to be looked upon by the crowds as one made in His likeness, and they called him “the good Father de Montfort.”

It is true that he reacted with force and publicly against licentious spectacles and demonstrations of debauchery, that he berated the authors of scandalous works and the readers of unhealthy books, the drunkards and those taking part in indecent dancing. He was like Jesus chasing the merchants from the Temple: he saw in these excesses a stain on the dignity of the house of God, whose Wisdom willed to live in human beings. But he showed great kindness in the confessional, where he bore witness to the love of God for the repentant sinner.

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The work that he chose made him an evangeliser and a catechist for the people of God, who wants to “renew the spirit of Christianity among Christians” (MR). He accomplished this objective through the practice of the parish “missions” that he gave “in dependence on Providence” and undertook “in an apostolic way.” These two qualifications give to his activity as he played a part in the pastoral practice of the clergy of his own day, a specific character in which the dominant feature is the surrender of the team to the God of all goodness, who never abandons his flock, and the improvised shape he was able to give to his interventions and the unfolding of the mission process.

The mission is intended for the poor. Montfort shared the opinion of Fénelon who said that “the greatest wretchedness for man is ignorance of God.” In this sense, the poor to whom he was speaking are to be found in every social class. Yet he felt more at ease with the disinherited and those without resources. He himself, in the way he dressed, contrasted with the churchmen of the Grand Siècle. It was the same with his comportment and his way of life. He was content with very little, and delighted in situations of poverty. He was one of the “poor” of the Gospel beatitudes.

Failures, contradictions, opposition, abound in his short life. He is persecuted, rejected, harassed. In this he sees the presence of the cross of Jesus Christ, the sign of the love of God for himself and his brethren. He identifies it with his Lord: “The Cross is Wisdom, and Wisdom is the Cross.”

Finally, he professes and proposes, towards the Blessed Virgin, an astonishing devotion that is “interior, tender, holy, constant and disinterested.” It does not involve any sentimentality, nor is it based on any apparitions that might be more or less controversial. The “true” devotion of M. Grignon is rooted in the great tradition of the Church affirmed by the Council of Nicaea, and relies on a theology which places Mary in the Christian mystery, in relationship with the Trinity, in the Incarnation and in the Redemption.

The place and the role that Mary had in the “first coming”, she continues in the history of Salvation. “It was through the Blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world” (TD 1). This missionary must be counted among the great mystics. John Paul II was right to present him as “a spiritual master.”

### ACTIVITY OF THE MAN

In the France of Louis XIV, there was no question of unemployment. There was always and everywhere something to do. Louis Marie de Montfort, for his part, was aware of a human reality: “Scarcely anyone thinks of the gentle, dying Jesus.” He was convinced that the thing most lacking in human beings was “knowledge of wisdom.” All his efforts went into obtaining this for them.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who died as bishop of that town in 395, had written: “Three things characterise the life of the Christian: thought, word and action. The most important of these three is thought.” It is this, in fact, that allows us to utter a just and true word, and if one is logical and faithful to oneself, to perform an action of the same quality. In this sense, some philosophers were able to claim that just to think is the supreme form of action.

When we consider his apostolic action, so intense, we recognise that Montfort would have prepared for it by study and meditation. The Bible, the Fathers of the Church, and all that had been produced treating of the spiritual life, were the object of his reading and his reflection. His studies at the Sorbonne and at Saint-Sulpice would have given a theological framework to that thirst to understand God that manifested itself in profound study, and was itself an astonishing form of action which would prepare him for his missionary activity.

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When he met his friend Blain the year before he died, Montfort was to give this justification for his apostolic action: “If prudence consisted in doing nothing new for God, in undertaking nothing for His glory for fear of being spoken about, then the Apostles were wrong in leaving Jerusalem; they should have remained shut up in the Caenaculum; St Paul should not have made so many journeys, or St. Peter have attempted to plant the Cross upon the Capitol and conquer for Jesus Christ the queen city of the world; ... with prudence such as this, the Synagogue would never have been stirred, nor have raised persecution against our Saviour's little flock; but, then, on the other hand, this little flock would never have increased in number, and the world would be still at the present day what it was then, idolatrous, perverted, corrupt in its morals and its maxims to a sovereign degree.” He himself had chosen apostolic action, through the force of reflection and meditation, after much hesitation and bitter failures. He had not succeeded everywhere, even in his action, with the same good fortune.

Like many rich personalities, Montfort was a man divided. Solitude attracted him: he felt “a secret love of retirement and of a hidden life”; on the other hand, wide horizons fascinated him: “The ardour of his charity gave him an attraction for barbarous countries.” He was content with being in a place provided he could, in that place, “teach catechism to the poor, which is what attracts me most.” Other people also, in the history of sanctity, have felt the same interior struggle before making their definitive choice, and sometimes their whole lives long: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux thought of himself as a shoddy example of a monk, considering that he gave too much time to political activity outside the cloister, and Saint Gregory the Great had the same scruples when faced with the priestly and social obligations of an office that left so little time for choral prayer and contemplation.

It remains a fact that Montfort, by temperament, was a man of action. It was in his nature to undertake things and to act. Certainly he could be seen to engage in long pauses of contemplation, in this or that hermitage in the countryside (Saint-Lazare in Montfort, the Forest of Mervent in the Vendée) or this or that hideaway in the towns (the Rue du Pot de Fer in Paris, Montbernage in Poitiers, the hermitage of St Eloi in La Rochelle). He even accepted a share in the life of the monks of Mont Valérien for several months. But Montfort was no monk. After his visit to Pope Clement XI, he chose his style of life very deliberately: “That’s it! I will roam through the world,” he wrote in one of his hymns, “living just like a vagabond, to rescue my poor neighbour.” Montfort was a man of action, but his action was rooted in deep reflection and contemplation.

The mystery of faith that most struck him was that of the Incarnation of the living God who “came into the virginal womb of Mary” and “displayed power in allowing himself to be borne by this young maiden” (ID 18). This gesture of the Word who “emptied himself” was for him the clear sign of God’s love for men, and the manifestation of Wisdom: “In order to draw closer to men and give them a more convincing proof of his love, eternal Wisdom went so far as to become man, even to become a little child, to embrace poverty and to die upon a cross for them” (LEW 70). This was the message he wanted to give, the good news he wished to proclaim.

We cannot, therefore, imagine him as sedentary, looking after a parish and administering the sacraments there: he wanted always to be able to say with Jesus Christ: “The Lord has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor,” ... or, with the Apostles: “He did not send me to baptise, but to evangelise.” He was to do this to the full and with great boldness: “If we don’t risk something for God, we will do nothing great for him” (L 27). For his action had a single aim: to make men aware of this God of love: he noted that “Hardly anyone studies the supreme science of Jesus... And yet this is the most noble, ... the most useful and the most vital of all sciences and subjects in heaven and on earth” (LEW 8).

So the activity of Montfort was to be directed essentially towards teaching about Christ, proclaiming his Gospel of Salvation to men and women. We know how he prepared himself to

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teach this knowledge of Jesus Christ: for “Can we love deeply someone we know only vaguely?” (LEW 8). His reading and his studies from his time at the Sorbonne and at Saint-Sulpice had been a direct preparation for this.

In order to communicate to men and women this knowledge of God, he did not neglect any means. The first and most important, to which he was to dedicate his whole life, was the mission: “going from place to place, teaching catechism to the poor people.” For sure, he had the allure of a prophet and a personal charisma. But he was an organised person, with a sense of rules. He wrote several himself, first of all for the two congregations he founded. The missionaries who would form the Company of Mary, would find a “rule for their times of mission” and “rules for catechising”, drawn up and ready. The children, in their missions, were to be the object of special attention and special methods. To maintain the work he had begun, he organised the instruction of the children of the populace. He got the Daughters of Wisdom to come from Poitiers to La Rochelle, and he gathered together volunteers for this work. He even appointed a number of the Brothers who accompanied him in his missions to this work. It was in this line that the Brothers of Saint Gabriel would work, when they were organised later into an independent Institute by Father Deshayes.

He showed the same attention to detail in all his apostolic undertakings. Preparing the pilgrimage of the White Penitents from Saint-Pompain to N-D des Ardilliers in Saumur, he would draw up detailed instructions to make sure that the days of the pilgrimage would be filled with prayer and penances. He gave the same attention to the organisation of a procession in the town of La Rochelle, and to the celebration of the renewal of Baptismal promises at the closing of each mission. Any and every technique was good for proclaiming to the people: “Jesus Christ, our Saviour, true God and true man, must be the final aim of all our other devotions, otherwise they would be false and deceptive... He is our only Lord on whom we must depend... There is no other name given under heaven than the name of Jesus by which we may be saved.” All his actions had no other aim. The Blessed Virgin certainly holds a privileged place in this, which God himself has reserved for her in the History of Salvation, and which she continues to hold in the life of every Christian.

To proclaim this throughout sixteen years of ministry, he would preach around 200 missions, especially in the area of the West of France: Poitou, Anjou, the Vendée, Aunis, Brittany. He made time to write around 2,300 lines of verse that he set to popular tunes to be sung in the mission celebrations. He wrote two treatises of spirituality which place him among the “Masters” in this domain: *“The Love of Eternal Wisdom”* and *“True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”*, of which Pope John Paul II would say: “This is a book that it is not enough to have read.” The complete works, in the French edition, runs to 1,800 pages. He would have written them between missions, during a break that this great walker organised for himself in one or other of his hermitages.

One might think that all his activity revolved around the religious plane and the teaching of the faith. In fact, we see him also being preoccupied with the sick, the needy, the poor. We see him engaged in all those enterprises in Poitiers, La Rochelle and the Salpêtrière. In Nantes, the setting up of the hospital for incurables is an achievement to be noted. In the same town, he went to the help of the victims who were cut off by the flooding of the Loire in 1711. And we see him also creating small schools for the education of children.

Certainly he did not envisage an activity in the line of social work. He was not a militant in any cause. But anyone who sets out to teach those like himself to know and love God (Montfort would say: “to preach Wisdom”), makes them grow in humanity and so brings something extra to society. His action, on both the plane of preaching and on that of humanitarian activity, is concerned with the human being and his well-being before himself and before God. It was Montfort’s deep devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation that guided him: God became man and every human being is made in his image. The Second Vatican Council would say that, in

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becoming man, the Son of God “in some way was united with every human being” (GR 22). It is necessary therefore, in every area that concerns man, to “open up to Jesus Christ.”

Montfort was an inventive and daring man. He confided to M. Blain that “the prudence of a person living in community is one thing, the prudence of a missionary and an apostolic man quite another; that the former had nothing new to undertake, and nothing to do but to let himself be guided by the rule and customs of a well-regulated house; that the latter, on the contrary, had to procure the glory of God at the cost of his own glory, and to execute new designs” (Blain).

And he remained convinced that “if you don’t risk something for God, you will do nothing great for him.” He wanted others to imitate him and follow him in his enterprise in the service of the Kingdom: “Let all those worthy priests who are to be found throughout the world... come and join us... (that there may be) but one sheepfold and one shepherd, and all will make your temple resound with their praise of your glory” (PM 29-30). “Given the needs of the Church” today, this appeal from Montfort and the example he gives retain all their force.

*Henri Derrien, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. For you, what is the most striking characteristic of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort’s life?
2. How is the tension between action and contemplation manifested in the life of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort?
3. Is Saint Louis Marie de Montfort a saint to be imitated; or rather a saint to be admired?

### FURTHER READING

Any good life of St. Louis Marie de Montfort; for example:

- E. C. Bolger, smm, *The Man Called Montfort*, Montfort Press, Liverpool, 2006.
- Benedetta Papásogli, *Montfort: A Prophet for Our Times*, Edizione Monfortane, Rome, 1991.

The Letters of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Publications, New York, 1987, pgs. 1-46.

## 2. SAINT LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT IN THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF HIS DAY

The life of Louis Grignion (1673-1716) unfolded almost entirely under the rule of Louis XIV (1638-1715), King of France. In 1661, the king took personal direction of the state. He died in September 1715, eight months before the death of Louis Grignion, which occurred on 28 April 1716.

In that period, the Muslim offensives began once again to menace the countries of Europe in the Danube valley and even to the gates of Vienna. Louis XIV sent an army to rally the armies of Austria before the Battle of Saint-Gothard in 1664, which signalled the defeat of the invader.

France was then the most considerable of all the Catholic nations. Louis XIV wanted to impose the predominance of France in Europe. He claimed a temporal power that would be equivalent to that of the Pope in the spiritual domain. The Pope, the spiritual head of Christendom, was also a sovereign ruler like those of other countries.

Within his kingdom, Louis XIV was keen to limit to his own profit the rights that the Papacy enjoyed in the spiritual domain. The expression “Liberties of the Gallican Church” translated this desire (the term “Gallicanism” came in later than this period). The French bishops were nominated by the king from the time of the concordat of 1516, signed by Francis I and the Pope; normally, the nominations made by the king were recognised by the Pope. Despite that, Louis XIV had recourse to the spiritual authority of the Pope in matters of heresy, because that suited him, when he wanted to condemn Jansenism (or Quesnelism) which was a challenge to his authority in his kingdom; which resulted in the bull *Unigenitus* in 1713.

In his conflict with the Papacy, Louis XIV sought to rally the clergy to his cause. The Gallican clergy were favourable to the defence of their traditions and their sovereign.

The Reform of the Church, decided between 1545 and 1563 by the Council of Trent, did not come into force in France until the end of the Wars of Religion (1598). The time of renewal began with Francis de Sales (+1622) who founded the Order of the Visitation of Mary; and Pierre de Bérulle (+1629), founder of the Oratory in France (1611) based on the Italian model of Philip Neri. It was missionaries in the French countryside who established seminaries and institutes for priests: Vincent de Paul and his Society of Priests of the Mission (1625); Jean Jacques Olier, with his Company of Priests of Saint-Sulpice (1645); Jean Eudes, and his Community of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (1643). Gradually, the rather lax and quite ignorant priests from before the Catholic Reform, were replaced by well-trained priests, and the poor people learnt the catechism.

By his roots and his formation, Louis Grignion belonged to the 17th Century, even if he was a priest during the first fifteen years of the 18th Century.

### A POOR LIFE

Before the French Revolution, society in France was divided into three Orders or ‘Estates’. The Clergy constituted an Order, the first Estate. The second Estate was the Nobility. Nobility signified a distinction among persons, raising those who possessed it above other subjects of the king. The social class of the Bourgeois, which was originally the class of town-dwellers, grew from the 17th century onwards thanks to work, savings, the regularity of their lives, the purchase of posts and the tendency of Louis XIV to find among them his most important agents.

Louis Grignion belonged to the provincial Bourgeoisie by birth. His family was for several generations composed of lawyers and property managers. Thanks to the attention paid to him by

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certain noble women, he was able to enter the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. All his life he would meet people from these two social classes.

His missionary activity, however, unfolded among those with no social standing, the “country poor” or “peasants” (L 5). The countryside, at this period, was the place where the most needy and the least favoured lived, labourers dependant on working the soil, artisans who were often semi-artisanal peasants, all living by the sweat of their brow, at the mercy of the seasons and the trying years of famine. To these workers must be added the tanners, the weavers, and, in the towns, the innkeepers and grocers... Louis Grignion made a preferential choice of these “poor” people, and for the missionary priests of the Company of Mary he prescribed also that same choice, that is to say, that they would “prefer the countryside to the towns and the poor to the rich” (MR 7).

Before being a missionary to the poor, Louis Grignion had chosen a poor lifestyle for himself. This personal orientation moulded his life-journey as a priest. The majority of the secular priests of his day lived on resources assured by the system of “ecclesiastical benefices.” This was the name given to some property of the Church attributed to a clergyman because of the functions carried out by him. This system of finance had as its origin the gifts known as “foundations”: rich people would grant goods or property to the clergy so that the clergy might profit by the revenues in exchange for spiritual advantages such as Mass intentions or religious services assured by the “founders”. Bishops, monastic Abbots, Canons and Chaplains all lived off their benefices, In the same way parishes were managed or ruled by a priest known as the “rector”, who guided the parishioners and took a part of the parish resources. If the rector did not himself carry out the ministry, he was replaced by a “curé”, who had the care of souls, the *cura animarum*, and received a small part of the revenues known as a ‘portion congrue’, that is, a fitting share. When Louis Grignion, not long before his twentieth birthday (the end of 1692 or beginning of 1693), made his way from Rennes to Paris to the seminary of Saint-Sulpice to be prepared to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders, he knew of the system of benefices and the abuses to which it gave rise. He knew that in the ordinary way of things for the clergy, he would need a benefice to be able to live. On the way to Paris, he made a decision never to possess anything as his own, which was implicitly a rejection of ecclesiastical benefices. We find this choice also in the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, who are neither to “govern ‘cures’” (MR 2), that is, be rectors or curés, nor “*vicarier*”, in the sense of being subordinates (in English: curates) of the rector or curé, who was the spiritual leader as well as the temporal one.

Louis Grignion did not depart from his chosen way of life when he lived in Paris for his formation for seven years. At first, he was received into a community of about twenty church students. M. de la Barmondière, a Sulpician priest who had founded, and governed, this community, “had the kindness,” wrote Louis Grignion, “to receive me for nothing” (L 2). He was taken in as a poor man. At the death of the founder, in September 1694, he took refuge in a miserable hostel for church students who had to beg their living. This one was not attached to Saint-Sulpice. He stayed there for about half a year.

The formation given by M. de la Barmondière had the same inspiration as that of the seminaries of Saint-Sulpice. The Major Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, founded by M. Olier (in 1643), was the seminary properly so-called, which accepted nobles and the well-to-do bourgeois, while the Little Seminary, founded by M. Tronson (in 1684), accepted the bourgeois of lesser means and impoverished nobles. M. Grignion was known at the Little Seminary where he had his spiritual director, M. Bauyn, in the time of M. de la Barmondière.

The superior of the Little Seminary, M. Brenier, appointed by M. Tronson who was the superior of the Major Seminary, wanted M. Grignion to enter the second of the two houses of formation. The fees amounted to 260 livres *per annum*. Louis Grignion had nothing. A member of the nobility, Mme d’Alègre, who used to give 160 livres to M. de la Barmondière to help one

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of his students, henceforth paid this sum to M. Brenier. Louis Grignion wrote: “She wanted me to have the place she was helping to provide” (L 3). This was not an ecclesiastical resource, but a help for a poor person. He was still lacking 100 livres. M Bauyn advised him to find this sum for himself, having recourse to an ecclesiastical benefice, and so Louis found himself provided with a benefice without his having wanted it: “God in his loving Providence, without my ever having thought of it, has provided me with a benefice of about 100 livres” (L 3). He considered this situation as a gift from God to bring about his entry into the cycle of Sulpician formation which lasted for four years. He was received into the seminary probably around May 1695.

Louis Grignion was ordained priest in June 1700. He remained a secular priest all his life, a member of the clergy of the diocese of Saint-Malo. Before being ordained, he had to have, just like all secular priests, resources to live on. The priests, quite independently of their diocesan bishop, used to find their own resources, but the official statutes of the dioceses foresaw that those who did not have an ecclesiastical benefice, would at least have a fixed income, sufficient to be able to live a decent life-style once they had left the seminary. This income, known as the “clerical title”, was paid by the family or sometimes by other individuals. It was backed up by supporting land revenues. The diocese of Rennes demanded 60 livres annually; that of Saint-Malo fixed the necessary revenue at 80 livres (about one third of the annual fees at the Little Seminary of Saint-Sulpice). Louis’s father, Jean-Baptiste Grignion, had decided, from 1697 on, to provide an income for his eldest son; he ceded to him for life by contract the revenues of one of his farms equivalent to the amount of the income for the clerical tile demanded by the diocese of Saint-Malo. The contract was signed on 13 August 1697. Even though it was obligatory, Louis Grignion would have preferred not to receive this income. He wrote to his mother on 28 August 1704: “I give up my right to everything except my patrimony which the Church does not allow me to renounce” (L 20).

He maintained his option once he was ordained in 1700. M. Lechassier, superior of the Major Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, who advised him by letter in 1701, was not happy that he had rejected the revenues arising from a canon’s post when he was so poor. The Sulpicians did not like financial situations that were poorly established, for they feared that priests left to themselves might become impoverished or beggars. For Louis Grignion, it was not a question of poverty submitted to, but rather chosen, the basic reason for which was the place of Divine Providence in his life. Rejecting the revenues of a canonry that had been offered him with a precise objective, to help the poor, he claimed in writing: “I would never exchange divine providence for a canonry or a benefice” (L 6). At the end of his life, he would say in his Will that he had no personal money: “I have no private money belonging to me.”

Louis Grignion, who had no money at the time of his death, loved to have none about him throughout his life. From his first journey to Paris to enter the seminary in 1692-1693, he gave to one poor man all the money his father had given him to make his journey (Grandet 350). In 1702, as he wrote, having received “a little money to make my way to Poitiers, I gave it away to the poor” (L 11). When about to depart for Rome in 1706, “he gave away to the poor the 18 deniers he still had left,” and asked the young man who was his companion on the way to get rid of the sous that he was keeping (Grandet 97). “So as not to be in debt to boatmen, because he never carried money on his person, he was known to risk crossing rivers on the locks,” as we are told by a priest from Poitiers (Grandet 479).

It was the social context of his day that allowed such poverty. There were many displaced persons. The pilgrims making their way to and from the shrines of Europe, especially Rome and Compostella, who were called “travellers”, mingled with all those who were moving about on foot, workers in search of seasonal work, beggars, professional vagabonds, adventurers, as well as horse-soldiers, troops on the move, the carriages of the rich, diligences carrying the mails - all on the move.

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It was possible to live on alms. The monasteries and abbeys all had their guest accommodation, sometimes demanded by their rules. The châteaux, farms and presbyteries all opened their doors. The poor who lived on very little, shared very little, but they did share. So you could find your supper and a corner in the stable to rest. Alms were asked for with reference to God: “For charity’s sake!” or “For the love of God!” These exchanges were based in faith: the poor person, up to a certain point, was given consideration with reference to Jesus Christ.

Mingling with these displaced persons, Louis Grignion was protected by his clerical garb, his cassock, as others wore the monastic habit. He practically never travelled alone, due to the need for companionship, for protection or to bear witness; or out of necessity so as not to be taken for a begging or degenerate priest. He left Poitiers for Rome accompanied by a pilgrim in 1706 (Grandet 97), and returned in the company of two others (Grandet 101). On the road from Poitiers to Mont-Saint-Michel, still in 1706, he was not alone, any more than he was en route from the diocese of La Rochelle to that of Rouen in 1714. When he went to visit the construction work in Pontchâteau in 1709-1710, he was accompanied. Going from one mission to another, he would move with the other missionaries. During the pilgrimage from Saint-Pompain to Notre-Dames des Ardilliers, he was among a group of pilgrims.

### A MISSIONARY LIFE

In the year 1693, Jean-Baptiste Blain, a native of Rennes twenty-two months younger than Louis Grignion, joined the latter in Paris. There they received the same formation in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Blain, who interrupted his course at the seminary several times, was ordained a priest at the age of 30 in 1704. Benefiting by an income from a canonry of the cathedral church of Noyon, to the north of Paris, he made his way there in the year of his ordination. Starting in 1709, he changed his income and became a canon of the cathedral church in Rouen, on the Atlantic coast. Subsequently he accumulated two incomes, becoming also a canon of the cathedral church of Andelys, in the same region, in 1713. Through these canonical functions, he fulfilled that priestly activity that was considered the most estimable in a society where the clergy was numerous: the praise of God by the daily singing or recitation of the Divine Office in the choir of a cathedral or collegiate church. The canons constituted a secular ecclesiastical body in a stable employment, each one living in independent dwellings. This function and this state were much appreciated by the priests making up the formation personnel of Saint-Sulpice. Jean-Baptiste Blain was following the common and normal path of the clergy of his day. His conduct was typical of those “good priests” of the time, so much so that we do not have to search any further to understand how unusual was the conduct of Grignion de Montfort.

Beginning in 1704, when Blain was ordained priest, there was a complete break in communication between Blain and Grignion that lasted for ten years. In 1714, Louis Grignion decided to seek out Jean-Baptiste Blain at a time when he was seeking priests to join him as missionaries in the footsteps of the poor Apostles. The previous year, in Paris, he had received only promises on the part of the Holy Spirit seminary, to which he had shown his *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*. After this second attempt, too, there were no priests of the diocese of Rouen who were prepared to join him.

The canon of Rouen, Jean-Baptiste Blain, was the inspector of seminaries in the diocese in 1714, an office which might account for M. Grignion’s journey to Rouen. Louis Grignion arrived at the end of a morning, and, in the afternoon, the two priests had a “conversation” of which Jean-Baptiste Blain has given us a full account. The exchange began with the same motive that had taken Louis Grignion to Paris, to the Holy Spirit seminary, the year before. Blain wanted to know for himself what the idea of his visitor was, and asked him “whether he ever hoped to find people who would be willing to follow him in the life which he was leading. I pointed out to him that a life so poor, so hard, so abandoned to Providence, was for apostles, for men of rare

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fortitude, grace and virtue, for extraordinary men, for himself, who was drawn to it, and had the grace to embrace it, but not for the common sort of men, who could not reach so high” (Blain 331). Blain compared the “common sort” with “extraordinary men” and, since the “common sort” will never attain the heights of “extraordinary men”, he judged the efforts of M. Grignion to be unrealisable, saying that “if he wished to associate other ecclesiastics with himself in his designs and labours, he ought either to relax the rigour of his life and the sublimity of his practices of perfection, in order to condescend to their weakness, or to pray for them to be raised to his own height by the inpouring of grace” (Blain 332). The contrast was very much linked to the style of life of priests of that period. It referred to the conduct that was habitual in a stable community (including the ecclesiastical body of canons) and that of missionaries who, according to M. Grignion, have chosen to follow in the footsteps of the poor Apostles. According to Blain’s account, M. Grignion said that “the prudence of a person living in community is one thing, the prudence of a missionary and an apostolic man quite another” (Blain 335). There are two choices, and, faced with one that was different from his own, Blain told M. Grignion that he would not succeed in bringing his plans to fruition.

Effectively, in the sense understood by M. Blain, M. Grignion did not succeed. At his death he was the only missionary priest of the Company of Mary. None of the priests that worked with him in his missions had made the two vows foreseen in the *Rules of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*. None of them are mentioned as such in his Will made on 27 April 1716. These priests had not wanted, or were not prepared after such a short stay with the missionary, or had not reached the heights necessary to take on the demands made by M. Grignion and recognised by Blain.

From then on, those who claimed to be following the ideas of M. Grignion and of the *Rules of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, lacked what certain orders and congregations call “the practice of the founder”. Even though four “lay Brothers”, according to his Will, had, in the words of M. Grignion, “joined me in a life of obedience and poverty,” that is by the two vows foreseen in the *Rules*, they had no independent status. They were accepted in a society of priests “to take care of the temporal side of things” (MR 4). They could not exist as a group except with priests. The first institute constituted uniquely of Brothers was that founded by Jean-Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719) in 1694. This innovator had come up against considerable difficulties and the weight of circumstances that only his tenacity and perseverance allowed him to overcome. But this was not the wish of Grignion de Montfort, He wanted a society of missionary priests, according to his dreams going back to the year 1700 (L 5).

The *Rules of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary* (and not “the Rule” like that of St Benedict) foresee the choice of members, their consecration and their activities. One peculiarity is that, not only are the members to be poor and missionary, but the community itself is not a stable one in a diocese. It may have “only two houses in the kingdom” (MR 12), one for the formation of its members, and yet the missionary priests are not to be in charge of this formation (MR 2); the other where those “who have retired from the fray may rest” (MR 12), which means when they were between missions and to “end their days” (MR 12). If a house is given to the Company in the various dioceses where they work, the Company will retain only the use of it, and “will by deed convey the ownership of these premises to the bishop of the place, and his successors” (MR 12). In this too, the practice of the founder was lacking.

“Their mission”, that of the missionary priests, according to the *Rules*, had as its aim “to renew the spirit of Christianity among the faithful,” meaning, quite simply, “in Christendom” (MR 56). The French were integrated into Christendom by a doctrine and traditions received from the past. Their assent to this state of things was almost total. Parish missions would periodically renew this spirit of Christianity in Christendom.

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Baptism was what effected this entry into Christendom. All French people were baptised at the beginning of the 18th century, and the registration of their baptism was equivalent to their birth certificate. It was the job of parish-priests to draw up records of baptism, of marriage and of funerals, which, kept in the parish registers, represented what we call today our civil documents. Christians, consecrated by baptism in Christendom, made promises of fidelity. These were the promises that the missionaries had people renew (MR 56). In a religious tradition that was neither Jewish nor Islamic, the “practice” of renewing these promises was done “on the Pope’s orders” (MR 56). In this perspective of Christianity, Grignion de Montfort also had a spirit of conquest. He foresaw “great saints” (TD 47) “chosen to oppose the enemies of God,” (TD 48) who will “give battle, overthrowing and crushing heretics ... schismatics ... idolaters” (TD 48), and he hopes for such a “fiery deluge” over “the whole world”, “that all nations, Moslems, idolaters and even Jews, will be caught up in its flames and be converted” (PM 17).

As a second “practice”, the missionaries must promote the recitation of the Rosary (MR 57). Once again here there is reference to Christianity. Shortly after the closure of the Council of Trent, a Dominican friar was elected Pope with the name of Pius V, in 1563. He was canonised on 4 August 1710 (three months after M. Grignion announced his intention of building a monumental Calvary at Pontchâteau). The canonization of Pius V was a religious event. M. Grignion made his profession as a Dominican Tertiary three months later. The memory of this holy man canonised in 1710 was linked with the recitation of the Rosary that he had spread round the whole of Europe before the battle of Lepanto, which took place in the Straits of Corinth in 1571, when the Papal fleet defeated that of the Turks, the Muslim invaders. Pius V attributed the victory to the Blessed Virgin who had preserved Christianity. He had an addition made to the Litany of the Blessed Virgin: “Help of Christians, pray for us!” In 1712, M. Grignion blessed, on the annual feast of St Pius V, a chapel that he had dedicated to “Our Lady of Victory” (the “Victory” of Lepanto).

The third “practice” of the missionaries was to “see to it that almost everyone makes a general confession” (MR 58), and the fourth was the ministry of “the preaching of God’s word” (MR 60-65). Grignion de Montfort insists on the role of the preacher favoured with the “gift of eloquence” which he calls the “gift of wisdom”, “so necessary to a true preacher for knowing and relishing the truth and getting others to relish it” (MR 60). He places the action of the true preacher on the same level as the struggle of Michael with Lucifer, or of the Virgin with the Serpent (MR 61). This calls to mind again the image of the “fiery deluge” of the Holy Spirit for the conversion of the nations (PM 17).

Grignion de Montfort had interiorised, made his own, these grandiose visions of the besieged stronghold and the conquerors. He claims that it is Christ who must reign: “Jesus Christ came into the world ... he must reign in the world” (TD 1). This reign is “interior” (TD 119), that is to say, concerned with the realm of conscience and liberty.

In the inner life, “baptism made us in very truth slaves of Jesus” (TD 68). The relationship of a slave to his master did not shock in a society that was highly hierarchical, where decisions were always handed down from a higher social level, though Grignion keeps, in this image, only that which speaks of belonging, leaving out any degrading sense. The slave of Jesus Christ must consecrate himself wholly to his master in a way that is inwardly free and loving. He is therefore, from then on, fundamentally disinterested.

At the opposite pole to that of a disinterested attitude, there is superstition. Superstition is an amalgam of vain practices whose aim is to have a hold on God, to make him fit in with one’s own wishes, to win him over to oneself. It is the exact opposite of service of God. Founded on fear, superstition was widespread in the French countryside. The Blessed Virgin, seen as more conciliatory than God, or more easily won over, was in favour with those who were superstitious, to whom Montfort replied: “The true subject of Mary does not serve his illustrious Queen for

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selfish gain. He does not serve her for temporal or eternal well-being but simply and solely because she has the right to be served and God alone in her” (TD 110). He states: “How pleasing and precious in the sight of God and his holy Mother must these servants of Mary be, who serve her without any self-seeking. How rare they are nowadays!” (TD 110). M. de Montfort wanted to draw the Christian of his own day to a disinterested stance. He did this, whether “publicly” (TD 110) by his preaching, or privately, as in the ministry of Confession. He decided to widen his scope so that every Christian might be disinterested in his relationship with the Blessed Virgin: “It is to increase their number that I have taken up my pen to write down what I have been teaching with success both publicly and in private in my missions for many years” (TD 110). This was the book that would later be known as *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.

This manuscript was hidden by necessity as soon as it was written in 1712. Montfort was well-informed on the subject of the Jansenists, writing in a prayer to Jesus Christ: “These people seldom speak of your Mother or devotion to her. They say they are afraid that devotion to her will be abused and that you will be offended by excessive honour paid to her” (TD 64). He foresaw their shudders and their fury against his writings and against himself for speaking of popular devotion. While awaiting better days, rather than have it published, he felt constrained “at least” to hide his book in a place where one would deposit precious objects or familiar objects that were valued, in “a coffer” (TD 114). Awareness of the existence and value of this manuscript had to wait until 130 years later, in 1842. The book was first published the following year, 1843. So, in terms of publication, the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* has to be placed, not at the beginning of the 18th century, but among the Catholic religious literature of the middle of the 19th century.

*Bernard Guitteny, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Looking at St. Louis Marie’s life, especially his priestly ministry, what would you say was the most powerful influence on him from his social background, or his education?
2. How did Montfort’s freely-chosen poverty of life reflect the social conditions of his day?
3. How did the “missionary” element manifest itself in his writings?

### FURTHER READING

The article *Milieu* in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*. Also in the same *Handbook* the following articles or parts of articles: *Church*, especially part I. on “Montfort and the Church of his Time”; the first section, “Montfort’s childhood”, of the article *Childhood*; sections I & II of the article *Education*; sections I & II of the article *Family*; the article *French School*; for the missionary element, the article *Parish Missions*; the article *Popes/Bishops*, etc.

Any good biography of St. Louis Marie.

### 3. THE EARLY BIOGRAPHIES

It is difficult to give an exact number of the biographies of Saint Louis Marie: there are several hundred, those in French being, by force of circumstances, the most numerous.

The three oldest of them deserve special mention: Grandet, Blain and Besnard.

#### I. JOSEPH GRANDET: LA VIE DE MESSIRE LOUIS-MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

This biography was published in 1724 at Nantes, the same year that its author died in Angers. There were no re-editions up to our own days. In 1993 there was published, for the Montfortian Family, a faithful reproduction, without any additions or comments. This was the 9th volume in the collection *Documents et recherches* ((Documents and research) made by the International Montfortian Centre. In 1994, the same text was published, the only difference being that the spelling of words and the punctuation were modernised. Also, to facilitate its use, there were added: a foreword, some notes, an index, a table of names and an analytical index. The original text was scrupulously respected, including certain stylistic forms which would be less correct nowadays. This was the 10th volume in the collection *Documents et recherches*. In 2006, an English translation of the book was published as volume XVI in the same collection.

##### 1. *Who was Joseph Grandet?*

Joseph Grandet was *born in Angers* on 30 July 1646. After his studies in literature he went to Paris in 1669, and studied theology at the Sorbonne. He entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in 1671 and was ordained a priest in 1674. In 1684 he returned to the seminary of Angers, where he had already worked as a deacon. He was to remain there until his death, while taking an active part in various missions, of which he was often the instigator, in Angers, Saumur and elsewhere.

In 1692 he was appointed superior of the seminary. In 1695, the seminary of Angers was officially united with the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. It was then that Father Joseph Grandet became a *member of the Congregation of Saint-Sulpice*. He died on 1 December 1724, aged 78 years and 4 months.

##### 2. *His Writings*

Father Joseph Grandet wrote many things: *21 manuscripts* are preserved in the library of the town of Angers (designated A to M); in the seminary of Angers (N to R); or in Saint-Sulpice (S to U). They consist of Notes, Dissertations, Memoirs, Notebooks, Exhortations...

He took on the task of *chronicler* of the missions in Angers and Saumur (1684). He felt at home in *spiritual works* (methods of prayer, instructions for the youth...). He did not disdain, though, *history* and *hagiography*: a Life of Mlle de Meleun; of Gabriel du Bois de la Ferté; of Pierre Cresley, priest; of Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. As though to resume all this, Fr. G. Letourneau, the superior of the seminary of Angers, does not hesitate to give him a place among “The Holy French Priests of the 18th Century”.

##### 3. *The Life of Monsieur Louis-Marie grignon de Montfort*

This life of Father de Montfort is certainly the last published work of Joseph Grandet, appearing a few months before his death. So it benefited from the wide and varied experience of a man who was already *well-informed* through his position at the seminary in Angers, and in the Company of Saint-Sulpice. On top of this, before getting down to writing, he took care to consult the

## THE EARLY BIOGRAPHIES

friends and collaborators of Father de Montfort, his spiritual directors, and the papers of the bishops of Nantes, Poitiers, Luçon and La Rochelle.

When he speaks of the *missions*, M. des Bastières, a collaborator with Fr. de Montfort, is often quoted, to the extent that the narrative sometimes takes on the sense of a chronicle which speaks warmly of events experienced personally by the narrator.

Certain documents, that he had requested so as to write the biography of the missionary, only arrived after he had already written his text. At the end of the book, we find these documents presented as supplementary information.

We cannot but be impressed by the *number and quality of the letters and testimonies* he gathered: the director of the Hôtel-Dieu in Poitiers, Father Préfontaine, Abbé Barrin, M. Desjonchères, Father Martinet, Father Dubois, M. Le Normand, M. Arot.

“Since it is you, Monsieur, that Providence has seen fit to choose to bring honour to this holy priest, who is already held in veneration wherever he went, I thought it my duty to pass on to you these various memoirs. I have added those that I have been able to collect, along with several letters, of which I have kept the originals...” (Grandet, pg. 238 [English version], *Letter from Monsieur Arot*, Advocate at the Parliament of Brittany, Rennes, 7 October 1719).

### LIMITATIONS AND OMISSIONS

Grandet has the merit of being the first biographer in a series that gets longer every year. Father Charles Besnard, when he read this “Life”, spotted a number of misunderstandings, anachronisms, omissions and mistakes of chronology. He describes them in the first paragraph of his own *Preface*. His remarks are still valid.

*“Whatever fruits of piety may have been produced by the first printed life of M. de Montfort, it was necessary to offer this one to the public. The pious author, too hasty in his work and badly served by his memories, left out many facts and misinterpreted a still greater number. My purpose is not to point out his mistakes and his anachronisms; I just want to supply his omissions, tell of the events in the order in which they should be placed, and finally to give an exact and complete life of Monsieur Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort.”*

Besides, the author is *prejudiced in favour* of his hero. That is especially evident when he treats, in Book V, of the virtues of the Servant of God. Faith, trust in God, devotion, zeal, hatred for sin, love of penance and of the Cross..., all these are presented as though for a process of beatification, even though it was still only a few years after the death of Father de Montfort. This style is less to the taste of our own times, which would emphasise that certain of the extreme attitudes of Father de Montfort, when recounted objectively, explain of themselves the lively reactions of those of his acquaintance. In any event, the statements of the historian rest on concrete facts and lived experience.

## II. JEAN-BAPTISTE BLAIN: ABRÉGÉ DE LA VIE DE LOUIS-MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

The reader who would like to study more deeply the *context of this biography* might look at the long introduction written by Fr. Louis Pérouas for the 2nd volume in the collection *Documents et recherches* (published 1973, pgs. 5\*-40\*); [English translation: *Summary of the Life of Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Centre International Montfortain, vol. III of *Documents et recherches*, 1977: Introduction: pgs. 5\*-33\*].

### 1. Blain's Text

We do not possess a written memoir in Blain's own hand. No doubt the original text was sent to Joseph Grandet, but it has not been found. In the archives of the Company of Mary there are

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two manuscripts from the 18th century: one of 359 pages, the other of 255 pages. For ease of reference, they have been called “Manuscript A” and “Manuscript B”.

The handwriting of these two manuscripts are different from each other and different from that of Blain himself. There are many variations between the two manuscripts, often not significant, but sometimes important enough.

Manuscript A presents a handwriting which is very legible and a regular enough spelling. On page 200, some deletions are made “on the advice of M. Blain” himself. It was also from this copy that Father Besnard borrowed the passages of Blain that he cites in his own biography of Montfort. Father Pérouas, in the 1973 edition mentioned above, gives priority to Manuscript A, but does not ignore Manuscript B. When the text of Manuscript B seems clearly better, he indicates this in a note.

### 2. *Who Was Jean-Baptiste Blain?*

Jean-Baptiste Blain was born in Rennes on 22 October 1674 in the Rue de la Charbonnerie. We know nothing of the social status of his family. He entered the Jesuit college in Rennes in 1684, with Louis Marie. With him he studied all his humanities, rhetoric and philosophy. He provides no details concerning the five years of humanities. This would mean that he scarcely knew the young Grignon at that time, lost in a class of 400 pupils, without even taking into account that the young Grignon “had hardly any dealings with the other students” (Blain, *Summary*, pg. 2).

Starting in their Rhetoric year (1690), Jean-Baptiste and Louis Marie formed a close friendship, illustrated by a journey they made together into the countryside to visit a friend who would become a Capuchin, Joseph of Saint Méen (Blain, *ib.* pg. 13), and a stay at the Bois Marquer, the country-house of the Grignon family in Iffendic (cf. *ib.*, pg. 14).

Blain is very reticent concerning the infancy and adolescence of Louis Marie, knowing it only indirectly from confidences on the part of his friend or from the uncle Alain Robert. But, as the years went by, he witnessed the life of his friend and can give his personal testimony, illustrating it from his own experience. Thus he speaks of the piety of Louis Marie, of his Marian devotion, his purity, his trust in Providence, and even his artistic tastes and talents.

Starting in 1692, the two friends began their theology studies in Rennes, But after a short time, the generosity of a benefactress, Mlle de Montigny, enabled Louis Marie to continue his studies in Paris. Scarcely had he arrived there than the young student wrote to his friend, exhorting him to come and seek virtue with him, far from the land of his relations (cf. Blain, *ib.* pg. 18). Hence the two students met up again and lived close to one another for several years: first of all in the community of M. de la Barmondière (1693-1694), then in that of M. Boucher (1694-1695), and finally in the Little Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. At some unspecified date, Jean-Baptiste had to leave this house, but stayed in touch with Louis Marie. Their relationship lasted until 1700, the year of Louis Marie’s ordination. Jean-Baptiste was present at the first Mass of Louis Marie, in the Lady Chapel of the church of Saint-Sulpice. He could not hide his admiration: “I was present there and while saying Mass he looked exactly like an angel” (cf. *ib.* pg. 105).

These six years living together or in close contact in Paris, constitute the period of his life on which Blain is best informed. He speaks at length of this period: the exercises of community life, their going out together, their attendance at classes, their confidential conversations...

After Louis Marie’s ordination, M. Blain would meet up occasionally with his friend. Louis Marie left Saint-Sulpice in the autumn of 1700. Blain stayed in Paris and lost sight of him a little. He knew that he had left for Nantes and that he was in the community of M. Lévesque, but he says nothing of the year that he spent there. Of Louis Marie’s stay in Poitiers between 1701 and 1703, he makes mention of just a few events. He mentions the enthusiastic welcome of the poor: “I

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have this from M. Grignon himself” (Blain, *ib.* pg. 111). He emphasises also the “jealous malice” that thwarted his activities (cf. *ib.*, pg. 114).

In the Spring of 1703, just as Jean-Baptiste Blain obtained his degree in Paris, the two friends met up again. Blain witnessed the difficulties of the young priest at the Salpêtrière, and the adventures that followed: under the staircase in the Rue du Pot de Fer, his stay in Mont Valérien, the hesitation of his Sulpician teachers who called into doubt the “good spirit” of their former student. He himself also had some questions.

In the Spring of 1704, Montfort left Paris, and Blain lost sight of him: “I could not say exactly where he was heading for. I think he made for Nantes or Poitiers” (Blain, *ib.*, pg. 131).

Jean-Baptiste Blain, ordained priest in the Autumn of 1704, left for Noyon where he was provided with a canonry. In 1708, he followed Mgr. d’Aubigné, the Bishop of Noyon, to Rouen, where he had been appointed Archbishop. There he took part in the formation of priests, the direction of religious sisters, and the consolidation of the Lasallian Brothers. He was to be a member of the metropolitan chapter for more than 40 years, until his death in 1751.

Louis Marie was leading a very different life, always on the move, going from one diocese to another: Poitiers, Nantes, Saint-Malo, Luçon, La Rochelle...

In the Autumn of 1714, after ten years of separation, the two former classmates were to have a few days together, for the last time. Here we have the most moving section of Blain’s *Summary* (cf. *ib.* pgs. 176-187). We need to re-read these pages, where we see the solidity of a friendship, the frankness of a dialogue, and the diversity of vocations... Montfort gives a firm reply to all the objections made against his behaviour: “I brought up several other objections which I thought unanswerable; but he refuted them in words so sound, so concise, and so full of the Spirit of God that I found, to my astonishment, that upon every point on which I had felt sure I could silence him, he had silenced me” (*ib.* pg. 182).

The two friends would not see one another again. Less than two years later, Montfort died while giving a mission in St-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. Jean-Baptiste Blain learnt very quickly of this death through an account sent to Saint-Sulpice. In 1724, he would go on pilgrimage to the tomb of his friend, to pray for his own healing.

### 3. Blain’s Information

The above paragraphs lay emphasis on the *direct information* that the author possessed concerning his hero: in Rennes and Paris, when they were studying together. And then there are their reciprocal confidences: letters and conversations between friends. We have cited also the occasional meetings in Paris and Rouen. The account of their final meeting in Rouen is particularly precious and rich in information: Montfort spent several days in Rouen, and the canon had lots of questions to put to him and to debate with his former classmate.

On top of this, it is certain that M. Blain had been able to *question many people*: his teachers in Rennes, his successive directors in Paris: Messrs Bauyn, Leschassier, Brenier; his former classmates in Rennes and Paris... Thanks to his journeys, as for example to Rennes around 1712, and his meetings, he was able to question priests, religious, and so on, who had seen the missionary or had worked with him. We could mention, for example, M. Bellier in Rennes, who had shown appreciation formerly for the apostolate of the young college student and could speak of the missionary’s collaboration with M. Leuduger; Father Vincent, a Capuchin, who had worked with his friend (cf. Blain, *ib.*, pgs. 145-146); Father Martinet, a Jesuit, told him about the work M. Grignon had done in the diocese of Nantes (cf. *ib.*, pgs. 158-159).

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Despite all this, we have to admit that, though the period of studies and of the seminary is well covered, the period of his apostolic activity shows serious deficiencies. He does not speak, for example, of his preaching in the diocese of La Rochelle, where he worked for a long time in complete agreement with the bishop of that diocese.

### 4. *How Blain Interpreted Montfort*

Father Louis Pérouas has several pages on this “interpretation of Montfort by Blain” (cf. Introduction, pgs. 19\*-28\*). Here we give the main argument.

Rather than a biography, the *Summary* is a testimony which speaks of the relationship of the writer with his hero. When the author recalls, in 1724, the poor food he had known in the community of M. Boucher (cf. *ib.*, pgs. 38-39), he is influenced by the ecclesiastical and bourgeois milieu in which he found himself in Rouen. He found it hard to understand that “*life of dependence on Providence*” embraced by his hero.

The difference between the canon and his hero is even more evident with regard to *social conformity*. The one takes his inspiration from the ideal of moderation commonly accepted at the start of the 18th century... “persons of consummate prudence ... who ... do not give rise to criticism” (cf. *ib.*, Pg. 179); the other is not afraid to astonish people with his unconventional way of acting. Hence there is the danger of reinforcing this originality.

With regard to *obedience*, we know that Montfort was capable of bending his own strong personality to the least flexible situations. And here again, we must not allow the portrait to be skewed to present a perfect guarantee of his fidelity: 80 pages in the original manuscript are devoted to this (cf. *ib.* pgs. 61-98).

There is also the *great ease* with which the canon was given to *admiration*; this manifests itself both in his view of Saint-Sulpice, “that land of saints”, and his view of Louis Marie, the object of testimonies full of praise on the part of their common teachers, whether Jesuit or Sulpician: Father Gilbert and Father Descartes, M. Bauyn or M. de la Chétardie... he shared in the grace of saints: his preaching, his miracles, and his apostolic successes deserve to be kept in mind.

Blain the hagiographer appeals often to Providence, to the *direct intervention of God*, in order to explain how things turned out, and his friend is a *ready-made saint* from his infancy: “It would seem as if he had not been touched by original sin or by the consequences of Adam’s disobedience... From the time I knew him he never had any desire, except for heavenly things...” (cf. *ib.* pg. 8).

Blain’s account needs to be read in light of the mentality and culture of his own time. The fluent use of a certain vocabulary is very characteristic: “virtuous”, pious, holy, “divine”... Superlatives come easily: “the purest virtue”, “the most sublime perfection”, “consummate piety”...

### 5. *What Blain reveals to us of the Person of Montfort*

Despite all the limitations we can emphasise in the sort of hagiography commonly in vogue then, the importance of Blain for a knowledge of Montfort is considerable. For example, here are a number of traits that he emphasises in his *Summary*.

- The *strong temperament* of Louis Marie. Hence, his resistance to setbacks, his need for self-domination.
- His *tastes and talents*, both intellectual and artistic.

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- His *affectivity*: “He was as tender-hearted as anyone could be” (*ib.* pg. 17). His extraordinary love for the poor.
- His *difficulty in fitting in socially*: “M. Grignion was of a very solitary disposition and had hardly any dealings with the other students” (*ib.* pg. 2).
- His *unfailing good temper* in the face of the most hurtful insults (cf. *ib.* Pg. 3).
- His *passion for action*: “born with an attraction for the apostolic life” (cf. *ib.*, pg. 108).
- “*naturally inventive* ... he had a lively imagination which hardly ever failed him in emergencies” (*ib.*, pg. 164). The conversation with Blain in 1714 is very significant: missionaries and apostolic men have “always something new to take in hand” (*ib.*, pg. 180).
- And yet, Montfort is a man who *lives an inner life*, and lives in God. He lived in “a profound... state of abstraction” and had a “dominant inclination for solitude and prayer” (cf. *ib.*, pgs. 70-71, 47).

### III. CHARLES BESNARD: VIE DE M. LOUIS-MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

#### 1. *Besnard and Clorivière*

The text we are concerned with was written in a series of notebooks which have been brought together and bound in one volume with the following dimensions: height, 25 cm; width, 20 cm; thickness, 3 cm.

It contains 213 leaves, plus a few added on: 420 written pages and a few blank ones. This manuscript was written around 1770. It remained unpublished. Fifteen years later, in 1785, Father J. Picot de Clorivière, the rector of Paramé, published the *Life of M. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort, Missionary Apostolic, Founder of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit and the Daughters of Wisdom*.

This was merely a rewriting, with very few additions, of the text of Besnard.

No doubt aware of his own literary limitations, Fr. Besnard seems to have preferred to proceed to publication under the name of a well-known man. So the pages written by Besnard were never offered to the public: Clorivière’s publication was a good replacement.

In 1981, our “Centre International Montfortain” felt the time had come to publish the original text, first of all because the book by Clorivière was difficult to come by, and also because a return to the sources was no less interesting than a publication in a more careful style.

The 1981 edition of the “Life” of Montfort, by Besnard, was therefore the *first edition*, not of the original manuscript, which has not been found, but of a copy which can be trusted. This copy is to be found in the archives of the Daughters of Wisdom.

This edition constitutes volumes IV and V of the collection *Documents et recherches*. The introduction gives details of the researches made, notably by Fr. Pierre H. Eijkeler *smm*, who made extensive consultations of the documents concerning our congregations and has left archive notes that have thrown light on our own researches.

#### 2. *The Author and the Copyist of the “Life”*

The biography we are concerned with here has come down to us in a manuscript that is doubly anonymous. The frontispiece that gives the title does not mention the name of the author; and

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the person who, to render service to the author, transcribed the original pages does not identify himself either. Nevertheless, these two sources of anonymity can be solved, at least in part.

The name of the *author* is not in doubt. It was *Father Charles Besnard*, superior general, after Fathers Mulot and Audubon, of the missionaries of the Company of Mary and the Daughters of Wisdom. This claim has never been contradicted, and is corroborated by a number of personal testimonies found in the text itself.

See for example:

Page 160: “Here is a trait which clearly confirms what I have just said, and that I had from the very person to whom this happened...”

Page 261: “This is the fact, related to me by the very people to whom this thing happened, and to whom I spoke when I was giving the mission in Challans in 1763.”

The name of the *copyist* is more difficult to determine. But here are a few things to reflect on that might open new opportunities for research:

The archives of the Daughters of Wisdom possess the manuscript of the life of Marie-Louise de Jésus, also written by Besnard. This manuscript is repeated in a copy that was used by Canon Allaire for his *Summary* of the life of Marie-Louise. The two copies (the life of Montfort, and the life of Marie-Louise) are in the same handwriting, but, so far as the researchers have been able to say up till now, it is not the handwriting of Canon Allaire, nor the handwriting of any Montfortians living at that time. Also it should be observed that the copy of the life of Marie-Louise contains few corrections, whereas the copy of the life of Montfort has many retouches, for which the copyist consulted the author.

We should also add that the two biographies are from the same author, with references from one to the other, remarking that certain facts have been treated more fully in the other work. In that case, as Father Eijkeler, concluded, it must be accepted that the life of Marie-Louise was finished before that of Father de Montfort. Canon Allaire was able to publish it in 1768, while Besnard was still working on his life of Father de Montfort in 1770.

### 3. *Who Was Charles Besnard?*

Charles Besnard was born in Rennes, in the parish of Saint-Germain, in August 1717. A student at the Holy Spirit seminary in Paris, he joined the missionaries of Saint-Laurent in 1743 and took part in the missions, for the first time, at Saint-Jean de Courcoué: 8 September to 6 October 1743. Under the generalates of Fathers Mulot and Audubon, he took part in around sixty missions.

On 9 December 1755, Father Besnard, being the chaplain in the Saint-Louis hospital in La Rochelle, went to visit the missionaries who were giving a mission in Poiré. He was very surprised to find Father Audubon, the superior general, seriously ill. Father Audubon died on 15 December.

The following day, 16 December, Father Besnard wrote a long letter to Father Croissant, giving him details of the sickness and the edifying death of Father Audubon (cf. the *Chroniques* of Sister Florence, pg. 38 ff, Note 35). In this letter - a copy of which is in the Montfortian general archives - the author notes that the dying man had designated Father Besnard to succeed him. A little later, the missionaries, gathered in a chapter, confirmed the choice of the dying superior. Father Charles Besnard was then 38 years old.

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In spite of the absorbing tasks belonging to his office, Father Besnard continued to take part in a number of missions and wrote the lives of the founders, Father de Montfort and Marie-Louise de Jésus.

It was also on his initiative that the house of the *Chêne Vert* was improved for the Sisters in 1756, and the *Big House* was built for the missionaries, completed in 1788.

Charles Besnard died in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre on 22 April 1788.

### 4. *A Well-Informed Biographer*

Charles Besnard, the third successor to Louis Marie, was a great admirer of the founder. He had heard of him when he was at the Holy Spirit seminary and he knew that the only biography in existence at that time, that of the Sulpician Joseph Grandet, left much to be desired. His own direct contact with people who had known M. Grignon well, notably Brother *Mathurin Rangeard*, *Sr. Marie-Louise de Jésus* and the first Daughters of Wisdom... put him in a unique position as regards information.

So he collected the necessary material for a new biography, on which he was still working in 1770: "We have learnt, while writing this in 1770, that the king, always appreciative of generous actions, has just granted a reward to two parish-priests for showing courage and charity like this" (Besnard, *Montfort*, Vol. I, pg. 199).

Besnard had in his possession some extraordinary documents. An example, that he himself cites in the life of Marie-Louise de Jésus: "He was greatly helped by a *Memoir* hand-written by *Sr. Marie de Jésus* which contains fifty-three leaves that she wrote out of obedience, to help in the writing of the life of M. de Montfort, and which he has used very usefully in writing his own" (Besnard, *Marie-Louise*, pg. 7).

Another example. The tenth book of the biography (cf. Besnard, *Montfort*, vol. II, pg. 239 ff) does not treat directly of Fr. de Montfort, but gives a *first history of the Company of Mary*. It speaks of the vocation, the work and the death of his first disciples, Vatel, Mulot and Audubon... It is a rich source of complementary information, in which the *Marquis de Magnanne*, a friend and disciple of Louis Marie, also plays an important part. It is here that we find the impressive list of the works of this exceptional benefactor of the Montfortian family (cf. Besnard, *Montfort*, vol. II, pg. 259 ff).

In the *Preface* which opens the biography, Besnard himself gives guarantees concerning his information:

I have gathered all the information necessary to avoid omitting anything in a life in which everything seemed interesting to me, and I have concentrated on the surest recollections so as to speak nothing but the truth. I have even been to visit nearly all the places where this holy missionary exercised his zeal, and I have spoken with several people who assisted at his missions. I have profited by all the writings left by those who were prevented by a sad revolution or death itself from continuing their labours...

We know that Besnard visited Normandy in 1765. Since he was the first author to cite passages from Blain, we can suppose that he brought a copy of Blain's text to Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre at that time (cf. Dervaux, *Le Doigt de Dieu*, vol. I, pg. 10).

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### 5. *Montfort as Interpreted by Besnard*

We can say that Besnard's text *satisfies all the basic requirements for any biography*: serious information, respect for the facts, an honest interpretation. The author can therefore calmly claim: *I have nothing to reproach myself with on the score of exactitude* (Besnard, *Montfort*, vol. I, pg. 5).

This is all the more true in that his point of departure in his work was to correct and complete the biography written by Grandet. He wanted to finally "give an exact and complete life of Monsieur Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort" (*ib.* pg. 4). He realises the difficulties involved: "I am writing here of a man whom the less informed spirits often accuse of indiscretion and eccentricity..." (*ib.* pg. 5). He knew the reproaches and criticisms that might be heaped on him, through excess or lack of understanding: not everybody is ready to look upon "an extraordinary man, and sometimes an inspired man" (*ib.* pg. 5).

The author took care to cite his sources and to prove his plan of creating a serious work. Once the work was finished, he read it over again, line by line, making corrections destined not just to make for a better style, but especially to make clear, here and there, such and such a fact.

It is equally interesting to note that biographers have been able to point out only rare errors in his *Life*, which was known even if not published, thanks to multiple copies made in the last century: errors due not to negligence, but to faulty information he had accepted, in good faith, as correct.

These positive aspects do not, however, hide the *limitations* of Besnard's text. We can reproach him with the same reproach offered to all hagiographers of his day: he writes *to edify*. A holy person is above all an exceptional work of God... Whence there is a certain tendency to emphasise certain facts and to present them in a light that says much less to the critics of our own day...

It is no doubt in this perspective that we must understand certain silences: he leaves in the shade such or such a fact that might not be understood, or he gives certain rather forced explanations. An example: the *eccentricities* of M. Grignion. They had a certain public notoriety. The author looks at them at length in his Preface. He cites other examples of quite eccentric saints: Saint Simon, Saint Philip Neri, Saint Felix of Cantalice, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint John of the Cross... (cf. *ib.*, pg. 10). The spirit of wisdom is sometimes somewhat disturbing.

Who knows even whether some of the eccentricities of Fr de Montfort were not deliberate and, in a certain way, exploited in favour of the apostolate...? It is true that in the time of Louis XIV, the century of "grandeur", ecclesiastical writers were not above colouring their subjects with this.

## IV. SOME MODERN BIOGRAPHIES

In 1988, about ten of the Montfortian confreres met in Rome and composed an unpublished volume of 449 pages, entitled: *Montfort, un maître spirituel pour notre temps* (Montfort, a spiritual master for our days).

In this volume, fifteen or so pages were devoted to a bibliography: pgs. 117-131. And these pages are not exhaustive. This shows the number and the richness of the books dedicated to Fr. de Montfort. It shows also the difficulty involved in giving a list of titles, which might give the impression of ignoring others. The ones mentioned below are a few examples of a rich flowering.

- Louis Le Crom, *Un apôtre marial. Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort*. Pontchâteau 1942. The chronological order used facilitates consultation.

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- Edward Bolger, *St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Press, Liverpool 1947. Re-issued as *The Man Called Montfort*, 1966, 2006.
- Louis Pérouas, *Grignon de Montfort, Les pauvres et les missions*, éd. du Cerf, Paris 1966. A reinterpretation of the pastoral activity of Fr. de Montfort.
- René Laurentin, *Dieu seul est ma tendresse. Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort: sa vie, son expérience spirituelle, sa théologie, son actualité*. O.E.I.L., Paris 1984. Re-issued. Theological and spiritual importance appreciated.
- Théodore Rey-Mermet, *Louis-Marie de Montfort*, Nouvelle Cité, Paris 1984. Re-issued. Prepared in collaboration with the Montfortian congregations.
- Benedetta Papásogli, *L'homme venu du vent, Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, éd. Bellarmin, Montreal 1984; English translation: *Montfort, A Prophet for Our Times*, Edizioni Monfortane, Rome, 1991. Translated from the Italian. The female point of view.
- Max Vilain, *Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. A pas de géant*, éd. Apostolat marial montfortain, Leuven 1994. Fifteen chapters that are sharp, attractive and... historically accurate.

Marcel Gendrot, *smm*

### EXERCISES

1. What, in your view, is the difference between a 'hagiography' and a critical biography?
2. Compare Grandet's and Blain's accounts (Grandet, pgs. 33-34; Blain, pgs. 73-74) of the audience that St. Louis Marie had with Pope Clement XI in 1706. Which one of these two appears to have a more accurate version?
3. Which of the various modern biographies have you read? What was your first impression?

### FURTHER READING

The article *Montfort, Louis Marie de* in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, especially the first section, "Various Interpretations of Montfort's Personality".

## 4. THE WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

### I - THE PRINCIPAL WRITINGS

During his relatively short life, and despite the rigours and demands of a very active apostolate which comprised (apart from his ministry in the Hôpital Général in Poitiers, and similar periods of ministry in other places) around 200 complete parish missions around the West of France, St. Louis Marie managed to find the time to write three books, two shorter booklets, two major religious rules, several shorter rules, at least thirty-four personal letters or fragments of letters and some more general or ‘circular’-style letters, many prayers, and at least 164 hymns (some of them as many as 30 or more verses long), as well as a number of minor works for use during his missions or designed for particular groups to use. His collected writings in English make up two volumes<sup>1</sup> of around 600 pages each:

- *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Publications, Bay Shore, NY, 1987 - which contains all his surviving works (including his letters) except for all but a handful of his hymns and most of his *Notebook* and *Book of Sermons*;
- *God Alone II: The Hymns of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Publications, Bay Shore, NY, 2005 - containing all the known hymns that are attributed to him, in a non-rhythmical format.

Among all this prolific output, the works which would generally be considered the most important, in that they set forth most fully and clearly his spiritual teaching, are the following:

- *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*
- *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*
- *The Secret of Mary*
- *The Secret of the Rosary*
- *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*

We will examine each of these in turn in what follows; but it should be noted that St. Louis Marie’s Hymns are also an important witness to his spiritual teaching; however, because of their special use and format, we will consider them separately.

All of these writings are available online for private study and consultation: see <http://www.montfort.org.uk/Writings/MontWork.php>.

*The Love of Eternal Wisdom (LEW)*

#### CONTENT

This book gives the essential context of all the other writings of St. Louis Marie. In it he treats of the relationship between God and mankind, stressing first and foremost the love of God for human beings, and the plan he devised for saving them from the consequences of sin. Using many texts from the Old Testament Wisdom literature, he meditates on the extraordinary desire God has to love them and be loved by them. He, like St Paul and St John, sees the Saviour, Jesus Christ, as the embodiment of the Wisdom of God, and applies to Christ the title “Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom of God” - therefore the “Eternal Wisdom” in the title of the book is to be taken as Jesus Christ himself. In his reflections on the love of God for humans, St Louis Marie

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<sup>1</sup> These two volumes can be obtained from **Montfort Press, 28 Burbo Bank Road, Liverpool, L23 6TH**, in the United Kingdom; or from **Montfort Publications, 26 South Saxon Avenue, Bay Shore, NY 11706-8993**, in the USA.

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picks out the death of Christ on the Cross as the greatest manifestation of this love, to the point where he can say: *Wisdom is the Cross, and the Cross is Wisdom*. Making the assumption that all human beings desire happiness, and that “wisdom” (in a natural sense) is the way to achieve this, he discusses various forms of wisdom, and states that the only true wisdom is the Wisdom of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ himself. It then becomes the life-long quest of all Christians to seek to acquire this Wisdom, or, in other words, to seek to know and love Jesus Christ, the Eternal Wisdom of God. He proposes four principal means to achieve this: (1) An ardent desire to do so; (2) Constant prayer for this grace; (3) “Universal” mortification; and (4) A tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin. He claims that this fourth means (devotion to the Blessed Virgin) is the most effective way to acquire and preserve Divine Wisdom, and it is this theme which he develops in the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* and *The Secret of Mary*. The third means (universal mortification) is seen as a way of participating in the Cross of Christ, by accepting our own “crosses” and so becoming more aware of the love shown by the sufferings of Christ. He develops this theme more in *A Letter to the Friends of the Cross*.

### HISTORY

Despite a claim made in 2003 that this book was the work, not of St. Louis Marie, but rather of Fr. Charles Besnard (1717-1788), the third Superior General of the Montfort Missionaries and the Daughters of Wisdom—a claim which did not seem to be based on any concrete evidence, and which was robustly refuted by others—it is generally accepted that *The Love of Eternal Wisdom* is an early work of St. Louis Marie. There is no clear evidence of when it was written, but according to many who have studied the matter in depth, the most likely date is 1703 or 1704. This was the period when St Louis Marie was in Paris, having left the hospital in Poitiers, and was living (for some of this time) in the hovel in the Rue du Pot de Fer. Besnard says (repeated by Picot de Clorivière) that at this time he gave a conference or a series of conferences to the students of the Holy Spirit seminary established by his school-friend, Claude Poullart des Places, in which he spoke eloquently of Wisdom and “gave a very beautiful paraphrase of the book of the Bible that bears this name” (the Book of Wisdom)—a theme which is extensively pursued in LEW. Others think that it may have been written around 1700, even perhaps before his ordination to the priesthood, while still others claim that it was perhaps written towards the end of his life, in 1713 or after. It has been claimed that the style of the work shows a certain immaturity when compared with the texts of *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (TD) and *The Secret of Mary* (SM), which might support the argument for an earlier date rather than a later one.<sup>2</sup>

The general archives of the Montfort Missionaries in Rome possess a precious manuscript of LEW, which some claim is in the handwriting of St. Louis Marie himself, though this has been disputed by others, including a handwriting expert employed by Mgr. Frehen to examine all the manuscripts we possess of the writings of St. Louis Marie. Their conclusion is that our MS shows traces of a number of copyists, including Frs. Mulot, Vatel and Besnard. Although the work was, therefore, known to early generations of Montfort Missionaries, LEW had to wait until 1929 for a definitive edition to be published, and translations into other languages had to wait even longer.

### SIGNIFICANCE

On the understanding that this is a genuine work of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, experts in Montfortian Spirituality point to its great doctrinal value and see it as of fundamental importance for the understanding of Montfort’s work as a whole. It has even been claimed to be the only book that gives us the overall view of Montfortian spirituality, while *True Devotion to the*

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<sup>2</sup> See the article by Jean-Pierre Prévost, *Love of Eternal Wisdom*, in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Publications, Bay Shore, NY, 1994, pgs. 633-648 for the whole article; pgs. 634-5 for this question of date.

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*Blessed Virgin* (TD) has been seen as “only a magnificent commentary on Chapter 16” of LEW.<sup>3</sup> Although this book has not enjoyed the popularity of TD, perhaps because of the tastes of the general Catholic public, it deserves to be better known, and can be especially valued today when a spirituality nourished on the Bible is more appreciated.

In recent years there have been various interpretations of LEW, by Montfortians and others, all of which recognise its importance for an understanding of Montfort’s spirituality (and perhaps, even, of his life). In today’s theological climate, it has the great merit of being thoroughly Christocentric. It also offers, through Montfort’s understanding of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, a contribution to the theology of creation, a theme brought to the fore by Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). And finally, through St. Louis Marie’s insistence in this work on the Cross as the greatest proof of God’s love for mankind, LEW offers an important contribution to the theology of Redemption currently enjoying renewed attention in theological circles.

### LITERARY STYLE

In many ways the literary style of LEW is quite different from that of other works of St. Louis Marie. Where TD and SM are clearly written with what might be called a “missionary” intention—to persuade his readers to adopt a more effective way of drawing close to Jesus Christ and living the Christian life—LEW, on the other hand, (at least in the major part of the book) reads more like a personal meditation on God’s love for mankind and his offer of salvation. This is reinforced by his listing, in several chapters, of many scripture verses (principally from the books of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs), as though inviting his readers to read and reflect on the Scriptures: Introduction, nos. 3-4; Chapter 2, nos. 20-28; Chapter 4, nos. 48-49; Chapter 5, nos. 52-63; Chapter 6, nos. 65-69; and also from the Gospels: Chapter 12, nos. 133-153.

### SOURCES

Montfort himself cites, in this work, some fifteen authors or saints whose testimony he gives. It is surprising that he does not make mention of members of the French School of Spirituality, although in fact they supplied him with a great deal of his material. Three names stand out among those who influenced him in the writing of this book: Henry Suso (a Dominican), Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure (a Jesuit) and Amable Bonnefons (also a Jesuit), though only Henry Suso is explicitly quoted by him; his dependence on the other two is however clear. Indeed certain sections of LEW are copied directly from Saint-Jure and from Bonnefons, even though Montfort does not acknowledge his borrowings.

From his extensive use of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, it is clear that Scripture itself must be counted as one of his major sources; and it is striking how different his use of scripture is from that of the authors who influenced him—even to the number of verses of scripture he and they employ. His use of the Wisdom literature has been said to be “truly surprising”, especially since no Patristic commentary on the *Book of Wisdom* exists.<sup>4</sup>

### *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (TD)

### CONTENT

This is the book for which St. Louis Marie de Montfort is probably best-known. It should, however be read in the context of *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, where he makes it plain that a

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<sup>3</sup> H. Huré, preface to the definitive edition of *L’Amour de la Sagesse éternelle*, Librairie mariale, Pontchâteau 1929, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> See the article *Montfort’s Spiritual Exegesis*, by M. Gilbert, S.J., a translation of an article in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, November/December 1982.

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“tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin” is only a means (although the most effective means) to acquire and preserve Divine Wisdom.

In the *True Devotion*, St. Louis Marie sets out his teaching on devotion to Mary in general, and proposes a particular form of devotion, involving a total dedication or consecration of oneself to Jesus through the hands of Mary. The first part of the book is devoted to showing that devotion to Mary is not an end in itself. It is always a means to becoming more dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ. It is, however, he claims, a necessary means to this, and is indeed the surest way to achieving this goal. He examines the qualities of what he calls “true” (or genuine) devotion to Mary, as opposed to false devotion. And he makes it clear that there can be many different kinds of “true” devotion to her. Yet he claims, based on his own experience and reading, to have found one form of devotion to Mary which achieves its aim (to bring us closer to Jesus Christ) more effectively than any other.

The form of devotion to Mary to which he refers (and which he earnestly proposes to his readers) consists in a ***total dedication of oneself to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary***. This total dedication he calls “consecration”, and he is careful to explain that, even though we may speak of “consecration to Mary”, this must always be understood as only a step on the way to “consecration to Jesus Christ”. The rest of the book is taken up with an explanation of what this total dedication means in practice, and with descriptions of its effects in a person who undertakes it, intended to encourage us to embrace it. It also examines various “practices” of devotion intended to help us to live it out, both “exterior” and “interior” practices, as he calls them. Among the exterior practices, he speaks of the recitation of the Rosary, a topic which he treats more fully in *The Secret of the Rosary* (SR).

This form of devotion to Mary was known in St Louis Marie’s day (and before) as “Holy Slavery”, and he spends some time explaining the meaning of this phrase, insisting that, far from being a slavery of compulsion, it must be a “slavery of love”. Other phrases, more in tune with our modern way of thinking, could easily be used in place of this.

Another of St Louis Marie’s works, *The Secret of Mary* (SM), is a shorter presentation of much the same matter as is found in the *True Devotion*.

### HISTORY

Tradition favours the view that this work was composed in the autumn of 1712, when St. Louis Marie stayed for several weeks at his ‘hermitage’ of Saint-Éloi in La Rochelle. Other dates suggested are the winter of 1710-1711, when he was obliged to rest for a few months in Nantes, after the failure of the Calvary project in Pontchâteau; or the second half of 1715, when he spent a few weeks in his cave-hermitage in the Forest of Mervent. But he makes it clear that the subject he writes about in this book, and the doctrine which gives rise to it, is something that he has constantly preached in his missions and other interventions for the whole of his priestly life: “I have taken up my pen to write down what I have been teaching with success both publicly and in private in my missions for many years” (TD 110). The only indication in the book itself of its date of composition is in no. 159, where he mentions Father Boudon who, he says, “died a holy death a short time ago;” it is known that Fr. Boudon died in 1702.

The original manuscript of TD appears to have been lost for some time: it was buried for safety with other precious documents in a chest and hidden in a field near Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre during the French Revolution, which began in 1789. This has been taken to be the fulfilment of the prophecy of Montfort himself in no. 114 of TD: “I clearly foresee that raging beasts will come in fury to tear to pieces with their diabolical teeth this little book and the one the Holy Spirit made use of to write it, or they will cause it at least to lie hidden in the darkness and silence of a chest and so prevent it from seeing the light of day.” It seems that, even when this chest was recovered after the Revolution, the manuscript was not recognised as being one of St.

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Louis Marie's writings, and it was only on 22 April 1842 that it was re-discovered in the library of the mother-house of the Montfort Missionaries. The handwriting was immediately recognised as that of Montfort himself, and the first printed edition was published the following year. The manuscript is preserved today in the General Archives of the Company of Mary.

It has never been seriously disputed that the manuscript is in Montfort's own handwriting, though there are also other hands evident in some of the corrections made to the manuscript. However, it is clear from internal evidence that the manuscript that we possess is not the complete work written by St. Louis Marie. In nos. 227, 228 and 256 of TD, the author speaks of a "first part of this preparation for the Reign of Jesus Christ," in which the reader would find a recommendation that he or she "should spend at least twelve days in emptying themselves of the spirit of the world," in preparation for making the Consecration to Jesus through Mary; and of "exercises of the contempt of the world which we have given in the first part of this treatise." These recommendations, as such, are not found in the present manuscript, which indicates that a number of pages from the beginning of the original work are missing. Also, in no. 230 he speaks of a prayer of St. Augustine "which they will find near the beginning of this second part;" this prayer is actually to be found in no. 67, which might indicate that the "first part" was originally much longer than what we have at present. Again, in no. 231, he speaks of "the act of consecration which is given at the end of this book", and in no. 236 of wearing "a little chain blessed with a special blessing (given further on<sup>5</sup>)". In fact, neither the act of consecration, nor the special blessing for the little chain are found in the manuscript as we possess it, which again indicates that some pages from the end may have been lost. However, what we actually possess in the manuscript preserved in Rome is an adequate presentation of his Marian theme.

As the first pages of the original manuscript were evidently missing when it was rediscovered in 1842, the publishers had to choose a title for the printed work. In no. 227, Montfort referred to his book as a "preparation for the Reign of Jesus Christ." However the first publishers decided upon the title *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, or rather *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (to give it its full title as in French), and the name has been retained in all subsequent editions. Shortly after its first publication in French in 1843, Father Frederick William Faber, an English convert from the Anglican Church, became acquainted with St. Louis Marie and the *True Devotion*, and translated it into English for the first time, this first English version being published in London in 1863. From that time on, there have been multiple re-editions of the work in many different languages.

### SIGNIFICANCE

This book is certainly the work which has most made the reputation of St. Louis Marie as a spiritual "master". Since its first publication in 1843, it has appeared in so many languages and in so many parts of the world that it cannot be denied that it speaks to the hearts of Christians (and not just Catholics) all over the world. But it is far from being merely a work of "popular devotion"; it is solidly based in authentic Christocentric theology. The fact that the Catholic Church accepted it as authentic Christian teaching at the time of the Beatification and Canonization of its author, has given it a universal value that has only been reinforced by the adoption of its teaching by so many renowned Catholic thinkers, among them the late Pope John Paul II, who confessed, in a letter to the Montfortian congregations of 8 December 2003: "the reading of this book was a great help to me in my youth: 'I found the answer to my doubts,' which were due to a fear that worship given to Mary 'if developed too much, might end by compromising the primacy of the worship of Christ' (*My Vocation, Gift and Mystery*, pg. 42). Under the wise guidance of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, I understood that, if we live the mystery of Mary in Christ, there is no such risk. This saint's Mariological thought, in fact, 'is

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<sup>5</sup> This last phrase has been omitted from the English translation found in *God Alone*, though it is present in the French version.

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rooted in the Mystery of the Trinity and in the truth of the Incarnation of the Word of God' (*ibid.*). ...”

Pope John Paul's words remind us also that this book is not just (or even primarily) a book about Mary—it is firmly based in the Church's understanding of Jesus Christ; it is deeply Christocentric. This is most clearly seen in nos. 61-62 of TD itself, where St. Louis Marie expresses the absolute primacy of Jesus Christ in Catholic theology, and ends by saying: “If then we are establishing sound devotion to our Blessed Lady, it is only in order to establish devotion to our Lord more perfectly, by providing a smooth but certain way of reaching Jesus Christ. If devotion to our Lady distracted us from our Lord, we would have to reject it as an illusion of the devil. But this is far from being the case.”

Another point that it is important to recall is the distinction that Montfort himself makes in the book between “true” (or *genuine*) devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and the “perfect” devotion to her, which he also claims is the “perfect” devotion to Christ himself—while there can be many forms of “true” devotion, he claims for a particular practice of devotion, known in his day as “Holy Slavery” and today more often as “Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary”, the distinction of being the most perfect way to grow in conformity to Jesus Christ, and therefore the perfect practice of devotion to Mary.

### LITERARY STYLE

While LEW presents more the air of a personal meditation, TD has the appearance and structure of a more theological reflection; St. Louis Marie himself does not call it a “treatise” (despite the English translation of no. 256), but it has been called such since the first publication in 1843. And the book is indeed well-structured, and its theology is sound. However, as with all his writings, St. Louis Marie did not intend it for a learned readership, but rather for “the poor and simple” (TD 26), and the style he used in writing it could be seen as more of a “popular” nature. He was ever the “missionary”, and his intention was always to draw people closer to Christ. So, for example, the many stories and anecdotes he quotes regarding miracles and the practices of the saints, are more calculated to appeal to the simple people of his day than to theologians. Much of the book is in the nature of encouragement to take up the devotional practice he is promoting: hence the whole of chapter 4 (Motives which recommend this devotion) and chapter 6 (Wonderful effects of this devotion), as well as chapter 5 (Biblical figure of this perfect devotion: Rebecca and Jacob). Much of this material may perhaps have less allure for modern readers than for those of his own day. On the other hand, his extensive use of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church is striking, and will be appreciated in today's climate.

### SOURCES

St. Louis Marie claims to have “read almost every book on devotion to the Blessed Virgin” (TD 118), and states in TD 41: “I shall quote only one of the many passages I have collected from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.” We know, from his *Notebook*, that he deliberately made notes of much that he read, starting during his days as a seminarian in Paris, and the *Notebook* is very useful in identifying his sources for TD. Among the authors he used extensively in composing TD, we can list: F. Poiré, S.J., *La Triple Couronne de la Bienheureuse Vierge Marie*; J.-B. Crasset, S.J., *La Véritable Dévotion à la Sainte Vierge*; L.-F. D'Argentan, Capuchin, *Conférences sur les Grandeurs de la Sainte Vierge*; J. de Cartagena, *Homiliae Catholicae de Sacris Arcanis Deiiparae Mariae*; P. Grenier, *Apologie des dévots de la Sainte Vierge*; and many of the members of the French School of Spirituality, such as Bérulle, Olier, Boudon, Boissieu, and Bernardine of Paris. He did not, however, use all the material from these authors that we find in his *Notebook*; he made choices of what he would use, which underlines his own essential originality.

Again, St. Louis Marie quotes extensively from Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. With regard to the Patristic references, it has been pointed out that Montfort did not necessarily read

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extensively, himself, the works of the Fathers; rather he used already-existing collections of quotations to be found in books such as that of Crasset.

### *The Secret of Mary (SM)*

#### CONTENT

*The Secret of Mary* presents much the same matter as the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, in a shortened form, but it also includes a section on “The Tree of Life”. It seems to have been written for a member (or members) of a Religious Congregation. The title indicates the way in which St Louis Marie presents his topic: he wishes to disclose a “secret” of holiness, or a “secret” for finding happiness, and that “secret” is to be found in Mary, and in particular in the form of devotion to her which he proposes in the book.

As in the *True Devotion*, the first part of the book is concerned with the “necessity” of a genuine devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, for a real knowledge of, and adhesion to Jesus Christ. Again, this devotion to Mary is a means to this end, never an end in itself, and is necessary only because God himself has chosen the way of Mary to reveal himself in Jesus Christ.

In the second part of the book, St Louis Marie examines briefly some *genuine* forms of devotion to Mary, before presenting what he calls “the *perfect* practice of devotion to Mary”, which he says is “unknown to many and practiced by very few”. This perfect devotion, he says, consists in “surrendering oneself in the manner of a slave to Mary, and to Jesus through Mary, and then performing all our actions with Mary, in Mary, through Mary and for Mary”, referring to this as a “consecration”. He goes on to discuss what this means, and in particular what he means by performing all our actions “with Mary, in Mary, through Mary and for Mary”.

In a kind of supplement at the end of the book, we find two very beautiful prayers: a Prayer to Jesus, and a Prayer to Mary; and a short metaphor for this form of devotion, which he calls “*The Tree of Life*”.

The matter presented briefly in the Secret of Mary is much more developed in the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.

#### HISTORY

It is difficult to know precisely (or even roughly) when St. Louis Marie penned this little booklet. We know from Sr. Florence’s *Chroniques* that it appears to have been written in the form of a letter to a religious sister in Nantes, but this does not mean that he was living or working in the diocese of Nantes when he wrote it. All we can say is that Montfort seems to have a thorough grasp of his subject matter, and a facility in expressing it, which might indicate that it is a work of his maturity. Fr. Dorio-Marie Huot, smm, in his presentation of the writings of St. Louis Marie<sup>6</sup>, gives it the date 1712.

We do not possess the original manuscript of *The Secret of Mary*. Instead we have two copies, with only slight variations in the text between the two: one in the archives of the Company of Mary, and the other in those of the Daughters of Wisdom. Both date from the first half of the 18th century, and may have been made by either Brother Jacques, a companion of St. Louis Marie himself, or by a layman called Joseau to whom Bro Jacques gave the writings of Montfort to be copied.

*The Secret of Mary* was not published until 1868, although fragments of the text were used by a number of biographers of St. Louis Marie before this date. The text of this 1868 edition was not, however, complete, and it was only in 1898 that Father Lhoumeau (a Superior General of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. D.-M. Huot, *I manoscritti delle Opere di S. Luigi Maria da Montfort*, in *Quaderni Montfortani*, no. 4, 1986, pgs. 118-131.

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the Company of Mary) published the entire text with one exception: certain passages on the wearing of little chains were omitted because of hesitations arising from certain condemnations of abuses of this practice by the Holy See<sup>7</sup>. In 1926, a definitive edition of the whole text, with many explanatory notes, was published by Fr. Huré, another Superior General of the Company of Mary and the Daughters of Wisdom.

The manuscripts we possess do not give a title for the work. The first publishers took the title commonly given to it today from no. 20 of SM: “Happy, indeed sublimely happy, is the person to whom the Holy Spirit reveals the secret of Mary, thus imparting to him true knowledge of her.”

### SIGNIFICANCE

The basic structure of SM is much the same as that of *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (TD), and the primary thrust of the teaching contained in it is exactly the same; indeed, SM could be seen as a shortened version of TD. However, there are certain points that are more explicitly presented in SM, and there are a few variants. For example, the use of the word “secret” in SM has a particular significance: for St. Louis Marie, a “secret” implied several things: that Mary is “hidden”—too great and wonderful for us to be able to understand fully—but also that Mary is a wonderful means to find happiness, that she is “the secret of happiness”. This use of the word “secret” was certainly calculated to appeal to the sensibilities of the ordinary people to whom he regularly preached, whose diet of entertainment was nourished on the pamphlets hawked by the travelling peddlars, obtained from the “*bibliothèque bleue*” of Troyes<sup>8</sup>.

The definition of “the perfect practice of devotion to Mary” in SM is somewhat more precise than that given in TD: “Chosen soul, this devotion consists in surrendering oneself in the manner of a slave to Mary, and to Jesus through her, and then performing all our actions with Mary, in Mary, through Mary, and for Mary” (SM 28), and his manner of presenting what he calls in TD the “interior practices” of this devotion, and in SM “the interior practice” shows certain variations. Not only is the order of the four prepositions, “through”, “with”, “in” and “for” Mary slightly different (which is not all that important in itself), but the explanation of these four ‘attitudes’ is slightly different in the two works, especially regarding “in Mary”.

### LITERARY STYLE

As already mentioned, *The Secret of Mary* is presented in the form of a “letter” addressed to a “chosen soul”. While we know that it was addressed in the first instance to a particular individual, it is quite different in style to his personal letters, and could easily be taken as a sort of “circular letter” intended for a number of persons (like the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*). As such, it can clearly appeal to all kinds of people.

### SOURCES

Montfort’s sources for his composition of *The Secret of Mary* are essentially the same as those for *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.

### *The Secret of the Rosary* (SR)

### CONTENT

One of the most honourable titles given to St Louis Marie (“the priest with the big rosary”) is that of “*Apostle of the Cross and of the Holy Rosary*”. The Rosary occupied an important place in his own spiritual life and in his apostolate. *The Secret of the Rosary* (sometimes called “The Admirable

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the book by Fr. Gabriel Denis, smm, *The Reign of Jesus through Mary*, which begins with the text of *The Secret of Mary*, omits the practice of the wearing of chains.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux 17e et 18e siècles*, Ed. Stock, 1964.

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Secret of the Rosary’) is not as original in its composition as his other books, for here he is demonstrating the value of one particular devotional practice (among others mentioned in the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*), and at the same time borrowing extensively from many authors.

As he was primarily a missionary of the ordinary people, concentrating especially on the poor and abandoned, he set out to renew in them the spirit of Christianity, believing that this could be achieved by devotion to Mary which could only lead people to Jesus and holiness. He believed that the Rosary was a wonderfully effective way (a ‘secret’) of knowing Mary and finding Jesus through her. He established the devotion of the Rosary wherever he preached and had it recited publicly every day during his missions. This book, though not published in his lifetime, was certainly intended for all classes of people, as is clear from the “Little Roses” in the introduction. In the body of the book, which (like the Rosary itself) is divided into Decades, each with ten “roses”, he speaks about the origin of this form of Marian devotion and the climate of miracles in which it developed over the centuries. Well aware that critics would express doubts about some of his stories, he simply points out that he has quoted them from reputable authors. Other sections of the book deal with the power and effectiveness of the Rosary, the prayers of which it is made up, the beauty and usefulness of the meditations which should accompany it. He describes how to say the Rosary “worthily”, and at the end provides some Methods of Reciting the Rosary.

### HISTORY

It is not known when or where St. Louis Marie may have written this book. What is certain is that a great part of his text is borrowed from other authors, although Montfort arranges his subject matter and interprets it in his own way. It was certainly not published in his own lifetime, although some appendices (which appear in *God Alone*, as in the *Oeuvres complètes* in French, at the end of *Methods for Saying the Rosary*) on the “Principal Rules of the Confraternity of the Rosary”, “The Power and Dignity of the Rosary”, and “The Dignity of the Hail Mary”, which were added to the end of the manuscript of SR, would cause us to believe that he had the intention of offering this work to the public.

We do not possess an original manuscript in the hand of St. Louis Marie himself; only a copy. But that copy appears to have certain texts and corrections that were written by Montfort himself.

The author of this article has been unable to find any information as to when the first publication took place.

### SIGNIFICANCE

There is no doubt that the recitation of the Rosary was something very dear to the heart of St. Louis Marie. We have only to read what he says of this “exterior practice” of devotion to Our Lady in TD (nos. 249-254) to recognise this: “I do not know how this should be, but it is perfectly true; and I know no surer way of discovering whether a person belongs to God than by finding out if he loves the Hail Mary and the Rosary... I earnestly beg of you, then, by the love I bear you in Jesus and Mary, not to be content with saying the Little Crown of the Blessed Virgin, but say the Rosary too, and if time permits, all its fifteen decades, every day.” We know also, from his collaborator, Fr. des Bastières, that St. Louis Marie was known to refuse to return to a parish for a second mission if the people of the parish had abandoned the practice of reciting the Rosary. This book, then, clearly fits in with his own practical demonstration of devotion to Mary. But it is, nevertheless, only one of the exterior practices that he recommends for genuine devotees of the Blessed Virgin. The fact that this book is by far the least ‘personal’ of his writings (being to a great extent borrowed from other authors), does not mean that it is less important for an understanding of his thought. In fact, this book, perhaps because of its style, is one of the most in demand of all his works.

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### LITERARY STYLE

The main body of SR is in the form (like the Rosary - or Chaplet - itself) of five ‘decades’, each divided into 10 ‘roses’<sup>9</sup>, in which he gives various reflections on the Rosary, often in the form of anecdotes about its power as a prayer or the miracles performed through it. There is no doubt that this style was intended to appeal to the ordinary people of his day, and was very much in accord with his ‘missionary’ purpose that is evident in all his written works. On the other hand, it has been suggested that this work was primarily intended for the Missionaries of the Company of Mary, perhaps to help them in the preaching of the Rosary, which he prescribes as one of their principal tasks: “During the whole of the mission, they must do all they can by the morning readings and by the conferences and sermons, to establish the great devotion of the daily Rosary and they will enrol (they have the faculties for this) as many as possible in the Rosary confraternity” (*Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, 57).

### SOURCES

Montfort himself, in no. 33 of SR, reveals one of his major sources, when, speaking of the stories that abound in this book, he says: “all I have done has been to copy them from very good contemporary authors and, in part, from a book written a short time ago, *The Mystical Rose-tree*, by Fr. Antonin Thomas, O.P.” Others that he used (and seems to have copied whole passages from) are the Jesuits Boissieu and Spinelli and the Dominican Cavanoc, as well as one that he cites frequently, Alain de la Roche, O.P. The editors of the French edition of SR in the *Oeuvres complètes* chose to show the textual borrowing made by St. Louis Marie in this work in italics, and a brief glance at this French text shows that a great deal of Montfort’s text is in fact borrowed directly from other authors. This does not mean that it cannot be attributed to him; the use he made of his sources is still quite personal and original.

### *Letter to the Friends of the Cross (LFC)*

### CONTENT

The *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* is largely a meditation on the words of Christ:

*If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, and take up his cross and follow me*  
(Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23).

It is addressed to the members of an association which he seems to have established in various places during the course of his missions<sup>10</sup>, and presents the self-renunciation called for by Christ as a necessary, beneficial and glorious means of becoming a true disciple of Christ. St Louis Marie here gives practical “rules” for making our own sufferings and acts of penance and mortification a real “following of Christ”. It could well be read in conjunction with what he says in *The Love of Eternal Wisdom* on the third means for acquiring Divine Wisdom: universal mortification.

### HISTORY

As we can read in Grandet’s biography of St. Louis Marie, this little work was printed and published during the lifetime of St. Louis Marie. Besnard tells us that he wrote it during a visit to Rennes, where he was making a retreat and was meditating particularly on the sufferings of

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<sup>9</sup> The 50th rose is not included in the manuscript, possibly because the author was distracted, or possibly because he intended the ‘Methods of Saying the Rosary’ to form this rose.

<sup>10</sup> Grandet, the first biographer of St. Louis Marie, says in his *Vie de Messire Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort*, published in 1724, that “Monsieur Grignon... tried to inspire in all the people the love of crosses, of whatever kind, spiritual or temporal, such as illnesses, insults, humiliations, contempt, etc.... To inspire this devotion, so contrary to the senses and to corrupted nature, he set up associations of a number of people under the title of the cross. He gave them rules and practices approved by the bishops... and had printed a circular letter addressed to the Friends of the Cross, which contains Gospel maxims necessary for salvation” (pgs. 208-209 in the English version).

## THE WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

Christ. This seems to have been in 1714, shortly after the mission in Roussay near Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. The original manuscript of the work was, in the days of Father Besnard, Superior General, still in the possession of the Missionaries in Saint-Laurent, according to Besnard himself, but has since been lost; and no example of the editions published by St. Louis Marie himself has survived. The earliest text we now possess is that published in 1839 by Father Dalin, Superior General, and this is the text generally used today, with certain minor additions found in extracts quoted by Besnard or others. It seems that the ending of the work, as written by Montfort, may be missing: Dalin's edition ends with a series of full-stops, as though something has been omitted, but we cannot be certain.

The authenticity of the text as a whole, and its being a work of Montfort, is not in doubt, though the fact of our having no original manuscript nor copies of the original publication means that we cannot guarantee all the details of the text.

### SIGNIFICANCE

Grandet, in the section of his book already mentioned, notes that the Cross had great importance in the life, the thought and the preaching of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, and he links the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* directly with this theme of Montfort's spirituality and teaching. What we have in this work is well in accord with what he has written in other works, notably *The Love of Eternal Wisdom* (especially chapters 13, 14 and 15), and can be seen as practical advice on how to make our own sufferings and troubles meaningful in the light of Christ's cross.

### LITERARY STYLE

This booklet is in the form of a 'circular' letter intended for the members of the associations of 'Friends of the Cross' that St. Louis Marie set up during many of his missions. As such it is readily understandable for the simple, honest souls for whom it was meant.

### SOURCES

Once again, as in his other writings, Montfort quotes extensively from Scripture and to a lesser extent from the Fathers of the Church and a number of Saints. In several passages, his indebtedness to Henri Boudon's book *Les saintes voies de la Croix* is evident.

## II - OTHER WRITINGS

A glance at the Table of Contents in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, or that in the French *Oeuvres complètes*, will show that St. Louis Marie wrote many other things, apart from those that we have picked out as his principal works. We may list them as follows (roughly in order of their dates):

- His personal Letters
- Methods for Saying the Rosary
- Prayer for Missionaries
- Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary
- Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary
- The Wisdom Cross of Poitiers
- Original Rule of the Daughters of Wisdom
- Maxims and Lessons of Divine Wisdom
- Letter to the People of Montbernage

## THE WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

- The Rules
- The Covenant with God
- The Will of St Louis Marie de Montfort
- Morning and Night Prayers
- Rules of Voluntary Poverty in the Early Church
- Four Short Meditations on the Religious Life
- Dispositions for a Happy Death

To these we must add the 164 Hymns that have been attributed to the Saint, all of which are contained in the French *Oeuvres complètes*, a few in English translation in *God Alone*, and all in English translation in *God Alone II: The Hymns of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*.

We also possess a notebook, known in French as the *Cabier de Notes*, in which St. Louis Marie made many notes on his own reading, plans for sermons, etc. This has never been published in its entirety, but exists in manuscript in the Archives of the Company of Mary.

Finally, there is St. Louis Marie's Book of Sermons (*Livre des Sermons*), which again exists in manuscript in the Archives of the Company of Mary, and was published in 1983 as Volume VI of the collection *Documents et recherches* by the International Montfortian Centre.

We will give brief details of each of these, and a little more comment on the Hymns.

### *The Letters (L)*

St Louis Marie wrote a number of personal letters during the course of his life, only 34 of which (or fragments of them) have been preserved. They are written to 14 recipients, the principal ones being M. Leschassier (his confessor and spiritual director), his sister Guyonne Jeanne, and Sr Marie Louise of Jesus (Marie Louise Trichet). They help us to understand him as an author and what he wrote in his works. Some of them (especially Letters 5, 6, 8-11 and 15-16) throw a great deal of light on the early period of his priestly life, when he was struggling to find the Will of God for him.

### *Methods for Saying the Rosary (MSR)*

As would be expected from a popular missionary, St Louis Marie's book, *The Secret of the Rosary*, was meant to serve as a practical apostolate, and with this in mind he added to his book three methods for saying the Rosary, including one which he had composed for the Daughters of Wisdom. He gives two further methods in his Book of Sermons, and these are included in "*God Alone - The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*". An appendix to *Methods of reciting the Rosary* in *God Alone* adds some passages which St Louis Marie quotes verbatim from other authors, on *The Principal Rules of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary*, *the power and dignity of the Rosary* and *the dignity of the Hail Mary*.

### *The Prayer for Missionaries (PM)*

From very early on in his priestly life, St Louis Marie de Montfort dreamt of "a small company of priests" who would be dedicated to the preaching of missions to the poor, under the banner of the Blessed Virgin. As the years went by, his efforts to secure some recruits who would work with him in this way were redoubled. This prayer, known in French as the "*Prière Embrasée*"

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(burning prayer), composed by him probably towards the end of his life, is a heart-felt cry to God to fulfil his dreams. It describes the sort of “apostles” he is seeking, who he foresees will be particularly necessary in what he calls in the True Devotion (nos. 35, 45-58), the “latter times”.

This *Prayer for Missionaries*, together with *The Rule of the Missionaries of the Company of Mary* and *A Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary*, forms a kind of “trptych” which is the inspiration for the modern Rule and Constitutions of the Company of Mary (Montfort Missionaries).

### *The Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary (MR)*

This original rule of the Company of Mary was probably written about 1710, maybe even before any priests had yet joined St Louis Marie in his work. It is fairly typical of the sort of rule which was common for Religious Congregations about this time, except for some interesting details. For example, St Louis Marie speaks of only two vows, those of poverty and obedience, instead of the normal trilogy of poverty, chastity and obedience. It may be presumed that, as he expected any priests who joined the Company of Mary to be already ordained, they would already be bound to chastity; but it is probable that he insisted on poverty and obedience as being essential for the *freedom* and *availability* of which he speaks in the *Burning Prayer for Missionaries*. For the same reason, he insists that the members of the Company of Mary must hold no benefices, must not be “installed” in parishes, must have only two houses in France, etc. Their task was to travel to bring the good news to the poor, and a great part of the Rule is concerned with the *Directives to be Followed during their Missions*, *Their Timetable during Missions* and *Rules for Catechetical Instruction*.

This Rule, together with the *Burning Prayer for Missionaries* and the *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary*, forms a triptych which has been accepted by the Holy See as part of the official Rule and Constitutions of the Company of Mary today, in the sense of their being the source of the modern Rule.

### *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary (LCM)*

In this *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary*, (or *Letter to the Associates of the Company of Mary*, as it is called in the French), beginning with the words of Christ: *Fear not, little flock, because it has pleased your Father to bestow a kingdom on you* (Lk 12:32), St Louis Marie applies these words to his Company of Mary. This short letter is an exhortation to the members of the Company to be faithful to their spirit of evangelical poverty and trust in the Providence of God. When it was written, it is probable that there were as yet no priests belonging to the Company, and St Louis Marie seems to foresee that the Congregation would always remain relatively small, since he insists on their not being discouraged on account of their small numbers. He insists, too, on hope and joy in the knowledge that God will care for them in his Providence.

The end of the manuscript is missing, finishing in the middle of a sentence, but an ending was supplied (probably by Fr Gabriel Deshayes) in 1837.

As mentioned above, this Letter, together with the *Burning Prayer for Missionaries* and the *Rule of the Missionaries of the Company of Mary*, forms a triptych which has been accepted by the Holy See as part of the official Rule and Constitutions of the Company of Mary today, in the sense of their being the source of the modern Rule.

### *The Wisdom Cross of Poitiers (WCP)*

When St Louis Marie was chaplain of the “General Hospital” (poorhouse) at Poitiers from 1701-1703, he formed a group of young girls who gathered together regularly in a house which he

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called “La Sagesse” (Wisdom). Soon afterwards, Marie Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet, who were to become the first Daughters of Wisdom, joined them. St Louis Marie composed for them a programme of the spiritual life based on the words of Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom: “*We must renounce self and carry our cross after Jesus Christ, under Mary’s guidance*”. He wrote this programme in a very simple way on a cross, which has been preserved by the community of the Daughters of Wisdom.

### *The Original Rule of the Daughters of Wisdom (RDW)*

This original rule of the Daughters of Wisdom was almost certainly written in 1715, when Blessed Marie Louis Trichet and Sr Catherine Brunet arrived in La Rochelle to become the nucleus of the new Congregation. It is clearly inspired by M. Tronson, one-time Superior of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, but other influences seem to have been St Francis de Sales and St Vincent de Paul. Almost all its sections containing rules are followed by “Counsels” addressed personally to the Daughters of Wisdom by St Louis Marie himself. As with the *Rule of the Missionaries of the Company of Mary*, there are passages which are very practical descriptions of the work which St Louis Marie foresaw his Sisters undertaking: there is a whole section, for example, on *Rules to be observed in the Charity Schools of the Daughters of Wisdom*, which refer to the free schools for boys and girls which he set up in La Rochelle in collaboration with the Bishop.

### *Maxims and Lessons of Divine Wisdom (MDW)*

St Louis Marie inscribed on the “Wisdom Cross” of Poitiers a concise programme of the spiritual life. He enlarged upon this programme for the benefit of the Daughters of Wisdom and wrote this small book of maxims and lessons, which contains the same message as that given in chapter 12 of *The Love of Eternal Wisdom* which is entitled “Principal Oracles of Divine Wisdom”. They are clearly intended to be maxims to which the Daughters of Wisdom should conform if they sincerely wish to acquire the spirit of true wisdom.

### *Letter to the People of Montbernage (LPM)*

In 1705, having been released from his post as chaplain to the “General Hospital” in Poitiers, St Louis Marie began preaching missions in the town and suburbs of Poitiers. He began by concentrating on those districts, such as Montbernage, where the ordinary people lived. He immediately met with great success, but at the same time encountered serious opposition, especially from the Vicar-General. For the sake of peace, the Bishop chose to sacrifice Louis Marie, who was forced to leave the town at the beginning of Lent 1706. Before leaving Poitiers and making a pilgrimage to Rome to see the Pope, he wrote a circular letter to the people of the parishes where he had preached, now known as the *Letter to the People of Montbernage*. In it he encourages them to be faithful to all that they had promised during his missions, and asks for their prayers at this particularly difficult moment for himself.

### *Rules for Various Associations (RVA)*

St Louis Marie established a variety of “Associations” during the course of his missions, with the purpose of continuing the benefit gained by those who attended the missions faithfully. Some of these Associations (e.g. the Confraternity of the Rosary) already existed and had their own rules; others were apparently invented (or adapted) by himself, and he wrote rules for these. Two of them were *The Society of the Forty-four Virgins* and *The White Penitents*. *The Society of Virgins* was formed to protect girls from the corrupting influence of the world and the temptations arising

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from attending dances, etc. It was restricted to 44 girls at any one time, who took a temporary “vow” of chastity for the time that they remained a member. *The White Penitents* was modelled on the confraternities of penitents which began in Italy, and was intended to deter men from giving way to drunkenness, immorality, swearing and slander. Apart from the general rules for the White Penitents, St Louis Marie also wrote a set of rules for the *Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Saumur* made by the Penitents to obtain from God good Missionaries, a pilgrimage made by the White Penitents of Saint-Pompain to the shrine of Notre Dame des Ardilliers in early 1716.

### *The Covenant with God (CG)*

St Louis Marie’s aim in all his missions was “to revive the Christian spirit through the renewal of the baptismal promises” (according to his earliest biographer, Joseph Grandet). Grandet adds: “And to help them to remember their undertakings, he had a formula of renewal printed, and those who could write were required to sign it” during a special ceremony which was the highlight of the mission. St Louis Marie speaks of the consecration which he proposes in his True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin as a “perfect renewal of the vows of Baptism”.

Four printed copies of this *Contract of Covenant with God* have been preserved. Two of them, showing slight variations, are reproduced in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St Louis Marie de Montfort*.

### *The Will of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*

On the eve of his death at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre, St Louis Marie dictated his last will and testament to Fr Mulot, whom he appointed his successor as Superior of the Company of Mary. He had very little to leave: a few books, some banners and other things which he used in his missions, and a little money. He also left instructions concerning some properties which had been offered to him for the Company of Mary. From his will, we also learn something more of the few Brothers who had accompanied him in his missions.

### *Morning and Night Prayers*

In the original rules of the Daughters of Wisdom and the Company of Mary, St Louis Marie speaks of prayers that both Congregations must say, but he does not give any further details. We know however that he did write a manuscript version of the prescribed Morning and Evening Prayers, which was printed in 1859. The main part of the Morning Prayers is *The Little Crown of the Blessed Virgin*, versions of which were popular in the 17th Century. The form of the Evening (or Night) Prayer was also commonly used at that time, but St Louis Marie’s version contains some prayers (notably “O Jesus living in Mary” and prayers relating to the theme of rest and sleep) which are clearly drawn from the French School of Spirituality.

### *Rules of Voluntary Poverty in the Early Church*

This text, found in Montfort’s *Notebook*, appears quite abruptly among pages which had been left blank, and has nothing in common with the other matters in the Notebook. It may have been written at a moment when the theme of poverty for lay people living in community presented itself to him with a certain immediacy. It seems to have been written for a group of Brothers, but who these Brothers were, we do not know.

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### *Four Short Meditations on the Religious Life*

This text appears at the end of the manuscript of *The Secret of Mary*, and consists of four summaries of meditations on poverty, chastity, obedience, and Religious Rules. It may be a copy of notes taken by someone else who heard his talks.

### *Dispositions for a Happy Death*

On the eve of the death of St Louis Marie, a copy of the *Dispositions for a Happy Death* was found among the effects of the missionaries accompanying him. On a few blank pages of this little book, Fr. Mulot wrote the *Last Will and Testament* that the dying man had dictated to him. This explains why the copy of this little work, the only one now existing, has been preserved. It comprises five parts, the last three of which are certainly not the work of St Louis Marie, but rather of Fr. J. Nouet, S.J. The second part "*Vast expanses of Paradise*" appears also to be borrowed from someone else. The first part, however, on the remote, proximate and final dispositions for death, which are similar to drafts of sermons found in St Louis Marie's Book of Sermons, could well be his own work. In the final dispositions, we find exhortations to true devotion towards the Blessed Virgin, and to renew our Baptismal promises, themes very dear to St Louis Marie.

### *The Notebook*

From the time when he was a seminarian, and off and on perhaps for the rest of his life, St Louis Marie made notes on what he had read, or at least on some of this; for his Notebook certainly does not reflect all that he read, particularly when he was librarian at Saint-Sulpice. It contains especially notes on the Blessed Virgin and on devotion to her, and from it we can see clearly some of the sources he used in writing his great Marian works: *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* and *The Secret of Mary*.

### *The Book of Sermons*

This is a manuscript notebook, in which from time to time, probably beginning in his days as a seminarian, St Louis Marie wrote notes for sermons to be preached in missions. A few extracts from this notebook have been included in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St Louis Marie de Montfort*. And, as mentioned above, the whole Book of Sermons was published in the series *Documents et recherches* in 1983.

## III - THE HYMNS

St Louis Marie believed in the people being involved at every level in his missions, and one of the ways he brought about that involvement was through singing. He was a copious writer of hymns, which he often set to the popular tunes of his day. In all, 164 of these hymns have been preserved. Most of these are to be found in four manuscript notebooks preserved in the Archives of the Company of Mary, some of which are clearly in the handwriting of the Saint himself. Fr. Fradet, who did a detailed study of the hymns of St. Louis Marie, concludes: "The manuscripts do not contain a single hymn that we can find in any previous collections." We can be fairly sure, then, that these hymns are authentic compositions of St. Louis Marie. Montfort started writing hymns even before his ordination in 1700, according to Blain<sup>11</sup>. He continued to compose them right up to his death in 1716.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Baptiste BLAIN, *Summary of the Life of L-M Grignon de Montfort*, pg.116 in the original French, pg. 71, English version.

## THE WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

Their intention is, as always with St Louis Marie, to teach and encourage the ordinary people. They are not, therefore, of any great poetic merit, but they contain many indications, not found elsewhere in his writings, of the completeness of the spirituality which he lived and taught. For example, much of what he would have taught on the Mass, the Eucharist and Holy Communion is found more extensively among his hymns than elsewhere in his writings. It must be remembered, too, that many (if not most) of the people to whom St. Louis Marie was addressing his preaching were illiterate. These hymns could be learnt by heart, especially as they were so often sung to tunes already familiar to the ordinary people, and so were a valuable means of catechising these simple people, for whom such oral tradition was a normal source of learning.

Some of Montfort's hymns are more didactic than others; others are more expressions of wonder at the mystery of God's love and his dealings with men. Yet others are intended to help people to express themselves in a meaningful and sincere way to God.

Often the hymns are very long - they were sung during the processions and dramas which were a very effective part of the mission programme.

A few of them can be found in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St Louis Marie de Montfort*. All are to be found in *God Alone II: The Hymns of St Louis Marie de Montfort*.

### IV - THE USE OF IMAGES

Although not exactly "writing", Montfort's use of visual images was an important part of his apostolic method. He himself was very aware of the impact that visual scenes, pictures, statuary, and even dramatic representations could have on people who were limited in their literacy, and he used all the visual means he could to drive his message home.

Perhaps the greatest example of his use of visual imagery was his ill-fated attempts to create a calvary that would be visible from a good distance and would be a striking reminder to the people of the truths he taught in his preaching. Having been impressed by the calvary he found on Mont Valérien in 1703-4, he planned his own, first of all in his native town of Montfort, then later in Pontchâteau. As we know, both attempts failed, although the Calvary at Pontchâteau was revived and completed long after his death. St. Louis Marie still hoped, even after the failure at Pontchâteau, to see a monumental Calvary erected somewhere, and carefully preserved the statues he had had made for it. And, on a smaller scale, it was his common practice to erect crosses and small 'calvaries' in every place where he preached a mission, many of which survive to this day.

St. Louis Marie also used visual aids in various ways in his missions. We know from his Will that he carried about with him various banners that he had had made: banners of the Rosary mysteries and others illustrating various truths of the faith. He also used drama as an effective teaching tool. He wrote and produced various mission "pageants", like mediaeval mystery plays, to be performed during the course of his missions, even taking part in them himself from time to time, as when he took the part of a dead man on his way to judgement. We have an example of such a dramatic presentation among the Hymns: Hymn no. 127 on "The Abandoned Soul Freed from Purgatory by the Prayers of the Poor and of Children" is preceded by instructions as to how it should be presented: "There should be 20 individual characters, as well as the Angels and the Poor... there should be five chairs, the middle one raised higher than the others, and the actors should be arranged more or less as follows..."—and there follows a diagram indicating the positions of the chairs and the characters in the drama. After St. Louis Marie's death, his missionaries of the Company of Mary continued his use of visual aids, and were renowned a century later for the splendour of their "mission pageants".

## THE WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

St. Louis Marie was himself a competent, if amateur, artist who took up painting as a hobby even as a student at the college in Rennes. Though we do not possess any of his paintings, we do have knowledge of a number of small statuettes attributed to him. One of these, a carved wooden figure of the Madonna and child, is said to have been carried by him everywhere he went, sometimes fixed to the top of his walking staff. It is preserved today in the mother-house of the Daughters of Wisdom in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. Others are to be found in La Séguinière (Our Lady of Patience), St-Amand-sur-Sèvre, La Rochelle and the mother-house of the Company of Mary in Saint-Laurent. The statue of Our Lady of Wisdom in Montfort's birth-house in Montfort-sur-Meu is said to have been carved by him, as is the crucifix which used to be kept at Saint-Lazare outside Montfort, and is now in the birth-place of the saint.

*Paul R. Allerton, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Reflect on your own reading of the works of Montfort. Which of them has had most impact on you? Why?
2. Briefly compare *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* and *The Secret of Mary*. What, in your view, is the most telling difference (apart from length)?
3. If you have consulted Montfort's Hymns, which one most appeals to you? Why?

### FURTHER READING

*Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* (Montfort Publications, Bay Shore, NY, 1994) contains many articles which should be read by the serious student of the works of Montfort. The most important, from this point of view, are:

- *Love of the Eternal Wisdom*, by Jean-Pierre Prévost (pgs. 633-648)
- *True Devotion*, by Alphonse Bossard, SMM (pgs. 1209-1229)
- *Secret of Mary*, by Alphonse Bossard, SMM (pgs. 1113-1124)
- *Rosary*, by J.-C. Laurenceau, O.P. (pgs. 1055-1074)
- *Cross*, by Jean Bulteau, FSG, and Patrick Gaffney, SMM (pgs. 255-280)
- *Hymns*, by R. Payne, Odilon Demers, SMM, and G. Francini, O.S.M. (pgs. 515-526)

For his use of images, the article *Iconography*, by Marcel Sibold, SMM (pgs. 527-538) is useful.

## 5. THE MONTFORTIAN FAMILY

### I. FATHER DE MONTFORT, THE FOUNDER

Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort was just over 27 years old when he was ordained priest in Paris on 5 June 1700. At the end of September that year he arrived in the community of Saint-Clément in Nantes, which was run by a priest from Saint-Sulpice, M. Lévêque. He was hoping to find there a place suited to his own missionary aspirations. But he was profoundly disappointed.

On 6 December he wrote to his former spiritual director in Saint-Sulpice, M. Leschassier, about his disappointment. This letter (L 5) is the first indication we have of his desire to found something.

“I have not found here what I had hoped for and what led me to leave such a holy place as St. Sulpice, almost against my better judgement. My intention was, as yours was too, to prepare for mission-work and especially for teaching catechism to the poor, since this is what attracts me most. But I am not doing that at all and I do not think that I shall ever do it here... I know very well, my dear Father, that I am not worthy to do such honourable work, but *when I see the needs of the Church I cannot help pleading continually for a small and poor band of good priests to do this work* under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin...”

On 5 July 1701, Louis Marie gave an account to M. Leschassier of the 10-day mission he had been able to give in Grandchamps (cf. L 8). It had been a great joy for him, but it was not enough to keep him in Nantes. He needed a much wider field, and he needed people to work with him.

Louis Marie had two great friends in Rennes and Paris: Poullart des Places and Jean-Baptiste Blain. In their confidential sharing with one another, they will certainly have spoken about their plans.

*Claude Poullart des Places* had his own great projects, but they were quite different to those of Louis Marie. But why could not these projects be combined and complete one another?

“You know,” said the young Claude, “that for some time now I have been distributing all I have at my disposal to help poor students to follow their courses of study... That is what I would like to devote myself to, gathering them together in a house... If God grants me the grace to succeed in this, you can count on missionaries. I will prepare them for you, and it will be for you to set them to work. In this way we will both be satisfied.” This was the first draft of the contract that M. Grignion would later recall to the minds of the successors of Poullart des Places.

*Jean-Baptiste Blain* dreamt of a more tranquil life. And yet, in 1702, on the occasion of a visit to Paris by M. Grignion, he himself felt called: “I listened very carefully to all that was said about him and could not help wondering how anyone could regard him as a saint while doubting that he was on the right way to sanctity. As I felt greatly inclined to imitate him and be his companion, I was the more interested in what concerned him and anxious to know how exactly I should rightly judge him.”

Returning to Poitiers, Louis Marie went back to the Hôpital Générale and its poor inmates. There, he organised the first “Wisdom” community: a dozen sick and crippled women, under the direction of a pious, blind woman. It was an ephemeral community that gave rise to jealousy, but provided the first Daughter of Wisdom, *Marie-Louise de Jésus* with an impulse of the heart and a familiarity with spiritual things.

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The time was approaching when the material and spiritual renewal that he had undertaken at the hospital would once again brew up a storm and grant the missionary his liberty. From then on he could follow his own great inclination: “teaching catechism to the poor.”

The Bishop of Poitiers offered him board and lodging as the director of the House of Penitents, and gave him leisure to “spread himself around the town”. The poorer quarters would be the favoured place for his apostolate.

One day when he was hearing confessions in the House of Penitents, a man came in to pray. When he had finished the confessions, the missionary approached this young man and engaged him in conversation. *Mathurin Rangeard* told him that the Capuchin Fathers had preached a mission in his own village. He was then making ready to join them as a lay brother. M. Grignion, quite simply, but with an inspired air, told him: “It was not by chance, but really providentially, that you came in here. Would you not like to help the missionaries in their work? Follow me; that is your sure vocation.”

As in the Gospel, the young man set himself to follow him. *Brother Mathurin*, born in 1687, was to be the first “Montfortian”. He was to follow Father de Montfort and his successors in all their missions, right up to his death in 1760.

Five years after his ordination, Father de Montfort had sketched out the way forward: *Marie-Louise de Jésus* and *Mathurin Rangeard* were opening the route of the Montfortian foundations...

It was to be a modest little seed in a field with limited dimensions. But the seed was sown. It was to germinate and its branches were to gradually and slowly spread out. In the course of the 20th century, the Montfortian Family would take its modest place in the wide world...

Here we give a few stages, in the lifetime of the Founder.

1707-1708. Father de Montfort spent some time in the hermitage of Saint-Lazare in Montfort-la-Cane. With two young men who had no vows, Mathurin and Jean, he repaired the chapel, summoned his neighbours to prayer, fed the poor, and trained his two “postulants” in prayer and sacrifice. This was the first Montfortian “community”.

1713. Louis Marie spent twenty-four hours in Poitiers. He got Catherine Brunet to join Marie-Louise.

1715. In La Rochelle, the Montfortian Family took off: in February, *Adrien Vatel* joined Louis Marie; on 22 August, four young women made an official commitment to the Daughters of Wisdom—they were *Marie-Louise Trichet*, *Catherine Brunet*, *Marie Vallean* and *Marie Régnier*. The first community of La Sagesse was on its way.

1715 (September). In Fontenay, *René Mulot* joined Louis Marie.

1716 (28 April). Louis Marie de Montfort died in the middle of a mission in St-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. His will (cf. *God Alone*, pg. 506), dictated and signed on 27 April, mentions *four Brothers* “who joined me in a life of obedience and poverty”: Nicolas of Poitiers, Philippe of Nantes, Louis of La Rochelle, and Gabriel, “who is at present with me”, and then *three laymen* without any vows: Jacques, Jean, and Mathurin. We need to add to this number *two priests* without vows, René Mulot and Adrien Vatel. In all, then, nine persons and the community of La Sagesse in La Rochelle.

After the mission in St-Laurent and the burial of M. Grignion, one part of the group (the two priests, Brother Mathurin...) went into retirement in the presbytery of Saint-Pompain. It was not until Lent 1718 that the exit from the Cenacle began, thanks to a mission, announced without notice to the missionaries by the parish-priest of Saint-Etienne-des-Loges. From that time on, the “hermits” of Saint-Pompain would move out more and more on their mission journeys...

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Throughout their history, and in spite of the inevitable gap between their lived experience and the ideal they were pursuing, they kept in mind the aim given by Montfort himself to the pilgrims of Saint-Pompain: “You will make this pilgrimage for the following intentions: Firstly, to obtain from God through Mary's intercession good missionaries, who will follow the example of the apostles by complete abandonment to divine Providence and the practice of virtue under the protection of our Lady; secondly, to obtain the gift of wisdom in order to know, love and practise the truths of our faith and to lead others to Christ.”

### II. THE THREE CONGREGATIONS: ORIGIN - MISSION - HISTORY

The difficulty in the following pages is to present in a few words a history which requires several volumes. The reader must not look here for answers to the many questions for which the answers can only be found in other documents and in historical research.

#### 1. *The Missionaries of the Company of Mary*

*Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, in an article by Fr. Pierluigi Nava, smm, gives in 18 pages (pgs. 181-198), the history, mission and spirit of the Company of Mary. We can refer to it with interest.

Around 1713, Louis Marie de Montfort wrote the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, preceded by the *Prayer for Missionaries*, and followed by the *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary*. This triptych represents the burning heart of the apostle who mobilises all people of good will and gives them their apostolic tasks.

Only seven months after his priestly ordination, Louis Marie, faced with “the needs of the Church”, was dreaming of “a small and poor band of good priests” who would go from parish to parish, teaching catechism to the poor people, “under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin” (cf. L 5).

Two years later (August 1702), it seems he had proposed to two of his friends that they should enter into his project. Jean-Baptiste Blain hesitated seriously: “I felt greatly inclined to imitate him and be his companion.” Claude Poullart des Places, on the other hand, did not feel called to the missions, but he was ready to help in the project: “If God grants me the grace to succeed in this, you can count on missionaries. I will prepare them for you, and it will be for you to set them to work. In this way we will both be satisfied.” (Besnard, Montfort, vol. I, pg. 104).

What Montfort wanted was a company of *priests* (cf. MR 1), though that did not exclude lay associates (cf. MR 4). The aim was to proclaim the Gospel to the poor; by means of catechesis (cf. 79-91) and the renewal of Baptismal promises (cf. MR 56); under the eyes of, and with the help of Mary (PM 11-13). And the missionaries must always be preoccupied with “the needs of the Church” (cf. L 5), which might differ according to time and circumstances.

When Fr. de Montfort went in 1713 to meet the students of Poullart des Places and the one who had succeeded the Founder, Fr. Bouic, three topics were high on the agenda. They set forth the spirit of the missionary and indicate, for his followers, the main lines to keep in mind: *the spirit of poverty*, in the manner of the apostles (cf. Acts 3,6); *the Blessed Virgin*, his favourite theme; and *the spirit of the Gospel*, which is foolishness for the world (cf. Besnard, Montfort, vol. I, pgs. 105-106; Clorivière, Montfort, pg. 313).

“This is where the mystery lies, where human wisdom cannot penetrate and which has been revealed only to the little ones and the humble of heart: *abscondisti haec a sapientibus et revelasti ea parvulis* (Matt 11, 25). He made us all kneel down, M. Bouic added, to pray to God and ask him for that divine wisdom of which he had just been speaking to us, and he did this in such lively

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terms, with such animated features and such sublime thoughts, that we seemed to be listening to an angel.”

### 2. *The Daughters of Wisdom*

As with the Company of Mary, we can consult *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, pgs. 281-298, for more details on the topic “Daughters of Wisdom”.

Montfort had hesitated regarding the name to be given to his female congregation. He had written “Daughters of Providence”, then he corrected himself, writing “Wisdom” above “Providence” (cf. *God Alone*, pg. 477, notes 1 and 2). The first title corresponds to an inclination of his heart, but the second represents a more fundamental attraction: “if [wisdom] consisted in doing nothing new for God, in undertaking nothing for His glory for fear of being spoken about, then the Apostles were wrong in leaving Jerusalem; they should have remained shut up in the Caenaculum...” (Blain, *Summary*, pg. 337). By the foolishness of their lives, the Daughters of Wisdom would be witnesses to the Gospel in the midst of the world.

The foundation of this congregation is quite extraordinary. Montfort arrived at the General Hospital in Poitiers in 1701. Poverty and disorder reigned in this institution. The young chaplain drew up a plan of reform, to achieve greater economy and an exact observance of the rules. The staff who dedicated themselves to the poor had need of training, enshrined in a rule of life. But the governing body rejected it.

Montfort, never short of new ideas, thought up a sort of parable. He gathered together, in a room in the hospital, a dozen of the inmates: infirm, handicapped by nature, but pious women with great spiritual wealth. Over the door, he wrote: Wisdom; and on a cross he expressed in a naïve and meaningful way, a programme of spiritual life centred on Jesus Christ, Wisdom incarnate: we must renounce ourselves and carry our cross after Jesus Christ, under the guidance of Mary.

This little group was not to last more than a few months: from November 1702 to March 1703. But already the chaplain had met the woman who was to take up the baton: *Marie-Louise Trichet*. This young woman, 18 years old, had heard tell of the new chaplain and of his reputation for holiness. She presented herself at his confessional:

“Who sent you to me?” asked the confessor. “It was my sister.” “No, it was not your sister; it was the Blessed Virgin.”

Marie-Louise put herself under the direction of this man that she considered a saint. She took part in a retreat that he preached at the Hospital at Pentecost 1702. From then on, her only thought was to consecrate herself to God. She pressed her director to help her to realise her aim.

“Come and live in the hospital.”

The young woman went off to find the Bishop and told him of this proposal. “Impossible! There is no vacancy on the board.” For someone of her standing, any place other than a board-member was unthinkable.

“That does not matter... If these gentlemen will not accept me as a member of the board, perhaps they will not refuse to admit me as a poor person!”

And so the bourgeois young lady came to live in the hospital for the service of the poor. More than that, she wanted to live with them and like them, eating their black bread and their coarse soup... And it was in this context that the chaplain one day had her called: “My daughter, the idea has come to me to change your clothing.” On 2 February 1703, her spiritual Father gave his daughter in God a new name. He did this with a charming simplicity:

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“I am called Louis Marie, you are called Marie-Louise; add to this the name of Jesus, whom you are taking as your sole heritage.”

And that day, Marie-Louise Trichet became Marie-Louise de Jésus, the first Daughter of Wisdom...

Then there began the long wait for this woman who wanted to live a true religious life. The reforms introduced by Montfort had brought a little more comfort for the poor people, but a great deal of annoyance for the administrators: the “Wisdom” group was disbanded and Montfort himself had to leave Poitiers for the Salpêtrière.

He came back again in 1704, but only for a short time: a few months more as chaplain at the hospital, then a few months as a missionary in the back-streets of the town. But very soon the missionary understood that he had to leave the diocese...

At the beginning of Lent in 1706, he wrote a farewell letter to his “dear people of Montbernage, Saint-Saturnin, Saint-Simplicien, the Resurrection, and others...”

To Marie-Louise, as a form of encouragement, he said in a prophetic tone: “*Don’t leave here for ten years.* If the establishment of the Daughters of Wisdom comes about only at the end of that time, God will be satisfied and his plans accomplished...”

So for ten years, Marie-Louise remained alone in the overcrowded hospital, a governor and bursar without the titles, for many years. Her passion was: the poor to be fed, to be cared for and clothed... One day, in the heart of a terrible winter, she was heard to murmur: “Oh, I wish I could be stuff to clothe them in!”

In 1713, Montfort returned to Poitiers, but was not welcome in the hospital, or in the diocese. Nevertheless he had time to give Marie-Louise de Jésus her first companion, *Catherine Brunet*.

Two years later Montfort wrote from La Rochelle to his two spiritual daughters one of those demanding and convincing letters that he had the secret of writing (cf. L 27):

“I know you are doing a great deal of good where you are, but you will do infinitely more away from home and we know that since the time of Abraham right up to the time of our Lord and even to our own day, God sends his greatest servants out of their own country.”

Marie-Louise and Catherine needed great courage and great decisiveness to tear themselves away from their own task and their own country. They had to face opposition from the administrators, the anger of Mme Trichet, the blame of Marie Brunet and all around. They had to suffer and struggle to obey, in the face of all this, this new call from God.

So after the poor people of Poitiers, it was the charitable schools of La Rochelle. There, Marie-Louise and her first companions were going to show themselves to be marvellous teachers. In just a short time, the school was filled with four hundred little girls whose discipline, piety and enthusiasm for work attracted the admiration of the Bishop and the people of the district.

Poitiers had been the cradle of the congregation. La Rochelle was the place where it took its first steps. On 1 August 1715, Mgr. Etienne de Champflour approved the Rules of the Daughters of Wisdom. On 22 August 1715, the first community of La Sagesse—*Marie-Louise de Jésus, Catherine Brunet, Marie Valteau, Marie Régnier*—committed themselves to follow this Rule of life, wherever the needs of the Church might call them, and that in the double direction, charitable and missionary, as indicated by the Founder: *Call yourselves the Community of the Daughters of Wisdom for the education of children and the care of the poor.* (L 29).

When the Founder died in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre on 28 April 1716, the congregation numbered only four religious. But the woman who was his collaborator in the foundation, *Marie-Louise de Jésus*, was a courageous person who knew what she wanted and wanted what she knew.

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After the premature death of the father of the family, Marie-Louise was alone for 43 years, facing serious crises, such as the division of the Congregation (cf. the episode of the “Bourginettes” in La Rochelle: 1719-1725). She was alone also in the task of forming her first companions. Alone in guiding the foundation of new communities that began to multiply, often without any assured resources: small charitable schools, the visiting and care of the sick, the running of hospitals...

When she died in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre on 28 April 1759, La Sagesse numbered 122 religious, spread over 35 communities. Already 40 had gone to the Father’s House. When the great Revolution broke out (1789), there were 80 establishments with 360 Sisters. All of them, except for those in Brest, were expelled from their houses. Thirty-four paid with their lives for their loyalty to the Church, a fidelity that reminds us of the beautiful pages of the acts of the martyrs.

From 1821 until 1841, *Father Gabriel Deshayes*, Superior General, gave a great impulse to the Montfortian Family. When he arrived, there were 96 houses with 778 religious and novices. At his death, 1,668 religious were at work in 128 establishments. During his generalate, 32 establishments had been opened.

### 3. The Brothers of St. Gabriel

It will be good to have recourse once again to *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, (cf. pgs. 117-126). See also the important work of Brother Louis Bauvineau on the history of the Brothers of St Gabriel, as well as Volume XIII of the collection *Documents et recherches* on “Brother Eugène-Marie”, International Montfortian Centre, 1997.

Scarcely ordained priest, in 1700, Louis Marie Grignon, witnessing the “needs of the Church”, was dreaming of a group of collaborators who would devote themselves to the “mission”. He was looking for “missionary priests”. He found some Brothers, or some laymen in general, who worked with him in the mission. In 1705, it was *Mathurin Rangeard*, in Poitiers; in 1707, it was *Jean*, in Montfort-la-Cane.

*Brother Jean-Baptiste Rolandean*, in the article in the *Handbook*, has much to say concerning these first companions of Montfort in the mission: *Mathurin, Jean, Jacques, Pierre, Gabriel, Philippe from Nantes, Louis from La Rochelle*.

The Will of Fr. de Montfort, dated 27 April 1716, recalls some of these names (cf. *God Alone*, pgs 506-7): “the four Brothers who joined me in a life of obedience and poverty; namely, Brother Nicholas of Poitiers, Brother Philip of Nantes, Brother Louis of La Rochelle, and Brother Gabriel, who is at present with me...” and three committed laymen: Jacques, Jean and Mathurin.

So there we have seven young men who were the companions of the missionary for the mission, and who became, one way or another, his heirs. Their work had been: 1 - sharing in the parish mission, by catechesis, the singing of his hymns, the recitation of the Rosary, the organisation of the processions... 2. - charitable schools, only in the later years of the missionary and in the context of the pastoral options of the diocese of La Rochelle.

The Will mentions explicitly: “my small pieces of furniture and my mission books, to be preserved for the use of the four Brothers ... and for the use of those whom divine Providence will call into the same community of the Holy Spirit ... a small house given by a good lady of rank. If there is no possibility of building there, it should be put at the disposal of the Brothers of the community of the Holy Spirit to conduct charity schools ... All the pieces of furniture at present at Nantes are for the use of the Brothers who run the school, as long as the school remains there.”

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The *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary* provides for “Lay Brothers ... to take care of temporal affairs” (MR 4), but in a context that excludes teaching the young (cf. MR 2) but not anything that might help the missionaries in the mission: the cooking, the little shop, the care of the mule and leading it.

It is certain that Fr. de Montfort and his successors benefited greatly from the collaboration of the Lay Brothers, to the extent that the Company of Mary has always considered the dual title Fathers-Brothers as a constitutive part of its missionary vocation.

*Grandet*, the first biographer of Fr. de Montfort (published in Nantes, 1724), enumerates the “inventive strategies and means used by Monsieur de Montfort to perpetuate the fruits of his missions” (English version 2005, pgs. 200-201). The first of these means is “The establishment of Christian schools”.

A century later, *Fr. Joseph Dalin*, assistant to Fr. Gabriel Deshayes, recalled the integration of the school in the concerns of the missionaries:

“We will not end this Chapter on the Community of the Holy Spirit without speaking about, for the recognition and admiration of our readers, the works and the virtues of these humble Brothers of the Holy Spirit, who form such an interesting part of the community. Destined by Montfort to accompany and help the missionaries, then to conduct charitable schools, to care for the sick and to look after the temporal affairs of the two communities, we see them, right from the earliest years, carrying out zealously these modest functions, and this zeal has become hereditary among them...” (J. Dalin, *Vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, published 1839, pg. 454).

Such was the magnificent tree planted by Fr. de Montfort, which was, over the years and according to the “needs of the Church”, to put forth new branches and bear new fruit.

In the aftermath of the religious crises of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, *Fr. Gabriel Deshayes*, named superior in Saint-Laurent, was to give a new impetus to the foundations of Saint Louis Marie, and to develop the teaching branch which was to take the name of Brothers of St. Gabriel. From Auray, Gabriel Deshayes sent some recruits to St-Laurent. Arriving there in 1821, he already had 22 postulants in 1822. He drew up statutes in the tradition of Auray and St-Laurent. In 1823, he obtained the royal approval under the title of *Brothers of Christian Instruction of the Holy Spirit*, as a charitable association for the instruction of youth for five departments.

In 1824 he had the joy of accepting the religious vows of 42 Brothers. In 1825, Brother Augustin, one of the recruits from Auray, was named Director of the Brothers, and Brother Siméon, a recruit from St-Laurent, was appointed novice-master. This unity favoured both spiritual growth and the foundation of schools.

Until 1835 the house of the missionaries was the home of both the teaching Brothers and the “working” Brothers. But, as it was found to be more and more rather too small, Gabriel Deshayes had the idea of buying a house from the Daughters of Wisdom, that was just a few paces from the house of the missionaries. A “migration” was set afoot. Those devoted to the domestic services would remain, preferably in the Holy Spirit house, while the teaching Brothers would go across to the Maison Supiot, as it was called. They all still had the same superior, and there was great flexibility regarding passing from one to the other.

On 15 October 1835, Mgr. Soyer, the Bishop of Luçon, blessed the chapel of the new dwelling. The next day, Fr. Deshayes led his thirty-three Brothers and novices to the “Maison Supiot” ... There followed an impressive series of installations useful to the life of the new community... After that it was very easy to give a spontaneous new name: “Saint-Gabriel”. Let’s go to Saint Gabriel.

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In twenty years as Superior General, Fr. Deshayes was to found 78 primary schools. At the time of his death in 1841, 47 of them were still open, with ninety-nine Brothers, while waiting for the Congregation of St Gabriel to begin its spread around the world.

### III. MONTFORTIAN ASSOCIATIONS

The *Handbook* has much to say on this topic (cf. pgs. 31-44).<sup>12</sup> It speaks of Montfort and Associations, of the Association of Mary Queen of All Hearts, and of associations in the Church of today. Here we propose simply to sketch out the essential points, which might lead to a deeper study.

#### 1. *Montfort and Associations*

In the time of Montfort, spiritual and charitable associations abounded, often linked to Religious Orders or Monasteries, sometimes independent of these. The associations were proposed to the faithful to help them to live their Christian lives to the full. Montfort the missionary knew how to use the existing structures and, as occasion arose, he did not hesitate to create new ones.

Very early on, he himself turned to associations for support. As a student in Rennes, he joined, at the age of 15 or 16, a group of young people who used to meet with M. Bellier, the chaplain to the Hôpital Saint-Yves. This holy priest formed them for a life of prayer and for an apostolate for the benefit of the sick; he used to speak to them also of the missions in which he had taken part, under the direction of M. Leuduger.

Later on, Louis Marie joined the Marian sodality for the senior students, led by Fr. Prévost. The programme of this sodality was aimed, under the aegis and protection of the Blessed Virgin, at an interior formation and the witness of one's life. By the act of offering, the members undertook to honour Mary with a special form of cult.

In Paris, Louis Marie obtained the permission of his superiors to found a small group of "slaves of Jesus through Mary" (Blain, *ib.*, 50; TD 244).

After he became a priest, his missionary sense expressed itself through associations. His concern, at the end of a mission, was to leave in place various works that would ensure and prolong the fruits of the mission. He thought of all categories of the faithful and all their various inclinations.

***The Confraternity of the Rosary.*** In all his missions and retreats, he made himself the apostle of the Rosary. In his day, this was the most widespread form of popular piety. He has left us, in *The Secret of the Rosary*, an echo of his teaching and his missionary practice. After ten years of priesthood and of apostolic endeavour, he asked to be affiliated to the Third Order of Saint Dominic. In 1712, he obtained from the Master General of the Dominicans the faculty of introducing people into the Confraternity (cf. L 23).

***The Confraternity of the White Penitents.*** For them, he wrote a well-organised rule of Christian living (cf. *God Alone*, pg. 495), and he sent the group in Saint-Pompain on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Saumur, to obtain the grace of holy missionaries and the gift of wisdom (cf. *God Alone*, pgs. 495-498).

***The Forty-four Virgins.*** He wrote a rule for these, with the aim of encouraging those young women who wished to consecrate themselves to God in the world (cf. *God Alone*, pgs. 494-495).

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<sup>12</sup> Note that the French version of this article in *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité montfortaine* is much longer than its English equivalent (36 pages as opposed to 13), and has more details of Montfortian Associations in various different countries.

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*The 'Friends of the Cross'*. He saw in this association a great means of perseverance and of sanctification. For them, he wrote at Rennes in 1714 the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*.

*The Confraternity of St. Michael*. He wrote and obtained approval for the rule of this confraternity in order to help soldiers who had taken part in his mission (for example in Dinan, Montfort and La Rochelle) to remain faithful to their good dispositions.

By way of conclusion, we can say: all the faithful, by dint of their baptism, are full members of Jesus Christ and of his Church. All are called to holiness, that is to the perfection of charity, including its apostolic dimension. It was because he knew that God called them to holiness and to the service of the Church's mission, that Montfort established and left behind him those structures of support and witness that the various associations provided.

### 2. *The Association of Mary, Queen of All Hearts*

The associations we have already mentioned are aimed principally at providing durability for the fruits of his missions and retreats, for the benefit of parish communities or groups of the faithful.

Louis Marie had in his heart the idea of another association that he wanted to see come into existence, but which he was unable to bring about during his own lifetime. We are speaking of a "confraternity" that would gather together and unite those of the faithful who had decided to enter into the spiritual and apostolic way that he describes in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, a confraternity involving a "perfect consecration of oneself to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary" (cf. TD 121-130).

"Those who desire to take up this special devotion, (which has not been erected into a confraternity, although this would be desirable), should spend at least twelve days in emptying themselves of the spirit of the world, which is opposed to the spirit of Jesus... They should then spend three weeks imbuing themselves with the spirit of Jesus through the most Blessed Virgin..." (TD 227).

As a seminarian in Paris, Louis Marie, with the consent of his superiors, had created a "society of slaves of Jesus in Mary." What gave rise to this initiative was the book of M. Boudon, *Le saint esclavage de l'admirable Mère de Dieu* (The holy slavery of the admirable Mother of God). This book had a profound influence on him and guided his doctrinal and spiritual research. His missionary experience confirmed him in this path. But the premature death of our Founder did not allow the creation of a particular confraternity that would teach generous souls to renew in a perfect manner the promises of their baptism by total consecration to Jesus through Mary (cf. TD 120).

It was to be many years before the spiritual movement inspired by the *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* would give birth to the *Confraternity of Mary Queen of Our Hearts*.

It was in 1899, in Canada, that this association saw the light of day. In establishing it in his own diocese. Mgr. J. T. Duhamel, the Bishop of Ottawa, responded to the wishes of the Montfortians, to the desires of the faithful, and to his own personal piety. This confraternity was established in the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in Ottawa (cf. the review *La Règne de Jésus par Marie*, no. 1, January 1900). The aim of this confraternity was: to establish and extend the reign of Mary in our souls so as to bring about more perfectly the reign of Jesus Christ. Its practices: to make one's consecration to the Blessed Virgin, as far as possible according to the formula indicated by Louis Marie de Montfort; to renew this consecration each day with a short prayer; and finally, to take steps to live in dependence on Mary and act always in union with her.

The title "Mary, Queen of Our Hearts" came directly from the heart of Montfort. As a student at Saint-Sulpice, he knew of the chapel established by M. Tronson at Issy, which was dedicated

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to Mary, Queen of Our Hearts. In Montbernage, a suburb of Poitiers, in 1706, he converted a barn into a place of prayer and set up a statue of the Blessed Virgin under the title of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts, for the inhabitants of the district. At Saint-Donatien in Nantes in 1710, he changed the name of a little chapel to “Mary, Queen of Our Hearts”.

This title given to Mary was familiar and dear to the missionary: “As the kingdom of Jesus Christ exists primarily in the heart or interior of man... so the kingdom of the Blessed Virgin is principally in the interior of man... So we may call her, as the saints do, Queen of our hearts” (TD 38).

No sooner was the confraternity established than it began to attract members: faithful souls, religious, members of the clergy... The following year, a second confraternity was founded in France, in the diocese of Luçon, with its headquarters in St-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. Such confraternities quickly began to multiply: in France, in Europe, in America, Asia and Africa. In 1965 there were some 140 centres with several thousands of members...

In 1907, there appeared an *Association of Priests of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts*, which had a twofold aim: 1 - to sanctify the priestly life by the practice of the perfect devotion to Mary as taught by St. Louis Marie; 2 - to make of this devotion a powerful means of apostolate to establish through Mary the reign of Jesus, in both individuals and in families. Pius X had himself inscribed in the register of this association.

In 1913, a decree of Pius X raised the confraternity in Rome to become an Archconfraternity, to which all the confraternities should be attached. The spread of the confraternity was constant until the middle of the 20th century, when the number of members was approaching 500,000. And this number represented only a small proportion of all those who had made their consecration according to the spirit of St Louis Marie, for not all those who had consecrated themselves were registered as members of the association.

Beginning in the 1950s, the confraternity was to experience the turbulence taking place in both society and the Church. So it was that, in the 1960s, one could speak of a Marian question, and even of a “Marian crisis”, in the ten years following the Second Vatican Council. For many people, the confraternity was seen as a simple “pious union”, an aid to personal piety.

And yet, The Holy See, by a rescript of 16 July 1955, had declared this pious union to be an *association proper to the Company of Mary*, in the manner of a Third Order in relation to a Religious Order. It became, as it were, an extension of the congregation, to propagate zealously the reign of Jesus Christ through Mary. On 5 July 1956, the two associations of the faithful and of the priests received the approval of the Holy See for their new statutes. Attempts at renewal and restructuring were undertaken here and there, with more or less conclusive results.

Vatican Council II inspired renewal in all structures and associations in order for them to open to the Spirit of the new Pentecost. After accomplishing the *aggiornamento* of its own constitution, the Company of Mary still had to update the statutes of its two associations and to renew the spirit of both organizations. An international commission for Montfortian associations was formed in the late 1980s, and new statutes were proposed and approved for the confraternity, which had now become the *Association of Mary Queen of All Hearts*.

Work on the renewal of the two associations continued until, on 26 April 2001, definitive new Statutes were approved by the Holy See (see the [Decree of Approval](#)), and the two separate associations were again combined into one, to be known as the *Association of Mary Queen of All Hearts*. A month later, on 22 May 2001, the Holy See issued a rescript granting a Plenary Indulgence to all those enrolled in the Association 1. on the day of their enrolment; 2. on various other feasts and solemnities (see the [Rescript of the Sacred Penitentiary](#)).

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The new [Statutes](#) of the *Association of Mary, Queen of All Hearts* allow for centres of the association in various parts of the world, each with a Director appointed by the Director General of the Association who is the Superior General for the time being of the Company of Mary. They also give a clear presentation of the *nature* of the Association, which is declared to be such that it “gathers together the faithful, clerics or lay, who, desiring to be witnesses to the truth of the Gospel, intend to live the commitments of their Baptism with the help of a total consecration to Christ through the hands of Mary. To this end, they commit themselves to the perfect practice of true devotion to the Blessed Virgin taught by Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort, whom they choose as spiritual Guide and Master.” (Statutes Art. 1)

Further, the Statutes state: “The Association of Mary, Queen of All Hearts is open to all the faithful (lay persons, clergy, religious) who desire to engage themselves in the spiritual and apostolic journey proposed by Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort.” (Statutes Art. 8) Therefore: “One who, **after the necessary formation and preparation**, pronounces **the consecration to Jesus, Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom, by the hands of Mary, according to the formula of Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort**, may be received into the Association. The incorporation is made, following the motivated request of the candidate and **acceptance by the Director**, at the moment when the consecration is made **in the presence of the Director or his delegate** and its inscription in the register of the Association” (Statutes Art. 9).

The Statutes also make clear that one of the commitments of those who become members of the Association is the commitment to collaborate, according to their possibilities and their own condition, in the apostolate of the Company of Mary. Various forms of collaboration are possible, among them: (1) Praying for the Company of Mary, its members and its mission; (2) Actively assisting the Company of Mary in its mission, whether financially or by practical collaboration in its work.

After this survey of Montfortian associations in general, in their origin and development, it will be useful to see how each country has tried to adapt to its own culture, but always in the spirit of the Founder. The article we cited above on *Associations* in the *Handbook of the Spirituality of St Louis Marie de Montfort* (but more particularly in the French version in the *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité montfortaine*) gives some details on this topic. For the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, further details are to be found on the web site of the Montfort Missionaries at <http://www.montfort.org.uk/assocMQOAH.php>, which details the History and Nature of the Association, and how to become a member.

### 3. *Montfortian Secular Institutes*

To speak of Montfortian secular institutes is to speak of one concrete realisation of this—in the Montfortian province of Italy—since it seems that at present this is the only example of such an institute that exists. In France there exists a form of the *Association of Mary, Queen of All Hearts* (known commonly as the *Fraternité montfortaine*) that is sometimes designated by the initials ISM, which could be translated as “Institut Séculier Montfortain”, but in fact this group is not a secular institute in the strict canonical sense, even though certain ways of living and speaking may recall the idea of a secular institute. According to Canon 710 of the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church, “A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful, living in the world, strive for the perfection of charity and seek to contribute to the sanctification of the world, especially from within.” From the other Canons dealing with the topic (Canon 710-730), it is clear that the members of secular institutes are called to “live a life according to the evangelical counsels” (Canon 722, §2) of poverty, obedience and chastity, though in a way that is consistent with their living in the world. Canon 721, §1, 3° states that a married person cannot be admitted to such an institute while the marriage lasts.

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The case of the group known as *Missionarie di Maria* (Missionaries of Mary) in Italy is different: it is a diocesan secular institute in the strict sense, with its own structure and governance, even though its origin and mode of action remain profoundly “Montfortian”.

The *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* was rediscovered in 1842 and very quickly spread beyond the confines of France. It seems that the first Italian edition was published in 1851, even though the 1857 edition is the earliest one we now possess. The numerous editions that followed this have known great success.

With regard to Montfortian associates, the earliest documents, preserved in Italy, date back to 16 June 1906. This was the date of the establishment of the first confraternity of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts in Rome, close to the shrine of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts. This place was to become the driving centre of the Montfortian movement, both in Italy and internationally.

The day that was to prove decisive for the rapid spread of *True Devotion* in Italy was when a Papal audience was granted to Fr. Hubert Marie Gebhart, the Procurator General of the Montfort Missionaries. The Holy Father (Pius X) spoke words of approval for the doctrine taught by Montfort, and accepted to be the first one inscribed in the register of the Association of “Priests of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts.”

Asti, in Piedmont, was the first town to have an organised group of Montfortian associates, established on 29 April 1910. In 1911 there followed the group in Genoa, and on 2 May 1914, there appeared the first issue of *Regina dei cuori*, the official magazine of the Archconfraternity of Mary, Queen of Our Hearts.

Between 1914 and 1943, this magazine played a crucial role as a means of liaison, information and training. In 1946, the magazine acquired a new name: *Madre e Regina*. Over the years, more and more groups came into being: Padua, Casale Monferrato, Reggio Calabria, Templo Pausana, Santa Maria Ligure, Bologna...

In these groups, especially in Reggio Calabria, some members felt called to live their total consecration to Jesus through Mary in a form of consecration by the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. So it was that, little by little, a group was formed that is now approved as a *Diocesan Secular Institute*, under the authority of the Rt. Rev. Bishop of Reggio Calabria.

As opposed to the ISM in France, this institute has no juridical dependence on the Company of Mary, even though spiritual bonds and reciprocal service, including in “mission lands”, make this institute a part of the Montfortian Family.

*Marvel Gendrot, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Why did St. Louis Marie de Montfort become a founder of religious institutes?
2. What elements of his spirituality are particularly manifest in the various parts of the Montfortian Family?
3. What part could you play in the Montfortian Family?

### FURTHER READING

The articles already mentioned in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* might well be studied in more depth:

- *Company of Mary* (pgs. 181-198)
- *Daughters of Wisdom* (pgs. 281-298)

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- *Brothers of St. Gabriel* (pgs. 117-126)
- *Associations* (pgs. 31-44)

For brief histories of the Company of Mary and the Daughters of Wisdom in England, up to 1947, see the commemorative booklet *St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, published in the year of St. Louis Marie's canonization. It can be downloaded from the Montfort Missionaries' web site at [http://www.montfort.org.uk/Documents/St Louis Marie de Montfort \(Canonization book\).pdf](http://www.montfort.org.uk/Documents/St%20Louis%20Marie%20de%20Montfort%20(Canonization%20book).pdf), pgs. 67-72 and 73-76.

For the *Association of Mary Queen of All Hearts* see <http://www.montfort.org.uk/assocMQOAH.php> and <http://www.queenofallhearts.org/> in the USA.

## 6. THE LIVED GOSPEL

### HOW DID ST. LOUIS MARIE HIMSELF LIVE THE GOSPEL?

“To live the Gospel” means to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ (the “Good News”) as one’s rule of life; to believe, first of all, in Jesus Christ as the Gospel presents him to us: the Son of God, the “Word” who is God, the promised “Messiah”, the Saviour of all mankind; to accept the values that he taught and preached as the guiding norms for human living: his commandments of love, his message regarding suffering, his message of tolerance, etc.; and finally to accept his example of living as the ideal for our own lives, in other words, to imitate him in all that we do.

But history teaches us that there are many ways of interpreting the Gospel, and many different facets of the Gospel that can be emphasised, sometimes even to the point of denying or marginalising others. Fundamentally that is the cause of Christian disunity—something that has been evident in the Christian Church from the beginning (witness the great heresies of the early Church: Nestorianism, Gnosticism, etc.; and the ‘Great Schism’ of Eastern and Western churches), but that manifested itself most severely in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. St. Louis Marie himself lived in the shadow, as it were, of the Reformation, when the great theological debates were still, to some extent, going on and, even within the Catholic Church, there were divisive arguments that had an impact on the way Catholics lived their lives. The Jansenist controversy (or opposition to Jansenistic views) has often been cited as a factor in shaping his own beliefs and attitudes, though it has to be said that the influence of the Jansenists in his own difficulties has perhaps been somewhat exaggerated by biographers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Nevertheless, St. Louis Marie’s vision of the Gospel and of Christian living certainly differs in fundamental ways from that of the Jansenists.

In interpreting the Gospel, we can recognise today two basic and opposing attitudes that might be called “fundamentalist” and “critical”. In today’s terminology, a “fundamentalist” approach indicates a tendency to take as literal truth every single word in the Bible, whether the elements that are under consideration are the “historical” books, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Letters of the Apostles, etc. A “critical” approach, on the other hand, tries to see the different literary genres at work in the Bible, the results of informed scholarship on the meaning of different passages, the purpose that lay behind the writing of this or that book, and so on. This distinction, however, is one that was hardly recognised in St. Louis Marie’s day, when most spiritual or theological writers would have accepted, more or less, the absolute historical accuracy of the Bible. In LEW, for example, St. Louis Marie speaks of “the 4,000 years since the creation of the world”, and even gives precise dates: “Friday 25th March” for the conception of Jesus, “29th March” for his entry into Jerusalem, 2nd and 3rd April for the Last Supper and the Crucifixion of Jesus, and so on (LEW 104, 110, 114-115). This is not untypical of his time, and he was certainly a man of his own time in terms of the kind of interpretations of the Scriptures that would have appealed to him. Indeed we could say that it would have been well-nigh impossible for him to take a different approach. So his way of reading the Gospel tends towards the almost-fundamentalist approach that was prevalent in his time.

However, even within the prevailing scriptural and theological mentalities of his day, we can examine his choice of the truths he emphasised in his reading of the scriptures, and of the ways of expressing these truths in his own writings. We will attempt later on in this article to do just that, with a view to understanding how he lived the Gospel.

First of all, however, we should note that St. Louis Marie was unwavering in his belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God, Saviour and Messiah. We have only to read TD 61-62, his expression of the primacy of Christ in human living, to see this. “Jesus, our Saviour, true God and true man

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must be the ultimate end of all our other devotions; otherwise they would be false and misleading. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of everything... he is the only teacher from whom we must learn; the only Lord on whom we should depend; the only Head to whom we should be united and the only model that we should imitate... the only Shepherd that can feed us; the only Way that can lead us; the only Truth that we can believe; the only Life that can animate us... We are given no other name under heaven by which we can be saved..." The question is: is this belief nourished on the word of the Gospel, or does it arise simply from the general faith of the Church of his day? A first (simplistic) answer can be found in the very words we have quoted: clearly his description of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life, is taken directly from the Gospel of John, and the whole tenor of what he says here is gospel-inspired.

Secondly, there is no question about St. Louis Marie's familiarity with the Gospels. His works are full of quotations from the Scriptures, and, apart from his in-depth examination of the Wisdom books of the Old Testament in LEW, the vast majority of his quotations are from the Gospels. At a quick glance, quotations from the four Gospels occur in 98 sections (numbers) of his works (not including some of his Rules), often several times in a section. Among these, there is a whole chapter that seems like a mere list of quotations from the Gospels: LEW chapter 12 (69 separate verses in this chapter alone are quoted). But it goes beyond simply how often he quotes the Gospels themselves—the whole of his works are full of the Gospel. Fr. Louis Pérouas makes the remark that, as was the custom at that time, his reading of the Scriptures would have been less exegetical than spiritual. And, since at that time it was largely in the works of spiritual writers that a reflection on the Scriptures was taking place, it is to be expected that St. Louis Marie's interpretation of the Gospel will follow the line of these writers. As for the version of the Scriptures he would have used, it is likely that, along with most of the clerical class of his day, he would have used the Latin (Vulgate) translation of the books of the Bible. There were some translations into French in his day: e.g. the work of Nicholas de Leuze and François de Larben, published in Leuven in 1550, or the more recent translation known as the *Bible de Port-Royal*, prepared by Antoine Lemaistre and his brother Louis Isaac Lemaistre, finished in 1695 (when Montfort was studying for the priesthood in Paris), which achieved broad acceptance among both Catholics and Protestants; though it is perhaps unlikely that he would have used this translation, coming as it did from the Jansenist centre of Port-Royal. In any case, we do not know whether he used any of these vernacular Bibles.

Evidence as to how St. Louis Marie lived the Gospel is not, of course, confined to his writings. More important is the evidence we have from his life, as portrayed for us by his biographers and by his own letters. A particularly revealing passage comes from Jean-Baptiste Blain's account of his conversation with St Louis Marie when the latter visited Blain in Rouen in 1714. Blain tells us that he (Blain) "began by unburdening my heart of all I had to say or had heard said against his conduct and manner of acting." Then: "By way of answer he showed me his New Testament and then asked me if I could find fault with anything which Jesus Christ had practised and taught, and if I could show him a life more like that of our Blessed Lord and His Apostles than a life which was poor, mortified and founded upon abandonment to Providence; and he added that he had no other object but to follow such a life, and no other design but to persevere in the same" (Blain 331-332). Montfort is clearly claiming to be modelling his life on that of Christ himself, as Jesus went about with his disciples. And it is clear from all that his biographers tell us that this was no idle boast. We will see in the next section some of the Gospel attitudes and values that were dear to him. But for the moment let us note that his first biographer, Joseph Grandet, devotes the first part of Book V of his work (17 chapters) to what he calls "his special virtues", most of which, if they are not explicitly seen as Gospel virtues, are clearly meant to be an illustration of how St Louis Marie modelled himself on Christ. Besnard has a similar section in his biography—it was a common practice among biographers of those considered holy people

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in those days. And, in a few places in this treatment of his virtues, Besnard insists on the fact that Montfort was modelling himself on Jesus Christ as presented to us in the Gospels. So, for example, in speaking of his “gentleness”, Besnard says clearly that this trait was modelled on the gentleness of Jesus Christ himself, and he goes on to say that Montfort also looked upon Christ as his perfect model of humility.

### THE GOSPEL TRUTHS MONTFORT INSISTS ON

*Jesus Living in Mary: The Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie* contains detailed articles on each of the following topics. Here we will give a summary of each; but you are encouraged to read each article in full.

As already mentioned, each person, in their reading of the Gospel, tends to be attracted by some themes more than by others. This is true for St. Louis Marie de Montfort as much as for others. Also, one who is attempting, as St. Louis Marie was, to fashion a consistent way of spirituality, will lay emphasis on some Gospel truths more than others, while never ignoring the essential message of the Gospel. St. Louis Marie makes it clear in LEW and in TD and SM that his overriding concern is to draw his readers and listeners closer to Jesus Christ. His preferred way of doing this is through the devotion to Mary that he calls the “perfect” devotion, and that he claims is a perfect renewal of the Baptismal commitment of each Christian. All the Gospel truths that he insists on are intimately connected with this basic concern.

#### *Apostle*

St. Louis Marie laid great stress, especially in describing the sort of people he prayed God to send to his “Company of Mary”, on the quality of being “like the poor Apostles”. By this he meant being free from encumbrances, free to go wherever the Spirit of God would move them, always ready to obey and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We see this most clearly in his *Prayer for Missionaries*, especially nos. 7-10, and in the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, nos. 2, 6, 10, 12. Although he does not quote these verses of the Gospel, he is clearly basing himself on the instructions given by Jesus to the Apostles and to the 72 other disciples that he sends out before him: Matt 10:9-10; Mk 6:7-9; Lk 9:3; 10:4. In these verses, we may see also the great insistence of Jesus on relying on Divine Providence, another trait that Montfort stresses in PM and MR, as well as in his missionary practice. For him, being “like the poor apostles” and relying solely on Providence might sometimes seem to be the same thing.

#### *Baptism*

In the Gospel, Jesus proclaims: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5), and on leaving the world he commands his apostles: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). Hence, baptism is seen by the Christian Church as the first and most fundamental sacrament, which introduces the Christian into the life of Christ. St. Louis Marie was most concerned that all true Christians should be faithful to their commitment to Jesus Christ flowing from their baptism, and lamented the fact that so many were unfaithful to this commitment. In TD 127, he writes: “Does anyone fulfil the promises of baptism faithfully? Is it not true that nearly all Christians prove unfaithful to the promises made to Jesus in baptism?” and throughout TD 126-131 he claims that the “perfect devotion” to Mary that he teaches and indeed had taught in all his missions and sermons, is the perfect renewal of the Christian’s baptismal commitment. In all his missions, at least in the later years of his life, he placed the renewal of baptismal vows at the centre of activities. So for him, Baptism is central to his message, that Baptism that Jesus said was essential for entry into the Kingdom of God.

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### *Beatitudes (Happiness)*

Although St. Louis Marie explicitly cites the Gospel Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23) only once in his writings (LEW 151), they are as central to his own spiritual life and his message as they are to the Gospel. His own embracing of voluntary poverty, so evident in his life, is clearly a response to the first of the Gospel Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” His *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary* (LCM), especially nos. 5-11, reads like a meditation on this first of the Beatitudes. His obedience to the Bishops, and his meek acceptance of the censures and criticisms laid at his door, are clear evidence that he embraced the “meekness” or “gentleness” of the Beatitude: “Blessed are the gentle (meek)”. And his famous remark to Fr. des Bastières during the mission in Vertou: “No cross - what a cross is that!” is his own expression of the final Beatitude: “Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account.” However, as the article *Beatitudes* in the *Handbook* points out, St Louis Marie took the structure, as it were, of the Gospel Beatitudes, and expressed his own sense of “blessedness” or “happiness” in many different ways and in many different places in his writings, but always (as indeed the Gospel Beatitudes do) opposing “true” happiness (or true “wisdom”) to the false “happiness” that the world so easily promotes and praises.

### *Consecration*

The concept of “consecration” is clearly central to the message of St. Louis Marie; but what is its connection to the Gospel? The word itself is essentially bound up with “holiness”—a consecrated person or thing partakes of the holiness of the One who is Holy, by being made over to the service of God. Jesus, in the Gospel, is proclaimed “the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24), but God’s own people, through the Covenant between that people and God, are also “made holy”, consecrated to Him. And Jesus, recognising his own being as the Holy One of God, sent by God himself, prays that his disciples too may be consecrated: “Consecrate them in the truth” (Jn 17:17), and he says: “for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (Jn 17:19). It is in this sense that St Louis Marie says, in TD 120: “As all perfection consists in our being conformed, united and *consecrated* to Jesus it naturally follows that the most perfect of all devotions is that which conforms, unites, and *consecrates* us most completely to Jesus.” And he goes on to justify his insistence on the idea of consecration to Jesus through Mary by saying: “Now of all God's creatures Mary is the most conformed to Jesus. It therefore follows that, of all devotions, devotion to her makes for the most effective consecration and conformity to him. The more one is consecrated to Mary, the more one is consecrated to Jesus.” Later he insists that, as baptised people, all Christians are already consecrated to Christ: “The Catechism of the Council of Trent... exhorts priests ... to encourage the faithful to remember and hold fast to the belief that they are bound and consecrated as slaves to Jesus, their Redeemer and Lord” (TD 129). Consecration to Jesus is part and parcel of being a Christian; and consecration to Jesus through Mary is, for St Louis Marie, essentially a Gospel attitude.

### *The Cross*

Clearly, in the Gospels, Jesus’ death on the cross is the central element in the message of redemption and salvation that the Gospels proclaim. And, for St Louis Marie, it has the same central significance. As he says in LEW 167, “The Cross is according to my belief the greatest secret of the King - the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom.” Jesus “has so truly incorporated and united himself with the Cross that in all truth we can say: Wisdom is the Cross, and the Cross is Wisdom” (LEW 180). The whole of chapter 14 of LEW, between these two sentences, is a meditation on the Cross in the life of Jesus himself, in which St. Louis Marie recalls Jesus’

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own insistence on the necessity of his own suffering in order to fulfil the will of the Father and bring about salvation (quoting Mt 16:21; 17:12,22,23; 20:17-19; Lk 9:31; 12:50; 22:15, etc.); but also a meditation on the cross in the lives of Christians: “Eternal Wisdom has decreed the Cross to be the sign, the emblem and the weapon of his faithful people” (LEW 173); in particular a meditation on Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23: “If anyone wishes to come after me, let him renounce himself and take up his cross (every day) and follow me”, a theme on which he enlarges in the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, specifically basing it on this Gospel text. From St Louis Marie’s own life, and in particular the stress he laid on the Cross in it (“No cross - what a cross that is!”), we can see that this is one of the central themes of his personal spirituality and the spirituality that he set out to teach.

### *The Incarnation*

In TD 243, St Louis Marie says that the mystery of the Incarnation is “the mystery proper to this devotion”, that is, to the “perfect devotion” to Mary that he is proposing in his teaching: the devotion of “total consecration to Jesus through Mary”. In this he is at one with the “French School of Spirituality” which made the mystery of the Incarnation the core of its spirituality. However, Montfort approaches the Incarnation in his own way, and indeed does not often use terms beloved of the French School, such as “states” and “adherence”. Part of his originality in this respect is his extensive recourse to Scripture, which is evident, for example, in LEW. Perhaps his most original use of Scripture in this regard is his exegesis of the Wisdom books of the Old Testament; but he also places a particular emphasis and interpretation on the Gospel in dealing with the Incarnation. In his view, the humanity assumed by the Second Person of the Trinity in becoming man is such that it embraces total dependence on his mother Mary, and this *dependence* becomes the model for all perfect imitation of Christ. So he interprets the Gospel passages such as Lk 1:26-38 (the Annunciation), Lk 2:51 (“He went down with them then and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority”), and Jn 1:14 (“The Word became flesh, he lived among us”) in this light. Another aspect of the Incarnation that St. Louis Marie emphasises is its necessary inclusion of the Cross: “He wishes to become incarnate in order to convince men of his friendship; he wishes to come down upon earth to help men to go up to heaven... It would be expected then that this Wisdom incarnate would appear glorious and triumphant... But O wonder! He perceives something which is a source of scandal and horror to Jews and an object of foolishness to pagans. He sees a piece of vile and contemptible wood which is used to humiliate and torture the most wicked and the most wretched of men, called a gibbet, a gallows, a cross” (LEW 168). “He espoused the Cross at his Incarnation with indescribable love. He sought it out and carried it with the utmost joy, throughout his whole life, which became but one continuous cross. After having made several efforts to embrace it in order to die upon it on Calvary, he asked, ‘How great is my distress until it is completed!’” (LEW 170). He sees the many times that the Gospels portray Jesus as speaking of his Cross (cf. e.g. Mt 16:21; 17:12,22,23; 20:17-19; Lk 9:31; 12:50; 22:15, etc.) as the proof that the two (the Incarnation and the Cross) are inextricably bound together.

### *Mary*

Clearly, Mary lies at the heart of St. Louis Marie’s teaching, even though it remains essentially Christocentric (cf. TD 61-62). And it is her role in the Incarnation that is the core of his Mariology. As Fr. Pat Gaffney points out in the article *Mary* in the *Handbook*, Mary’s function in the Incarnation implies a twofold dynamic: the Trinity freely pouring grace into her soul, and Mary’s faithful response (cf. LEW 105). This dynamic of call and response is what Montfort proposes as the basic plan of God, not only for Mary for for all mankind. He sees this as establishing what he calls the “hypothetical necessity” of Mary in God’s plan—necessity only

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because God wills it so: he himself asks Mary's consent to become the God-bearer. And because Mary is thus necessary for God's plan, in its inception, she is also necessary for all those who wish to enter into God's plan of salvation. This is how he interprets the story of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) and the presence of Mary on Calvary at Christ's death (Jn 19:25-27). We must not expect to find, in St. Louis Marie's writings, the insights of modern Mariology regarding the interpretation of Mary's role as seen in the Gospels, since he was a man of his own time; but he has some particular insights, basing himself on his reading of the Gospels, into Mary's role. We have already noted the *dependence of Jesus on Mary* which he relies on heavily to underpin his teaching on total consecration. Another emphasis which he gleans from his reading of the Gospel is the relationship of Mary to us as our Mother. Certainly he cites the scene on Calvary (Jn 19:25-27) as the basis of this, but he also stresses that, since Christians are "incorporated" into Christ by baptism, Mary is the Mother of all Christians from the moment of her involvement in the Incarnation of Christ (cf. TD 32).

### *The Magnificat*

Although St. Louis Marie does not often refer directly to the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) in his writings, he clearly reserves a place of honour for it in his own spiritual experience and also in his teaching on Mary and the spiritual life. He recommends that it be recited often, especially at certain moments (cf. SM 64, TD 116, 255), and more particularly as part of a preparation for undertaking total consecration to Jesus through Mary.

### *Providence*

St. Louis Marie's own trust in divine Providence is clear from his actions throughout his life, from his departure from Rennes for Paris to study at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, to his habitual practice of asking nothing for his services during his missions and his instructions to his Missionaries of the Company of Mary (cf. MR). In all of this, as we have seen above, he is clearly basing himself on the words of Jesus himself in the Gospels to his apostles and disciples as he sends them out before him: Matt 10:9-10; Mk 6:7-9; Lk 9:3; 10:4. They are not to provide themselves with the necessities of life, but to trust in God to provide them for them. In his *Book of Sermons* Montfort has a number of sermon plans on the subject of Providence, in which he comments on God's Providence as shown in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (Jn 6:1-13)—cf. *Sermons* pgs. 190-199.

These are just some of the Gospel truths that St. Louis Marie insists on in his teaching. Many more could be found by perusing the articles in the *Handbook*.

## **MONTFORTIAN SPIRITUALITY A GOSPEL SPIRITUALITY**

Montfort's reading of the Gospel, and his application of Gospel truth to his own life and to his teaching on spirituality, is certainly filtered through the prevailing beliefs, attitudes and exegetical stances of his own day. His was a time when spiritual writers relied heavily on the writings of the Fathers of the Church, on the lives of acknowledged saints and holy people, and on the various catechisms and pronouncements of Popes and Councils, for their understanding of the spiritual life—perhaps much more than a direct appeal to the Gospels. In certain of his writings, the anecdotes concerning the doings of the saints, and concerning miracles wrought by them or by particular spiritual practices, are much more numerous than quotations from Scripture (see, for example, *The Secret of the Rosary* and certain parts of TD). It is clear, however, from his writings and from his own practice, that St. Louis Marie was steeped in the Gospels, and that all his efforts were directed towards a greater imitation of the Christ portrayed in the Gospels.

## THE LIVED GOSPEL

In his reading of the Gospel, we may say that there are certain themes that Montfort picks out and makes into the basis of his own spirituality and the spirituality that he tries to promote among his readers and listeners. His love of the title “Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom” for Jesus Christ is the fruit of his reflection on Christ as the “Word” (logos) in Jn 1, as filtered, as it were, through St Paul’s treatment of Wisdom, especially in 1 and 2 Cor. This theme of Wisdom is fundamental in his teaching. A second theme that he develops from his reading of the Gospel is that of the dependence of Jesus on his mother Mary, a dependence which he then recommends for those who wish to follow Jesus closely, and which becomes the basis of his teaching on consecration to Jesus through Mary. Again, he has reflected deeply on the words of Jesus regarding his own necessary suffering (the Cross), and on the necessity for us to carry our own cross, and this is the basis for all his teaching on the Cross.

Thus we can see that the major themes of Montfort’s spirituality are drawn from his reflection on the Gospel: Incarnate Wisdom the only true wisdom; Mary’s role in our salvation; the Cross.

*Paul Allerton, SMM*

### EXERCISES

1. How does St. Louis Marie use the Gospel to underline Mary’s role in God’s plan of salvation?
2. Are there any major Gospel themes that St. Louis Marie does not seem to have developed?
3. How can you live the Gospel in the spirit of Montfort?

### FURTHER READING

*Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St Louis Marie de Montfort*, throughout, but especially the articles on: *Apostle, Baptism, Beatitudes, Consecration, Cross, Incarnation, Magnificat, Mary, Providence*. All of these articles can be found online on the EWTN web site: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/HANDBOOK.HTM>

## 7. THE EXPERIENCE OF JESUS CHRIST

### THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF FATHER DE MONTFORT

When the humble Virgin Mary said yes to God's Plan of Salvation for the human race, the Holy Spirit transformed her whole being. In that saving moment God met man and man met God in the conception of her Son, Jesus Christ.

St. Louis Marie de Montfort built his unique spirituality on the ongoing dynamism of the Incarnation with its active involvement of the Trinity—making possible the rescue of mankind from the slavery of sin.

His writings and preaching are completely Christ-centred and are aimed at a total commitment to Jesus the Saviour whom he calls 'Wisdom Incarnate'. This personal self-abandonment finds its expression in 'Perfect Consecration to Jesus through Mary' which included the Renewal of Baptismal vows. The Consecration appears at the end of Montfort's True Devotion.

Fr. De Montfort's experience of Jesus Christ began at an early age. By nature he was pious and prayerful. His mother was a devout Catholic and he had an uncle a priest, Fr. Alain Robert who ministered in a parish in the town of Rennes where Montfort was educated by the Jesuits in the college of St. Thomas Beckett. At the age of seventeen while praying in one of the local churches, Louis Marie felt a deep desire to become a priest.

It was as a seminarian at Saint-Sulpice in Paris that the young student became influenced by the French School of Spirituality. Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle was the foremost exponent of this movement which sought to inculcate the contemplation of, dependence upon, and union with Jesus the Incarnate Word. This ideal was defined by St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Enshrined in the ethos of Saint-Sulpice was this Christocentric message, thanks to the founder, Fr. Jean Jacques Olier. Montfort imbibed this teaching and made it his own.

Later as a priest he makes it clear in his writings that his unmistakable devotion to Mary was not an alternative to the pursuit of Jesus Wisdom as the Christian end and fulfilment. For Montfort, Jesus Christ was the alpha and omega, the beginning and end of everything. This conviction shines through the pages of the True Devotion:

*'Jesus is our last end. Since he is our Redeemer and our God, we are indebted to him for all that we are'* (TD 125).

*'This (Marian) devotion is a smooth, short, perfect and sure way of attaining union with our Lord in which Christian perfection consists'* (TD 152).

Following the example of Jesus Wisdom, who immersed himself in the human condition of suffering and vulnerability, Montfort the missionary actively sought out the poor and the disadvantaged. There was a 'Franciscan' outreach in Montfort's ministry.

This displayed itself in his encounter with the poor leper in the town of Dinan during a general mission. He lifts the poor man on his shoulders and carries him to the door of the residence where the missionaries were staying. The door was closed because it was late. Montfort knocked, shouting out several times 'Open the door to Jesus Christ'. The priest who opened the door was astonished to see Father De Montfort carrying the man. He laid the man who was numb with cold on his own bed and made sure he was warm and comfortable before going to spend hours in prayer. For the saint, Jesus was to be found among the poor.

# THE EXPERIENCE OF JESUS CHRIST

## THE EXPERIENCE TO WHICH MONTFORT WOULD GUIDE US

### 1. *Christ-Wisdom Incarnate for the happiness of man*

The uniqueness of Montfort's spirituality lies in the presentation of Christ as 'Incarnate Wisdom'. This concept makes its first appearance in his early letters - notably in his letters to Marie Louise Trichet whom he met in Poitiers. He would invite her to be co-founder of the Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom: "*Found our community of the Daughters of Wisdom not on the quicksands of gold or silver but on the Wisdom of the Cross on Calvary*" (Letter 34).

His early work, *The Love of the Eternal Wisdom* is a spiritual masterpiece. It incorporates all the themes of his apostolate; the Incarnation, the demands of a Wisdom inspired by the Gospel, the foolishness of the Cross and the special place of Mary in the mystery of salvation. In this work, Montfort designates Christ as 'Wisdom' at least forty times.

When Montfort speaks of 'Wisdom' one must make the distinction between 'Wisdom' as a person, that is, Jesus Christ, and 'Wisdom' as a gift, that is Jesus Christ's communication to human beings of his word. By responding to the 'Word', a soul can achieve spiritual happiness. *'When Eternal Wisdom communicates himself to a soul, He gives that soul the gifts of the Holy Spirit'* (LEW 99).

The advent of Jesus Wisdom at the time of the Incarnation is the 'new covenant' in the context of salvation history.

*'St. Louis Marie's charism, his particular view of faith in Christ known as the Wisdom of God, came among human beings in order to reveal the fullness of the Father's design of love and teach them that as true master of Wisdom, Jesus is by example and word the way to holiness'* (J. Hémerly, *An attitude of Evangelical Wisdom*).

Using the scriptural exegesis of his time, Montfort quotes abundantly from the Old Testament Wisdom writings (e.g. Prov 8, Sir 24, Wis 7-8). He then relates these texts to the New Testament (e.g. St. Paul: 1 Cor:15-20, Col 2:3. Jn 1:1-18) in order to demonstrate that Jesus is the personification of Wisdom.

*'Following the example of this great man (Solomon), I am going in my simple way to portray Eternal Wisdom before, during and after his Incarnation'* (LEW 7).

*'When St. John the Evangelist exclaimed "In the beginning was the Word" - the Son of God or Eternal Wisdom - "and the Word was in God and the Word was God"... this is the Eternal Wisdom of which Solomon often speaks in his book when he says that Wisdom was created'* (LEW 17, 18; Jn 1:1).

At the end of the *Love of Eternal Wisdom*, the saint outlines four means of acquiring Divine Wisdom — An ardent desire, continuous prayer, universal mortification and a genuine devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary — the last expounded later in his *True Devotion*.

In terms of his preaching, the Gospel was the missionary's compendium of Wisdom from which he invited the people to learn about Jesus-Wisdom and his teaching. *'(The Gospel contains) the principle utterances of Wisdom Incarnate which we must believe and practise if we are to be saved'* (LEW 12; 133-153).

### 2. *Christ crucified, the victory of the Cross and its life giving power.*

Montfort's famous saying, 'Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom', leads us to examine the place of the Cross in his life and writings.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF JESUS CHRIST

The mystery of the Cross is the crucible of suffering in which God fashions his saints: 'If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34).

The experience of the cross began early in the life of Montfort at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. As a very serious minded and intensely spiritual young man, he was ridiculed and humiliated by fellow students as 'holier than thou'.

Ordained to the Priesthood in 1700 and full of zeal, he again came up against rejection and misunderstanding due to his creative if unconventional pastoral approach to the ministry. He was made to feel unwelcome in his initial appointments as chaplain to the Poitiers hospital and the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. In 1703, he ended up living alone in a dingy hovel under a staircase on the Rue du Pot de Fer in Paris, '*impoverished, crucified and humiliated*' (Letter 16).

Eventually in 1706 he obtains an audience with Pope Clement XI in Rome to discern his future. The Pope presents him with a crucifix (which he used to great effect in his missions) and named him 'Missionary Apostolic' to his native France.

His style of preaching and the ascetical life-style of this 'vagabond' priest continued to upset the clerical establishment. Several Bishops refused him entry into their dioceses and slanderous stories began to circulate about this 'upstart' missionary. Unwittingly, he had made enemies, and there were even some attempts on his life.

For all that, the ordinary people looked upon him as 'the good Father de Montfort'.

It is not surprising that the theme of the Cross figured largely in his sermons. In the course of his many parish missions, he enlisted the manual assistance of the people in erecting Stations of the Cross and Calvaries. In 1710, he was to witness the destruction of the Calvary project at Pontchâteau on the order of the government. In fact, his enemies had been at work misleading the authorities that the Calvary could be used by France's enemy, the English, as a fortress.

A relic of Montfort's love of the Cross survives to this day in the 'Wisdom Cross' of Poitiers, which he designed and presented to the Daughters of Wisdom. Its centre piece was the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a detailed list of virtues associated with the Cross.

*Jesus has so truly incorporated and united Himself with the Cross that in all truth we can say that Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom' (LEW 180).*

In order to maintain the spiritual momentum of his parish missions, Montfort set up Associations of the Cross. A 'Letter to the Friends of the Cross' was circulated by way of keeping alive the work of conversion and renewal. The original letter has not survived but a faithful version was revived in 1839 by Fr. Dalin, Superior General of the Company of Mary.

The framework of the Letter is a commentary on Matthew 16:24—the call to self-denial and the acceptance of the Cross with supporting texts from the Old and New Testament, the Church Fathers and Saints.

After setting out the guiding principles of the Friends of the Cross, the Letter offers 14 practical ways of carrying one's cross. (LFC 42-62). Essentially, to become 'A Friend of the Cross' was to choose the Way of Jesus, Crucified Wisdom and accept the crosses that come our way. *My dear Friends of the Cross, resolve to suffer any kind of cross...poverty, injustice, loss, illness, humiliation, contradiction, slander, spiritual dryness, desolation, interior and exterior trials, saying always, My heart is ready, O lord, my heart is ready' (LFC 54).*

It is noticeable in the writings of Montfort that there is little mention of the Resurrection. This is explained by the fact that at that time in the Church, no distinct theology had been developed for the Easter Mystery. For Montfort, it could be said that Good Friday anticipated the glory and

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the victory of the Resurrection. Like the writers of his day, Montfort celebrates *The triumph of Eternal Wisdom in and by the Cross* (LEW ch. 14).

### 3. *The Prayers of Father de Montfort.*

Montfort is the man of prayer, one who pleaded for prayers and as a Missionary taught the people how to pray, especially the Rosary. From his youth, he made time for prayer. As a missionary, even in the middle of intense apostolic activity he would stop off at churches, make pilgrimages to Marian shrines, reciting the Rosary en route.

His biographer and friend, M. Blain, observed Montfort's prayerful reverence during the celebration of **Mass** as being 'angelic'. A prolonged thanksgiving would always follow his Mass.

Montfort lived his life acutely aware of the **presence of God**. This conscious reverence explains why he never wore a hat.

In his Letters, he reveals a deep yearning for the hidden and contemplative life of prayer. He sought out places of solitude to be with the Lord and refreshed his interior life with frequent personal retreats. Frequently in his letters he pleaded for prayers. To his sister, Guyonne-Jeanne, he wrote, *'Ask pardon of God and Jesus, the Eternal High Priest for the offences I have committed against his Divine Majesty in the Blessed Sacrament'* (Letter 12). In a subsequent letter, he indicates that these 'offences' were 'half-hearted Communion'. He later asks the same sister (who became a Religious) to pray that he might be given extra crosses to bear so as to acquire Divine Wisdom.

He makes an impassioned plea to God for the foundation of his Company of Mary, and writes, *'When I see the needs of the Church, I cannot help pleading for a small band of good priests'* (Letter 5).

In his powerful *'Prayer for Missionaries'* he envisages such a group of 'Free men' intent on carrying out God's will. Like the Apostles, they will be ready and available to spread the Word of God and witness to Christ with their very lives. Montfort cites St. Dominic as a model of fearless preaching and burning zeal, spreading the gospel far and wide, with the weapon of the Rosary in his hands.

The **Rosary** was an integral part of Montfort's Apostolate of Prayer. It was a popular prayer with the simple people and as a missionary he used it as a means for catechising and instructing them in the faith. In his book, *'The Secret of the Rosary'*, the saint reveals the Rosary as a way of knowing Mary and finding Jesus through her. In the forty nine 'Roses' or meditations he highlights the decades of the Rosary as the 'Gospel Prayer' in which Jesus is contemplated through the eyes of Mary. It is a prayer for all classes of souls, a prayer for saints and sinners, and a prayer for all seasons. Montfort set up Confraternities of the Rosary to promote its regular recitation among the faithful.

The **Little Crown of the Blessed Virgin** which he composed consists of three Our Fathers and twelve Hail Marys in honour of Mary's twelve stars or privileges.

The **Perfect Consecration to Jesus through Mary** marks the climax to the *True Devotion*. It is the defining prayer of Montfort's spirituality—a complete offering of oneself and a total dependence on Jesus. It involves a solemn promise of carrying our cross after Him and the living out of our Baptismal vocation. It is an act of Holy Slavery in the presence of Mary who is called upon as our Mother to unite us to her Son, Incarnate Wisdom.

Montfort composed around one hundred and sixty four **hymns** most of them meant to be sung in the context of parish missions. These hymns also celebrated and commemorated the different liturgical seasons, religious festivals and events. He produced his own Christmas carols and a musical drama of Christ's Passion. Such were his artistic and musical skills that he was able to create a choreography involving singers and scenery.

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The Montfortian Archives in Rome contain four manuscripts or ‘notebooks’ of his hymns. Montfort regarded his hymns as a tool for evangelisation. Although the poetry and lyrics are simple, Montfort was more interested in the gospel message that they contained. He was not averse to using popular secular melodies, even the tunes of drinking songs, in order to engage the minds and hearts of the people.

There are beautiful hymns dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Hymns 40-44), the Eucharist (Hymns 112, 128-134, 136, 158), Eternal Wisdom (Hymns 78, 103, 124, 126), the Holy Spirit (Hymn 141)—to name but a few. It is recorded that on his deathbed he sang a verse from ‘The road to Paradise’: *Let’s go my dear friends, let’s go to Paradise*’ (Hymn 152)

### THE ROLE OF MARY IN THIS EXPERIENCE

In Montfort’s experience of Jesus and Mary, there is a strong inter-relationship between the Mother and the Son. In particular his devotion to Mary was devotion to Jesus. *They are so intimately united that one is altogether in the other so that we can call Our Lord “Jesus of Mary” and our Blessed Lady, “Mary of Jesus”.*’ (TD 247)

Thanks to Mary’s intrinsic cooperation in the Incarnation, Montfort depicts Mary the Mother of Jesus as still ‘Mothering children for God’. In numbers 32-36 of the *True Devotion*, Montfort takes as his premise the doctrine of the Mystical Body and explains Mary’s maternal role of forming and nurturing souls into the image of Her Son Jesus, Incarnate Wisdom.

Montfort encourages souls to trust and depend on Mary, citing Christ’s dependence. *He glorified his independence and his majesty in depending on that sweet Virgin in his conception, in his birth, in his presentation in the temple, in his hidden life of thirty years and even in his death.*’ (TD 18).

Although Montfort does not refer explicitly here to Christ’s bequeathing of Mary on Calvary to the protection of St. John who represents the Church, commentators see this text which speaks of Mary’s presence at the death of her Son as implying the status of Mary as ‘Mother of the Church’. Like St. John (in Christ’s last words), we must make a place for Mary our Mother in our hearts.

For Montfort, Mary the woman of faith was Christ’s first and finest disciple, and one of the wonderful effects of personal consecration to Jesus through Mary is that Mary shares her faith with that person (cf. TD 214).

Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary selected no. 214 of the *True Devotion* as providing the inspiration he needed for his legionaries. A paraphrase of this number is to be found in the Legion pamphlet called the *Tessera*. The stirring qualities of Mary’s faith would be the Legion’s battle cry as they ventured out to spread the Reign of Jesus through Mary.

At the very beginning of the true Devotion, Montfort sets out the pivotal place of Mary in the establishing of God’s kingdom. *It was through the Blessed Virgin that Jesus Christ came into the world and it is also through her that he must reign in the world.*’ (TD 1).

The Act of Consecration (which the Legionaries renew every year) is the heart and soul of Montfort’s charism. It embraces the three Montfortian watchwords—Wisdom, the Cross and Mary. By consecrating ourselves to Jesus through the hands of Mary and renewing our Baptismal Vows, we are undertaking a way of life which calls for utter self-abandonment to God’s Providence, the hallmark not just of Montfort but of all the saints. The Act of Consecration to Jesus through Mary, the mark of genuine Marian devotion, is the fourth means of obtaining Montfort’s heart’s desire—the acquisition of Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom.

Montfort’s ‘*Secret of Mary*’ covers the same ground as the *True Devotion*. It is written in the form of a letter to a soul. The original manuscript has been lost; the present version is a copy. The ‘secret’ is of course the person of Mary. She is the hidden treasure of God’s grace. Only the

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Holy Spirit can open this treasure for us. She is the ‘wonderful means’ given to us by God by which we can arrive at holiness which is union with Jesus Christ. *If we wish to go to Divine Wisdom, seeking union with him, we must use the same means which he used in coming down from heaven to assume our human nature and to impart his graces to us. The means we are talking about is a complete dependence on Mary his Mother, which is true devotion to her.* (Secret of Mary 24).

Montfort then goes on to explain the essence of this devotion. *This devotion consists in surrendering oneself in the manner of a slave to Mary, and to Jesus through her and then performing all our actions with Mary, in Mary, through Mary, and for Mary* (SM 28).

At the end of the *Secret of Mary* in the ‘Prayer’ section, Montfort sums up the goal of his spirituality by invoking the Holy Spirit. *Grant me a great love and longing for Mary, your exalted spouse, give me a great trust in her maternal heart and a continuous access to her compassion, so that with her you may truly form Jesus, great and powerful, in me, until I attain the fullness of his perfect age*. (SM 67).

James Murray, *smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Montfort speaks of Jesus as ‘Incarnate Wisdom’. What influences led him to adopt this teaching?
2. ‘Wisdom is the Cross, and the Cross is Wisdom’. What experiences in Montfort’s life brought him to this conclusion?
3. Montfort presents Mary as the fourth means of acquiring divine Wisdom. What qualities in her life does Montfort describe to justify this assertion?

### FURTHER READING

The following articles in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* provide much information; they can all be found also online on the EWTN web site at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/HANDBOOK.HTM>.

- *Jesus Christ*
- *Cross*
- *Love of Eternal Wisdom*
- *Mary*
- *Prayer*
- *Hymns*
- *Rosary*
- *Secret of Mary*

## 8. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD THE FATHER

### THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF FATHER DE MONTFORT

It is normal for a person's understanding of God the Father to be mediated by that person's personal experience of his or her own human father. In the case of Montfort, most of his biographers lay some emphasis on the fact that Jean-Baptiste Grignon, Louis Marie's own father, was of a somewhat harsh temperament, given (according to some) to bouts of anger or irritation with his children, and rather hard even on his wife, Jeanne. One might expect, therefore, that Louis Marie's understanding of God the Father might be coloured by this experience. But in fact this seems to be far from the whole picture. It has been conjectured that Louis's deep and tender devotion to Mary was to some extent a reaction to a difficulty for him to picture God the Father as a God of love and gentleness, a difficulty that might have arisen from his experience of his own human father. But again, this is belied by the reality of his personal experience of God the Father, as expressed in his writings and in his own life. For, in fact, the experience of God the Father on the part of Louis Marie, seems to be overwhelmingly an experience of being loved, cared for and cherished by the Father.

Montfort was a man of his own time, and in his day much emphasis was laid by theologians on the majesty and grandeur of God, on his 'transcendence' as opposed to his 'immanence', which, in certain circumstances, led to a somewhat austere view of God's relationships with man. This was perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in the teachings of the Jansenists, particularly in their insistence on having the right dispositions before approaching Holy Communion. Montfort was certainly opposed to the teachings of the Jansenists, even if their malevolent influence on his life and the difficulties he encountered has been somewhat exaggerated by many of his biographers. Yet the source of their thinking, based as it was largely on the teachings of St Augustine, was also the background to much of the mainline theological thinking of the France of Montfort's day, and he was bound to adopt ways of speaking and thinking about God that were common in this theological milieu. So we do find in Louis Marie's writings many words and phrases that underline the greatness of God and the 'distance' that separates God from man. Father Louis Pérouas even says that the "most frequent image" of God to be found in Montfort's writings is "not that of a God near to man, as we like to see Him today, but of a God who is other, distant, almighty"<sup>13</sup>, and cites in support of this contention a number of passages from *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. For example, TD 83 says: "to approach his infinite holiness directly and without help from any one of them [the mediators with himself that God has provided for us], is to be lacking in humility and respect towards God who is so great and holy. It would mean that we have less esteem for the King of kings than for an earthly king or ruler, for we would not dare approach an earthly king without a friend to speak for us." And indeed this is one of the principles that Montfort sees as underlying his teaching on devotion to Mary. It might seem from much of what St. Louis Marie writes, that his vision of God is more that of an inaccessible king than of a loving Father.

On the other hand, this image of an inaccessible God is powerfully complemented, or even counter-balanced, by the love that Montfort sees in the decision made by this Almighty God to send his only Son to save fallen man, which is the constant theme of *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*. It is true that this love seems to be ascribed more to the Son than to the Father in LEW, and that Montfort imagines a kind of contest between the Son of God, Eternal Wisdom, and the Justice of God (which might be ascribed to the Father in particular within the Holy Trinity)—see LEW 42—but Montfort is fully aware that all action of the Trinity outside of itself is the action of all

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<sup>13</sup> Louis Pérouas, SMM, *A Way to Wisdom: Louis Marie Grignon and his Beliefs*, New York, 1982, Pg. 116 (This book is a translation of Louis Pérouas, *Ce que croyait Grignon de Montfort*, Mame, 1973).

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three Persons, so that the love and pity that he specifically ascribes to Eternal Wisdom must also be taken to be the sentiments of the Father. It is also true that, for Montfort, the warmth and tenderness of the Godhead towards mankind finds expression more in the figure of the Blessed Virgin than in God the Father. It is almost as though Mary is seen by him as a kind of embodiment of what we might call the “maternal tenderness” of God. Perhaps his awareness of Mary is in part a kind of substitute for an awareness of the love of the Father.

Yet in practice Louis Marie displays in his life an awareness of a relationship with God the Father that far transcends one of fear or abasement before the grandeur of God, an awareness that certainly developed much more towards the end of his life, as his spiritual life and attitudes matured. And this awareness is particularly expressed in his abandonment to the “Providence” of God. As he himself said, in a letter to his uncle Alain Robert (his mother’s brother, a priest of the parish of Saint-Sauveur in Rennes), “I have a Father in heaven who will never fail me” (Letters 2). This was written at a moment when his future was particularly uncertain, his patron Father de la Barmondière having just died and the house he had provided for poor students in Paris being about to be closed as a consequence. But the confidence that this sentence expresses was something constant in the life of St. Louis Marie: he never failed in his conviction that, come what may, he had nothing to fear, for his Father in heaven would always provide for him. This Providence of God was expressed in so many different ways: his refusal, often, to seek the means of sustenance or nourishment, preferring instead to await whatever God would provide; his tendency to give away to others (especially the poor and wretched) any money given to him, in the absolute confidence that he did not need, himself, to “provide for a rainy day”; his insistence, in the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, that the members of his missionary band must divest themselves of all benefices, temporal possessions or anything inherited from relatives, so as to “exchange their paternal inheritance for one which God himself gives them, namely, the inexhaustible inheritance of his divine Providence” (MR 5). It was an attitude that he had adopted for himself from a very early age, and was most clearly demonstrated in his prophetic gesture as he crossed the Bridge of Cesson on leaving Rennes to study for the priesthood in Paris, when he refused a horse, gave away the money that had been given him, and exchanged his own new clothes for those of a beggar, vowing from that moment on to rely entirely on the Providence of the Father for all his needs.

Another manifestation of the experience of God the Father in the life of Montfort himself can be found in the fact that is reported by a number of his biographers, including the very earliest (Grandet, Blain and Besnard<sup>14</sup>), that, despite his frequent thunderings against the evils of sin and worldliness in his mission preaching, his attitude towards penitents in the confessional was one of gentleness, kindness, understanding and mercy. Grandet reports, for example, quoting the words of one of Louis Marie’s missionary colleagues, M. des Bastières: “The gentleness of Monsieur de Montfort extended to the tribunal of penance. ... In the pulpit he thundered against all the vices, but ... he had such a horror of too severe a morality, that he believed that rigorous confessors did a hundred times more harm in the Church than those who were lax... ‘I would much rather,’ he used to say, ‘suffer in purgatory for having shown too much gentleness towards my penitents, than for having treated them with a severity to make them despair’” (Grandet, pg. 197). In this, surely, he was reflecting the mercy of the Father which he himself experienced.

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Grandet, *La Vie de Messire Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Nantes 1724; English translation: *The Life of Monsieur Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Rome, Centre International Montfortain, 2006.

Jean-Baptiste Blain, *Abrégé de la Vie de Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Rome, Centre International Montfortain, 1973; English translation: *Summary of the Life of Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Rome, Centre International Montfortain, 1977.

Charles Besnard, *Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Rome, Centre International Montfortain, 1981.

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One of the shortest of Montfort's hymns (H 53), "Evensong" or "Evening Prayer" summarises his belief concerning the Father, born out of his personal experience:

Let us forever bless  
The Lord for His goodness.  
Oh! what a good Father!  
What great care He takes of us!  
He guards us all,  
Sustains us all,  
Instructs us all,  
Forgives us all,  
Despite our wretchedness.

### THE EXPERIENCE THAT MONTFORT WANTS TO GUIDE US TO

St Louis Marie is always the missionary, wanting to guide his hearers to a deep experience of the salvation God is offering every human being. As a true Christian, he sees this salvation as residing in union with the Saviour, Jesus Christ—a union that conforms each one to Christ, making them like Christ in all things, and in particular making them sons and daughters of the Father of Jesus himself. So he wants to bring all to a deep experience of God as our Father. But what forms will that experience take? How would he want us to experience the Father in our own lives? To find out, it is important that we remember that we must not look only to his writings, but also to his own lived experience, as we have described it above, what Father Pérouas calls "his progressive discovery of God's paternal attention to our existence."<sup>15</sup>

#### *1. God Alone, and the Happiness of Human Beings*

The phrase "God alone" was one particularly dear to Montfort. It was not his own invention by any means. We find the same phrase already in St Francis de Sales (*Introduction to the Devout Life*), and especially in the writings of one of St Louis Marie's favourite authors, Henri Boudon, who not only uses the expression often in his letters, but also develops the meaning of the phrase in a plan for a ten-day retreat which he called *God and I*, and says in other works: "In saying 'God Alone' we intend one thing only: the search for pure love only for God alone." For Francis de Sales, the phrase "God alone" indicates the mentality of a true Christian in the world—to be living in the world, yet not to be *of* the world (cf. Jn 17:14-16); to be living in the world in such a way that all our human faculties are used in order to know God and his blessings, with a lively awareness of the constant presence of God to us, and an understanding that we come from him as a child is begotten by his or her father. We can surely believe that St. Louis Marie's use of the phrase "God alone" so often in his letters and in his Hymns (the phrase is placed at the end of at least 90 of his 164 Hymns) is an indication of the same awareness and understanding. And indeed, in Hymn 50 (On the Perfections of God), we read: "By his power he is / present everywhere / ... in himself He is / only goodness and love." And in Hymn 24 (Practice of the Presence of God) we read: "Do we want to be happy? By essence and power / God is present everywhere! / Let us then live in the presence of God." This last line is the refrain reiterated at the end of each verse of this hymn, which goes on to proclaim: "A loving child fulfilling his father's wishes / In all things and with joyful heart, / Can never displease him, / He has his eyes on his father. / ... / Think of God's presence, in Him you will find / Buttress and brace, / Joy, exhilaration. / ... / The presence of God is eternal life, / The glory and support of the angels; / They find in it everything / Needed for happiness." So this awareness of God's presence everywhere, as a loving and supportive father, is what leads to the happiness of the human

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<sup>15</sup> Louis Pérouas, *op. cit.*, pg. 116.

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person. We must remember that St Louis Marie's hymns were one of his chosen tools for teaching, but also for exhorting his hearers to live a full Christian life. So it is clear that he wants those who hear him or read his works to be aware of the paternal presence of God and so to attain eternal happiness.

However, in line with the general understanding of God in his own day and his own milieu, this Father is one who is authoritative and sometimes demanding, who, for the eventual good of his children, uses punishments to form the character of his children; one who is to be revered and respected, and even at times to be feared. See for example what he says in the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* 25: "You should glory, then, in the correction your heavenly Father has given you and will give you in the future, for he chastises all his children." All this, too, is contained in the 'God Alone' of Montfort, and it may seem at times that this image of the Father is the dominant one in his teaching. We should not be surprised at this, as this was the common stance of the Church of his day. But, as we shall see, this rather stern image of God the Father is counter-balanced in his writings with a depiction of God in the role of a benevolent Father, sometimes very expressively.

### 2. "God alone is my tenderness"

This phrase, "God alone is my tenderness", is taken from St Louis Marie's hymn no. 52, "Praises of God for his Blessings", stanza 11, which in full says: "God alone is my tenderness, / God alone my support, / God alone is all I have, / My life and my wealth. / Let us forever bless / The Lord for his great gifts." The word "tenderness", as used by St Louis Marie, is not limited to its most common meaning in contemporary English when applied to people, namely 'sensitivity to pain or sorrow' or fragility or vulnerability; but it implies much more a sense of compassion, of affection, of being easily moved to pity, sympathetic and considerate. It is a word which he most frequently applies to Mary, and would be easily seen as a constituent quality of her maternal love for her Son, Jesus, and for men and women. But, as we see here, Montfort also applies the concept to God himself, and it can easily be seen as a quality of a benevolent father. This, then, is a quality, a fatherly quality, that he wishes to impress on his hearers and readers. We find the word, applied to God and sometimes explicitly to the Father, in many places in the Hymns: H 28:24, for example: "Humble yourself constantly / Under the hand of the Almighty, / Be thankful for His *tenderness* / And His compassionate heart." Or H 109:26: "Forgive me, Supreme Goodness, / Forgive me for I have sinned. / For love of you, / Lord, I am distressed. / Forgive me; through your Son and by your *tenderness* / By your grace, henceforth / I shall never sin again." Or again, H 160:1: "Praise the Lord, give praise to Him. / Sing in many different tongues / Of His mercy upon us. / He assures us of his *tenderness* / By filling us with his blessings." It is true that St Louis Marie uses the word "tenderness" more often of Mary or of Jesus, but these examples show that he also saw it as a characteristic of God the Father.

Towards the end of his life, when he had considerably matured in his own spiritual life and was less psychologically tied to his personal experiences of his own human father and mother, he wrote the clearest presentation of the experience of God as a "tender" Father that he wanted to instil in his audience, in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, speaking of "the wonderful effects" that the devotion of Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary will bring to those who embrace it wholeheartedly: "The Mother of fair love will rid your heart of all scruples and inordinate servile fear. She will open and enlarge it to obey the commandments of her Son with alacrity and with the holy freedom of the children of God. She will fill your heart with pure love of which she is the treasury. You will then cease to act as you did before, out of fear of the God who is love, but rather out of pure love. You will look upon him as a loving Father and endeavour to please him at all times. You will speak trustfully to him as a child does to its father" (TD 215).

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### 3. Providence and confidence

We saw above that, in his own personal experience of God, trust in God's Providence played a major role in his life. Recall his letter to his uncle Alain Robert: "I have a Father in heaven who will never fail me... I never stop praying to him and rely completely on his providence" (Letter 2), and his gesture of abandonment to live in dependence on Providence alone as he crossed the Bridge of Cesson in 1692. And this dependence on, and trust in God's Providence was a constant theme of his teaching. We have already seen that, for his followers in the Company of Mary, he prescribes a giving up of all benefices, temporal possessions or anything inherited from relatives, so as to "exchange their paternal inheritance for one which God himself gives them, namely, the inexhaustible inheritance of his divine Providence" (MR 5). And in the *Letter to the Members of the Company of Mary*, he says: "provided you put all your trust in him ... Entirely dependent as you are on the Providence of God, it is for him to support you... It is for God to provide all that is necessary for your bodily needs. Do not, then, be afraid that you will go short of the necessities of life in these hard times which are hard only because people do not have enough trust in God... But it is not enough to be just unafraid. God wants you to hope for great things from him and to be filled with joy by reason of this hope. Our bountiful Father wants to give you the kingdom of his grace" (LCM 4, 5). So, for the members of his Company of Mary, it is clear that he wants them to have a complete trust and confidence in the Father who is the provider, in divine Providence. And it is in this light that he prescribes for them that 'poverty of spirit' which the Lord in the Gospel declares blessed (Matt 5:3), and on which he expands in this letter.

But it is not only for the members of his Company of Mary that St Louis Marie advocates this trust and confidence in God's fatherly Providence. In his letter written in 1716 to Mlle Dauvaise in Nantes, to whom he had entrusted the hospice for the incurably sick that he had founded there in 1710, he says of those who will be caring for the poor inmates there: "They must rely entirely on the unknown and invisible help of divine Providence" (Letter 33). In the same letter he says of himself: "I count on the inexhaustible wealth of the motherly divine Providence which has never failed us in all we have undertaken for the glory of God." It is interesting to note that here, Providence is seen as a quality of a good mother rather than of a benevolent father. But this mingling of masculine and feminine qualities should not surprise us in view of the way in which St Louis Marie, throughout his life and writings, takes Mary as a complementary vision of the goodness of God himself. As Father Pérouas rightly says: "during his whole life, his experience of God was always through the mediation of a feminine model."<sup>16</sup>

The same interchangeability, as it were, of the fatherly and motherly nature of divine Providence is found in his Hymns, in which he also exhorts the faithful to a confidence and trust in that Providence. For example, in Hymn 28 ("Abandonment to Providence", a hymn of 44 stanzas), he writes: "God knows our wretchedness / And all of our needs, / And since He is our Father, / He takes great care of us all... Put complete hope / In His paternal love" (H 28:6, 7). On the other hand in stanza 19, we find the feminine image: "They (the saints) nursed at the breast / Of this loving mother, / The milk for faithful souls, / And their daily bread." We may note also that, in French "la Providence" is feminine, and in this hymn St Louis Marie refers to Providence as "she", in a manner similar to that in which he refers to Wisdom as "she" in parts of *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, following the biblical Book of Wisdom. The interchangeability of the masculine and feminine images, the father and the mother, is therefore quite natural.

It should be noted that, in this same Hymn 28, St Louis Marie addresses himself to all categories of the faithful: "Pastors" (v. 31), "rich people" (v. 39), "clerics and lay people" (v. 40), "priests" (v. 42) — all are exhorted to trust in the Providence of God. This exhortation is heard also in

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<sup>16</sup> Pérouas, *op. cit.*, pg. 85.

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other Hymns: H 7:26: “Count on all things from his charity, / Both here on earth and in eternity, / Since with his Providence / He has for you a father’s care”; H 11:2, 29: “expect his Providence”; “His Providence watches over all”; H 21:23: “True zeal is full of trust / In divine Providence”; etc.

St Louis Marie, as a preacher to the simple, ordinary folk of the town and countryside, shared, to a large extent, their understanding of God as one who intervened directly and continually in the affairs of the world, particularly in those areas and events for which they had no rational explanation — hence their fascination with the spectacular and apparently miraculous (which is reflected in some of Montfort’s writings more than in others — for example in *The Admirable Secret of the Rosary*). This understanding was fairly widespread in the Church of his day, even among the better-informed clergy, and it must be admitted that Montfort’s insistence on the benevolent Providence of God was, at least in his earlier years, somewhat tributary of this understanding. However, as Father Pérouas remarks, “we find in his vision of Providence a powerful feeling of the benevolence of God towards whom Montfort manifests a truly extraordinary trust. Gradually his confidence was purified until it became the recognition of God in very ordinary events.” He adds: “But, from his earliest youth, it was in Providence that Louis Marie discovered the Almighty, sovereign monarch and irascible father, as a God who was near to him”<sup>17</sup>. It was this God, Father and provider, that he sought to make known to his hearers and readers.

### 4. *The Prayers of St Louis Marie*

In the prayers which he himself composed, that have been preserved for us, we find a number of references to St Louis Marie’s own experience of God the Father, an experience which he wishes to share with us. We have already mentioned Hymn n. 53, in which he exclaims: “Oh! what a good Father! / What great care He takes of us!” And, in many others of his hymns, verses of which are often in the form of a prayer, we find the phrase, “our good Father” occurring very frequently. It has been noted that the fact that Montfort himself was popularly known as “the good Father from Montfort”, is a very good indication of the convergence of the understanding of God and man as they came together in his own experience<sup>18</sup>. In *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, St Louis Marie makes his own a prayer attributed to Saint Augustine, in which he addresses Christ himself as “my Father, my merciful God, my great King, my good Shepherd, my only Master, my best helper, my beloved friend of overwhelming beauty, my living Bread, my eternal priest... my guide to my heavenly home, my one true light, my holy joy, my true way, my shining wisdom, my unfeigned simplicity, the peace and harmony of my soul, my perfect safeguard, my bounteous inheritance, my everlasting salvation” (TD 67). In these words we find much of what we have said above of the sense of “God alone” who is the happiness of mankind, the “tenderness” of God for us, and confidence in divine Providence.

In *The Admirable Secret of the Rosary*, St Louis Marie gives us a meditation, as it were, in the form of a prayer addressed to the Father, on the *Our Father*, which can also be seen as a kind of summary of his own experience of God the Father:

Our Father who art in heaven -  
Thou who dost fill heaven and earth  
with the immensity of thy being,  
Thou who art present everywhere:  
Thou who art in the saints by thy glory,

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 128-129.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the article on “God” in *Jesus Living in Mary: The Handbook of the Spirituality of St Louis Marie de Montfort*, pg. 483.

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in the damned by thy justice,  
in the good by thy grace,  
in sinners by the patience  
with which thou dost tolerate them,  
grant that we may always remember  
that we come from thee;  
grant that we may live as thy true children;  
that we may direct our course towards thee alone  
with all the ardour of our soul. (ASR 39)

And he continues this paraphrase of the *Our Father*: “Our Father who art in heaven, forgive us our sins... We dare to ask this because thou art our loving and merciful Father” (ASR 40).

But it is perhaps in the invocation of God in what might be termed his ‘spiritual testament’ at the end of his Notebook of Sermons that St Louis Marie most forcefully expresses his experience of God the Father: “O my amiable Saviour - to your divine Majesty - my God - my so gentle and so merciful Saviour - O! my God, my sovereign, my final end - O! my God and my all, in time and in eternity, may I be all yours and all for you, as you are all for me - O! my beatitude, my light, my life - O! the God of my heart - O! Father Eternal, Father of mercies, Father of Lights from whom descends every perfect gift” (S 41-49). And he ends this with the hope of dying “in the love and by the love of my God and my most gentle Saviour” (S 50).

### THE ROLE OF MARY IN THIS EXPERIENCE

At the beginning of this article it was noted that it has been conjectured that Louis Marie’s deep and tender devotion to Mary was to some extent a reaction to a difficulty for him to picture God the Father as a God of love and gentleness. While there may be some truth in this, particularly as applied to his immature years (as a boy and a teenager in Iffendic and Rennes, and even during his seminary years in Paris), it is probably more true to say that his personal experience of, and relationship with Mary helped him to come to an awareness of the Father which is more balanced. We can be sure that the ‘wonderful effect’ of the devotion to Mary that he constantly preached—Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary—worked for him just as he said it would for others: “You will then cease to act as you did before, out of fear of the God who is love, but rather out of pure love. You will look upon him as a loving Father and endeavour to please him at all times” (TD 215). And there is little doubt that the qualities he found in Mary, seen as his loving Mother, opened him to experience the same tenderness of fatherly love in God the Father. For him, as for all Christians, Jesus, the Son of God, is the image of the Father, and he proclaims in TD and the *Secret of Mary* that Mary is the living “mould of God” (TD 219, SM 16), in which she is able to form a perfect image of Jesus Christ, and therefore a perfect image also of the Father; and through that bring any Christian who has recourse to her (including himself) to a deep awareness of the love that is God (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), a love that exceeds all human love, of a father or a mother, and on which, as St Paul tells us, all human fatherhood is based: “I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15). We can be sure then that Mary played a truly formative role in Montfort’s own experience of God the Father, just as he says it will do for us.

*Paul R. Allerton, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. How did St Louis Marie de Montfort’s understanding of God the Father evolve during his life?
2. From your own reading of his works, what most shows you an image of God as your Father?

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3. What is your own experience of God the Father thus far in your personal life?

### FURTHER READING

The following articles in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* provide much information; they can all be found also online on the EWTN web site at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/HANDBOOK.HTM>.

- *God*
- *Trinity*

Louis Pérouas, SMM, *A Way to Wisdom: Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort and his Beliefs*, New York, 1982 (A translation of Louis Pérouas, *Ce que croyait Grignon de Montfort*, Paris, Maison Mame, 1973), especially Part Two, Chapter 2, “*The inaccessible God who gradually reveals himself*”, pgs. 115-135.

## 9. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

### THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF FATHER DE MONTFORT

There are numerous references to the Holy Spirit in the writings of St Louis Marie de Montfort, beginning with his personal letters (e.g. Letter 14, Letter 30) and his earliest known work, *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, written probably around 1703-1704. Many of these references, especially in his early writings, show his conviction (along with the rest of the Catholic Church of his day) that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the sacred Scriptures. So, for example, we have many examples in LEW of such phrases as “the inspired words of the Holy Spirit” (LEW 5), “the Holy Spirit offers this description of eternal Wisdom in the Book of Wisdom which he composed just for us” (LEW 16), “This is how the Holy Spirit tells it in the tenth chapter of the Book of Wisdom” (LEW 48), “In the next chapter of the Book of Wisdom the Holy Spirit describes...” (LEW 50), “Those whom God has chosen to write his sacred words are filled with the Holy Spirit” (LEW 60), “The Holy Spirit tells us” (LEW 72, 90), “Here is a prayer composed by the Holy Spirit...” (LEW 190), and so on. Similar phrases, indicating his conviction of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, are to be found throughout his works.

These references, however, do not tell us of the *personal* experience of Montfort regarding the Holy Spirit. For that, we have to look at those places where he describes the work of the Holy Spirit in souls: for example, in the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, where he says: “a sensible joy in our sufferings... comes from the soul, which is so overwhelmed with the divine joy of the Holy Spirit” (LFC 51). Or, in *The Admirable Secret of the Rosary*, where he exclaims: “When the Holy Spirit has revealed this secret (of the Rosary) to a priest and director of souls, how blessed is that priest!” (ASR 1). Or again, in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, he writes: “When the Holy Spirit, her spouse, finds Mary in a soul, he hastens there and enters fully into it” (TD 36); or “To rid ourselves of selfishness, we must first become thoroughly aware, by the light of the Holy Spirit, of our tainted nature” (TD 79); or “The Holy Spirit himself will lead this faithful soul from strength to strength, from grace to grace, from light to light” (TD 119); and, in speaking of the effects of the faithful practice of the “perfect devotion” to Our Lady, he says: “By the light which the Holy Spirit will give you through Mary, his faithful spouse, you will perceive the evil inclinations of your fallen nature” (TD 213); and again: “The Holy Spirit, finding his dear Spouse present again in souls, will come down into them with great power. He will fill them with his gifts” (TD 217).

Similar descriptions of the action of the Holy Spirit in souls can be found in most of his works, especially those that he composed later in his life, when (according to Father Louis Pérouas) “Montfort accorded an important place to the Holy Spirit, even larger than to God the Father”<sup>19</sup>. And, when he speaks thus of the Holy Spirit, Pérouas notes that his tone becomes warm and passionate. This would be a good indication that St Louis Marie is describing, in these texts, his own personal experience of the action of the Holy Spirit in him. That he *is* aware of the Holy Spirit working in him is evident from *True Devotion*, no. 114, that famous passage where he foretells the fate of his book: “I clearly foresee that raging beasts will come in fury to tear to pieces with their diabolical teeth this little book and *the one the Holy Spirit made use of to write it.*” Unfortunately, perhaps, such glimpses of his personal experience are rare. However, behind his descriptions of the activity of the Holy Spirit in souls, we can sense something of that personal experience.

A further indication of the prominent place that the Holy Spirit enjoyed in the experience of St Louis Marie might be gleaned from the fact, noted by René Laurentin, that, in 1707-1708, when he restored the chapel of the hermitage of Saint-Lazare just outside Montfort-sur-Meu, he

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<sup>19</sup> Louis Pérouas, *A Way to Wisdom: Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort and his Beliefs*, 1982, pg. 132.

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placed there physical symbols of the devotions that were dear to him (the name of Jesus, a statue of Our Lady of Wisdom, a large Rosary), and among these was the image of the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, placed above the altar.<sup>20</sup>

But it is perhaps from the experience that Montfort clearly wants to lead people to, that we can sense his own personal experience of the Holy Spirit.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT MONTFORT WANTS TO LEAD US TO

We might distinguish here between the content, so to speak, of this experience of the Holy Spirit, and the path that, in his view, will most easily lead us there. These two topics could be summarised as: “The Fruits of the Holy Spirit and happiness”, and “Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit”.

#### *The Fruits of the Holy Spirit and happiness*

The teaching of the Church on the fruits of the Holy Spirit was well-established at the time of St Louis Marie de Montfort, and, while this concept is linked to that of the “gifts of the Spirit”, the two are not exactly the same. The “fruits” (or more accurately “fruit” - with nine attributes) are enumerated by St Paul in Gal 5:22-23: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control”; while the “gifts” of the Spirit (usually given as seven in number<sup>21</sup>) are derived from Is 11:2: “the spirit of wisdom and insight, the spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and fear of Yahweh”, characteristics of the awaited Messiah. Later Catholic theology (notably Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*) saw the gifts of the Spirit as more or less similar to, or equivalent to, the principal virtues: understanding (or ‘insight’) and knowledge, fear of the Lord and wisdom being linked with the ‘Theological’ virtues of faith, hope and charity respectively, with counsel, power (or ‘fortitude’), and piety being linked with the so-called ‘Cardinal’ virtues of prudence, temperance, courage and justice. However the correspondences are not clear, and their attributions are variously described. What is of importance to note is that all the virtues are governed by human reason (though under the influence of grace, no doubt), while the gifts of the Spirit are directly under the influence of the Spirit and can only come into operation by his working. In any case, St Louis Marie would seem to speak more of the “fruits” of the Spirit rather than of the “gifts”, and he is well aware of the necessity of the Holy Spirit’s action in producing these fruits. He says clearly, for example, in his Hymn no. 141 (which can be seen as a kind of summary of his beliefs regarding the Holy Spirit): “Without you my soul is barren, / Empty of any good, / ... / I can neither think nor speak, / Nor do any good deed for God, / Unless to accomplish it, / You sustain me at all times” (H 141:10). Similarly he declares in H 29:29-30 that the world is incapable of receiving the Holy Spirit: “It is, as is written, / Incapable of the Holy Spirit. / Surprisingly, the world cannot / Receive any light.”

Yet clearly St. Louis Marie wants to bring his readers and hearers to experience this action of the Holy Spirit in their lives, becoming, by his power, members of Christ’s body and children of the Father. This is the fruit that he sees, above all, being produced by the Holy Spirit. So, for example, he stresses in TD 20, that it is the Holy Spirit who, with Mary’s cooperation, brings into being this mystical Body of Christ: “God the Holy Spirit ... became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. It was with her, in her and of her that he produced his masterpiece, God-

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<sup>20</sup> See René Laurentin, the article on “The Holy Spirit” in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore, NY, 1994, pgs. 495-6.

<sup>21</sup> The usual list is often given as: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude (or might), piety and fear of the Lord; and this is the listing to be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The extra one (piety) comes from the repetition in the Septuagint (Greek) version of the OT of the ‘fear of the Lord’.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

made-man, and that he produces every day until the end of the world the members of the body of this adorable Head.” Or, as he says in LEW 176, it is the Holy Spirit who “cuts and polishes all the living stones of the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the elect.” And, in order to fashion in the most perfect way these members of the Body, the Holy Spirit pours forth his fruits and his gifts, as Montfort states clearly in LEW 99: “When eternal Wisdom communicates himself to a soul, he gives that soul all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and all the great virtues to an eminent degree. They are: the theological virtues - lively faith, firm hope, ardent charity; the cardinal virtues - well-ordered temperance, complete prudence, perfect justice, invincible fortitude; the moral virtues - perfect religion, profound humility, pleasing gentleness, blind obedience, complete detachment, continuous mortification, sublime prayer, etc.” Through these gifts and virtues, the faithful are able to “grow from strength to strength and from grace to grace” (TD 34), enabling them to “attain the fullness of his (Christ’s) perfect age” (*Secret of Mary* 67). In other words, it is the Holy Spirit that will bring faithful souls to their ultimate happiness as children of God.

### *Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit*

In Montfort’s view, this experience of the Holy Spirit, with his gifts and fruits, is not possible without the cooperation of Mary. He reiterates over and over again in his writings that it is “only through Mary” that the Holy Spirit acts: “The Holy Spirit formed Jesus only through her, and he forms the members of the Mystical Body and dispenses his gifts and his favours through her” (TD 140); “If we desire to have the Holy Spirit working within us, we must possess his faithful and inseparable spouse, Mary the divinely-favoured one whom, as I have said elsewhere, he can make fruitful” (TD 164). For Mary is “the inseparable spouse of the Holy Spirit.”

This phrase, “spouse of the Holy Spirit”, is one that Montfort employs frequently in his writings to designate Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We must be careful to understand what he means by the phrase. Certainly he is not saying that it was the Holy Spirit who, as the consort of Mary, begot Jesus, the Son of the Father. That would certainly be seen as heretical, in his own day as in ours. Rather, what he wishes to emphasise by the use of this term is that Mary is “the inseparable associate of the Holy Spirit in all the works of grace” (TD 37), since she is used by the Holy Spirit to bring forth the members of the mystical Body of Christ, just as she was used by the Holy Trinity to bring forth the Head of that Body. This is most clearly enunciated in TD 20-21:

“God the Holy Spirit, who does not produce any divine person, became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. It was with her, in her and of her that he produced his masterpiece, God-made-man, and that he produces every day until the end of the world the members of the body of this adorable Head. For this reason the more he finds Mary his dear and inseparable spouse in a soul the more powerful and effective he becomes in producing Jesus Christ in that soul and that soul in Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the Blessed Virgin confers on the Holy Spirit a fruitfulness which he does not already possess. Being God, he has the ability to produce just like the Father and the Son, although he does not use this power and so does not produce another divine person. But it does mean that the Holy Spirit chose to make use of our Blessed Lady, although he had no absolute need of her, in order to become actively fruitful in producing Jesus Christ and his members in her and by her.”

Hence he can say (as we have already noted): “The Holy Spirit formed Jesus *only through her*, and he forms the members of the Mystical Body and dispenses his gifts and his favours through her” (TD 140). In this sense, Mary is the *inseparable* spouse of the Holy Spirit. Without her, according to Montfort, the Holy Spirit cannot act in the lives of Christians; or, rather, *chooses not* to act, since, as Louis Marie freely admits, he has “no absolute need of her” (TD 21). Just as, in a wholly unique way, Mary was told by the Angel at the Annunciation, “The Holy Spirit will come upon

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow”, so too the members of Christ’s Mystical Body must receive the Holy Spirit’s over-shadowing, and, according to Montfort, this happens only with the cooperation of Mary with her “faithful spouse”. And it is because of the deep and intimate relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit, expressed in this image of “spousal” love, that the Spirit produces wonders in the souls of those who are devoted to Mary herself. This is most clearly expressed in TD 36, where Montfort says:

“When the Holy Spirit, her spouse, finds Mary in a soul, he hastens there and enters fully into it. He gives himself generously to that soul according to the place it has given to his spouse. One of the main reasons why the Holy Spirit does not work striking wonders in souls is that he fails to find in them a sufficiently close union with his faithful and inseparable spouse. I say ‘inseparable spouse’, for from the moment the substantial love of the Father and the Son espoused Mary to form Jesus, the head of the elect, and Jesus in the elect, he has never disowned her, for she has always been faithful and fruitful.”

The form that these “wonders” produced by the Holy Spirit in souls devoted to Mary will take is described in a number of places in Montfort’s writings; for example, in TD 34, Montfort envisions the Spirit saying to Mary: “Let all your virtues take root in my chosen ones that they may grow from strength to strength and from grace to grace... your invincible faith, profound humility, total mortification, sublime prayer, ardent charity, your firm hope and all your virtues.” These are the virtues and gifts that the Holy Spirit finds in Mary, and he wishes to reproduce them, through her, in the souls of the faithful, so that they may come to the perfect image of Jesus Christ. The person who takes up the “perfect practice” of devotion to Mary (total consecration of oneself to Jesus through the hands of Mary) will experience that “The Holy Spirit himself will lead this faithful soul from strength to strength, from grace to grace, from light to light, until at length he attains transformation into Jesus in the fullness of his age on earth and of his glory in heaven” (TD 119). And, in describing what he calls “the wonderful effects of this devotion”, Montfort tells us that one of these effects is “the communication of the Spirit of Mary” (“which is the Holy Spirit of God,” TD 258): “The Holy Spirit, finding his dear Spouse present again in souls, will come down into them with great power. He will fill them with his gifts, especially wisdom, by which they will produce wonders of grace” (TD 217). It is clear, then, that, in the thinking of St Louis Marie, it is through the intimate relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit (encapsulated in his use of the phrase “spouse of the Holy Spirit”) that this Spirit of God implants in the faithful soul all his gifts and virtues, produces his sevenfold “fruit”, and ultimately brings about the conformity of that soul with Jesus Christ, Son of God.

This, then, is the experience of the Holy Spirit that Montfort would lead us to—an experience which, at its deepest level, he would say is only possible when we are united with Mary, his “inseparable spouse”. And it is an experience that, by its very nature—based in love and expressed in a *spousal* way—will enable us to come to a more personal and intimate union with both the Father and the Son. It will produce in us, when it finds its expression in perfect devotion to our Blessed Lady, another of the more striking effects of this devotion, *the gift of pure love*:

“The Mother of fair love will rid your heart of all scruples and inordinate servile fear. She will open and enlarge it to obey the commandments of her Son with alacrity and with the holy freedom of the children of God. She will fill your heart with pure love of which she is the treasury. You will then cease to act as you did before, out of fear of the God who is love, but rather out of pure love. You will look upon him as a loving Father and endeavour to please him at all times. You will speak trustfully to him as a child does to its father. If you should have the misfortune to offend him you will abase yourself before him and humbly beg his pardon. You will offer your hand to him with simplicity

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and lovingly rise from your sin. Then, peaceful and relaxed and buoyed up with hope you will continue on your way to him” (TD 215).

### *The Place of the Holy Spirit in “the Latter Times”*

St Louis Marie, along with most of the theologians and spiritual writers of his day, does not speak at any depth of the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the Church. Although, for him, the Holy Spirit is the architect of the Church (“You know that you are living temples of the Holy Spirit and that, like living stones, you are to be set by the God of love into the building of the heavenly Jerusalem. And so you must expect to be shaped, cut and chiselled under the hammer of the cross” - *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, 28), yet he does not have much to say about the functions of the Spirit at the ecclesial level, for example, in the resurrection of the dead or in the bestowal of charisms for the building up of the Church. He does, however, speak powerfully, especially in his *Prayer for Missionaries* (PM) and in TD 55-59, of the role of the Spirit in what he calls “the latter times”. In PM, he repeats what he has said in TD and other works, that it is the Holy Spirit who, in union with Mary, his faithful spouse, produces all the true children of God:

“Holy Spirit, be ever mindful that it is you who, with Mary as your faithful spouse, are to bring forth and fashion the children of God. In her and with her, you brought forth the Head of the Church and, in the same way, you will bring all his members into being. Within the Trinity, none of the divine persons is begotten by you. Outside the Trinity, you are the begetter of all the children of God. All the saints who have ever existed, or will exist until the end of time, will be the outcome of your love working through Mary” (PM 15).

But he goes further when he speaks of the “latter times”, when he says:

“The reign especially attributed to God the Father lasted until the Flood and ended in a deluge of water. The reign of Jesus Christ ended in a deluge of blood, but your reign, Spirit of the Father and the Son, is still unended and will come to a close with a deluge of fire, love and justice” (PM 16).

This reign of the Holy Spirit, which is present now in the Church, will finally be brought to its triumphant apex by the missionaries that St Louis Marie prays for with such fire, and that he sees will be especially under the banner of the Blessed Virgin: “It is among these men so dear to you, that you, Holy Spirit, as the greatest gift that Jesus Christ, the beloved Son, has made to men, will be pleased to dwell since, in all the missions they undertake, their sole aim will be to give glory to you for the spoils they have won from your enemies” (PM 23). These missionaries “will be like thunder-clouds flying through the air at the slightest breath of the Holy Spirit... they will have the silver wings of the dove enabling them to go wherever the Holy Spirit calls them” (TD 57-58).

It is especially through the Blessed Virgin, and by virtue of her intimate union with the Spirit, that the Holy Spirit will raise up these ardent missionaries and enable them to play a decisive role in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God:

“In the second coming of Jesus Christ, Mary must be known and openly revealed by the Holy Spirit so that Jesus may be known, loved and served through her... As she was the way by which Jesus first came to us, she will again be the way by which he will come to us the second time though not in the same manner... In these latter times Mary must shine forth more than ever in mercy, power and grace; in mercy, to bring back and welcome lovingly the poor sinners and wanderers who are to be converted and return to the Catholic Church; in power, to combat the enemies of God who will rise up menacingly to seduce and crush by promises and threats all those who oppose them; finally, she must

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shine forth in grace to inspire and support the valiant soldiers and loyal servants of Jesus Christ who are fighting for his cause... Mary's power over the evil spirits will especially shine forth in the latter times, when Satan will lie in wait for her heel, that is, for her humble servants and her poor children whom she will rouse to fight against him” (TD 49, 50, 54).

To sum up, we may read *The Secret of Mary*, no. 59:

“We are given reason to believe that, towards the end of time and perhaps sooner than we expect, God will raise up great men filled with the Holy Spirit and imbued with the spirit of Mary. Through them Mary, Queen most powerful, will work great wonders in the world, destroying sin and setting up the kingdom of Jesus her Son upon the ruins of the corrupt kingdom of the world. These holy men will accomplish this by means of the devotion of which I only trace the main outlines and which suffers from my incompetence.”

*Paul Allerton, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. How did St Louis Marie de Montfort experience the Holy Spirit in his own life?
2. Reading his writings, what most strikes you about his understanding of the Spirit?
3. What is your own experience of the Spirit in your own life so far?

### FURTHER READING

The following articles in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* provide much information; they can all be found also online on the EWTN web site at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/HANDBOOK.HTM>.

- *God*
- *Trinity*
- *Holy Spirit*
- *Mary*
- *End Times*

It would also be good to read again in its entirety St Louis Marie's *Prayer for Missionaries*, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, *The Secret of Mary*, and Hymn no. 141 in *God Alone II: The Hymns of St Louis Marie de Montfort*, Montfort Publications, Bay Shore NY (obtainable also from Montfort Press, 28 Burbo Bank Road, Liverpool L23 6TH, United Kingdom).

## 10. MONTFORTIAN PRAYER

### A great 'pray-er'

#### 1. THE CROSS AND THE ROSARY

On holy pictures we often see typical symbols that make the saint depicted unique. St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort is usually depicted with the Cross and the Rosary. The Cross reminds us of his great love for the crucified Saviour, while the Rosary signifies his deep love of prayer.

Louis Marie was a great 'pray-er'. The inmates of the poorhouse in Poitiers testify to this in their own way. When Louis Marie first came to Poitiers and had to wait for the bishop, he went to the chapel of the poorhouse to spend the period of waiting in prayer. The poor people in the house were astonished at the sight of this strange priest who knelt for hours in the church in deep prayer. How could anyone pray for so long?

Those also who knew him better, testify to his great love of prayer. "He knew no greater joy than prayer. For him, the time he spent in church was never too long, and he could be seen kneeling there for hours." When he was a boy, playing with other children, he would sometimes disappear, as he went off to pray in some hidden corner. He taught his little sister Guyonne-Jeanne to pray, and as a college student he established, with a friend, a small prayer-group. "On certain days they would meet in a room provided by a devout person for their use, and there they would carry out their exercises of prayer." Again, when he was in the seminary in Paris, he made an impression by his intense prayer-life. "He seemed so absorbed and recollected in everything that he did, that God was never out of his sight."

One of those who worked with him in his missions tells us: "I cannot say how many rosaries he recited every day. In addition to our prayer in common, he would say a Rosary before Mass, and again afterwards, in thanksgiving. Then there would be one before the sermon... It may have been five a day." The Rosary was like a bond, tying together Jesus and Mary.

Louis Marie is very much a praying person; prayer became for him a way of life, probably giving us an example of what it means to "pray without ceasing." We should do everything we do prayerfully. Prayer is – or becomes – life's journey. When this is attained, then nothing more happens without God. Forgetting God is the big danger, even for the believing person.

Saint Louis Marie has described his own prayer experience: he said that he experienced himself in the constant presence of Jesus and Mary. His prayer was a constant conversation with both of them, so that nothing happened without them. He confessed to his friend Blain that God had gifted him with a special favour which he called "the abiding presence of Jesus and Mary in his soul."

This is, admittedly, the climax of his prayer experience. It is, as he himself says, a favour. God was able to bestow on him because he had prepared with all his strength for it: by his loyalty to prayer and by his efforts to free himself from all that might get in the way of the presence of God in the human heart.

"He was so aware of the presence of God that, out of respect, he went almost always bareheaded, his eyes fixed firmly on the cross on his travelling staff," it has been said. The awareness of the presence of God is the foundation of the Christian life for him. In one of many hymns which he composed he tells us why it is so important to be aware of the presence of God: it helps us to avoid sin and to overcome it; it gives strength in times of weakness and grief; it creates light in darkness for the soul; it leads to holiness and to perfection. He who forgets the omnipresence of God, is like a fish out of water. God's presence can be found

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everywhere and in all things. Above all, however, one finds the presence of God in oneself, in one's own heart where He dwells. God has chosen the human heart for himself as his throne. Here he draws us to himself to give us his beauty and his love.

### 2. THE SOURCE OF PRAYER: AN ARDENT LONGING FOR JESUS

Jesus Christ has encouraged us not to give up in prayer. Maybe it is one of our biggest mistakes that we do not have enough perseverance and can be discouraged in prayer. So the apostle Paul reminds us: Pray without ceasing! Thus prayer for us should become a real life-style; it should flow through our blood into our very flesh, as it were. In Saint Louis Marie de Montfort we find one in whom prayer has indeed entered his flesh and blood. And thus constant prayer has led him to a deep and unique experience of God: the abiding presence of Jesus and Mary in his soul.

Louis Marie has the experience of the existence of God in prayer, yet prayer is by no means an exclusive experience just for the chosen few. It is open to all. Hence, the great concern of the saint is to demonstrate to as many as possible the way to this experience. His spirituality of perfect devotion to Jesus Christ and Mary is just such a way. From this we can draw out some typical characteristics which mark the prayer of Louis Marie. The first is clear: the prayer of Saint Louis Marie is **a prayer of yearning**.

All forms of Christian devotion have the same purpose. They should lead to a personal experience of God. The ways to this can be completely different, but they should always lead to a real meeting with Jesus Christ who then takes us with him to the Father.

In his book "The Love of Eternal Wisdom" the saint indicates four means which lead to this meeting with Jesus Christ: an ardent desire, persevering prayer, a real asceticism and true devotion to Mary

However, everything begins with the hunger of the heart, with the longing for communion with God, even for God Himself. If this longing may often be buried, it may also often be directed to wrong ends. It is written in the fibre of every human heart and does not rest until it has reached its real purpose. Something that worries a person and may produce strange blooms, has its real source in the longing for God. It finds its fulfilment, the saint knows, only in the encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter is a gift, a present, and we cannot achieve it by ourselves. And also this longing does not come from ourselves. It is the quiet work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Therefore, the longing for God and for communion with Him flows into the prayer with which we ask for God's greatest gift: his son Jesus Christ. The longing is the real "engine" of prayer. We pray not because we must pray, but because we count on the promise which Jesus has made us: "Ask and you will receive."

This simple, deep, insatiable longing for God is the real centre of Christian prayer. The prayer is the more real, the more it is an expression of our longing for God. The person who expresses his deepest longing in prayer, no longer speaks of "something", he expresses "himself".

The path to encounter and to union with the eternal wisdom of Jesus Christ begins with the fact that we recognize our deepest longing and express it in prayer. The longing for God is the living spring from which we are renewed over and over again.

### 3. BASIC CONDITION OF PRAYER: STEADY FAITH AND UNSHAKEABLE TRUST

Prayer does not depend first of all on human endeavour. Nobody would set out to pray at all if the Holy Spirit had not first awoken this longing for God in his heart.

Of course one could say that Saint Louis Marie had already experienced this longing for God and had the good fortune to grow up in a family in which prayer was natural. And yet, he also

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had experienced the fact that the fulfilment of this deepest longing of the person is something to be waited for. The letters which Saint Louis Marie wrote between 1700 and 1703, in the first years of his priesthood, testify not only to his longing for eternal wisdom, as manifested in Jesus Christ, but also to this painful waiting. In this waiting period it is a matter of persevering ceaselessly in prayer and asking. In the meantime he discovers that much prayer is necessary if we want to receive wisdom, God's greatest gift.

The Christian should pray with unshakeable perseverance and with “holy obtrusiveness”, the saint teaches, and reminds us of what Jesus said about prayer: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened” (Luke 11:9-10). Christian prayer rests on this promise. The Christian prays for no other reason than that he has this promise from Jesus, believes in it and trusts him. Louis Marie writes that one must ask with a “steady and living faith”, without the slightest doubt about the word of Jesus. “God has said it or promised it” (The Love of Eternal Wisdom 187); on this foundation Christian prayer is built.

That does not mean that God will grant all our desires, wishes and needs. Always, however, this stems from belief and from trust in persevering prayer: “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk 11.13). This is the experience of Mary, mother of Jesus, who receives no other answer than this: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Lk 1.35). In his hymns Saint Louis Marie speaks of the strength of such faith and trust:

“I believe, without hesitating: nothing is impossible for me. / Wisdom will come to me. / God has said it, He is infallible! / Who prays with faith will receive, / Who knocks with faith will enter, / Who seeks with faith will find” (Hymn 124:9).

In his so-called letter to the “members of the Company of Mary” he reflects on the word of Jesus, “Fear not “ (Lk 12.32), and writes of the times “which are hard only because people do not have enough trust in God” (No. 4).

Faith and trust are the basic conditions of Christian life and prayer; the saint also testifies this with his whole life. In 1703, at one of the most difficult moments of his life, he writes to Marie-Louise Trichet, the first of his Daughters of Wisdom: “you must put your trust in God. Be sure of this, that you will obtain from him even more than you think. Heaven and earth would pass away before God would break his promises and allow anyone who hoped in him to be frustrated in their hopes.” He expresses the same strong trust also in Mary. Thus he writes at the end of his letter to the inhabitants of Montbernage: “I place all confidence in her, despite the snarls of the devil and the world, and I say with St. Bernard, ‘In her I have placed unbounded confidence; she is the whole reason for my hope.’” This his friend Blain also confirms: “As far as he was concerned, when he had prayed to her there was nothing more for him to do and all hesitation vanished.”

His trust in God was so great that he had no further doubts and no concern, and saw no more invincible obstacles, once he had prayed. Faith and trust are the keys for prayer.

#### 4. MARKED BY THE WORD OF GOD

If one wants to understand what generates Christian prayer, actually, then one must take notice of the Holy Scriptures and look at the main figures of biblical belief. How they prayed, remains for all time a model for every praying Christian. From them we can learn the right attitude to prayer, particularly the humility without which prayer becomes impossible. This characterises Abraham and Moses and Mary, Mother of God, who were always aware of the fact that it is an undeserved obligation assumed by God to get involved with us and in our lives. In this basic

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attitude a loving contact with God becomes possible for them, and their prayer takes on a boldness and a freedom which can astonish us.

Thus all the prayers which are presented to us in Holy Scripture have for us a special meaning, since they are – like the whole of the Scriptures – the inspired word of God, so much more than mere human chat. They are given by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, are irreplaceable for us.

The prayer of the church has always derived from the Holy Scriptures. In fact, it is surely true that the Christian cannot pray at all without the Bible, nor without the Lord's Prayer. The most basic prayers of the Christian are biblical: the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Magnificat and the psalms which are the real prayer of the church. Christian prayer is not conceivable without the Word of God; it takes seriously this Word of God and lives with it. The one who believes in God, also believes that his Word tells us everything and is our starting point. Prayer – speaking with God – means letting his word penetrate our being. The writings and the prayers of St. Louis Marie are filled with the word of God also. The thinking, writing and prayers of the saint are impregnated by this word of God. This can only be so because he himself knew extensive passages of the Bible by heart. The word of God in the Holy Scriptures is the starting point and the foundation of all his thought, including his thoughts about Mary. In this lies his strength.

Also his prayers are thoroughly biblical. Sometimes he takes a text of the Holy Scripture as a guide for his personal prayer. In his rather long prayer for missionaries, the “burning prayer”, it is psalm 74 which becomes the underlying thread that shapes his prayer's direction. “Remember the people you took to yourself long ago, your own tribe which you redeemed, and this Mount Zion where you came to live,” prays the Psalmist, and Louis Marie connects with it his personal concern: the request for good missionaries for the church.

In other prayers and in his hymns and writings he wraps the words of Scripture in his own words over and over again. The word of scripture and his own words are inseparably connected. He carried the word of God in his heart and thus it issues over and over again, by itself, from his lips. The same is true of the hymn of praise of the Mother of God, the Magnificat, containing, as it does, many phrases from the Old Testament. From the heart of Mary, of whom Luke says that she treasured “all these things in her heart,” the word of God bubbles out as from a spring.

The favourite prayer of St. Louis Marie is the rosary which is also profoundly biblical. The Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, which are constantly repeated in the rosary, are prayers from the Holy Scriptures. But the heart of the rosary is the contemplation of the life of Jesus at its most important moments, and thus the word of God stands at the heart of every decade. In his letter about the rosary, Pope John Paul II urged that at the beginning of every decade the relevant Gospel passages should be read. In his view the rosary is a contemplation of the face of Christ through the eyes of Mary. And Christ is the Word of the Father.

### 5. THE PRAYER OF THE POOR

Poverty is for most of us a somewhat negative concept. To be poor means to have only the most necessary things for life and often not even these. Today we call this ‘subsistence level’. Such poverty can have many causes, natural ones such as climatic, geographic, historical and cultural circumstances, or social ones such as the inability of society to create fair structures between people and continents. Always, however, the poor are to be found at the lowest end of the social scale, with all the consequences which this brings with it.

The poor are sometimes encountered by us as beggars – and it makes little difference whether one begs at the social services office or on the street. He who feels forced to beg, has to admit to himself that he cannot make it alone and that he is totally dependent on help.

“We are beggars, it is true ...”

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We might label as poor in a very different sense from just the material sense, someone who depends in any way on help because he or she cannot rely on his or her own strength to escape from their personal poverty. Here again, admittedly, we have to resign ourselves and say: in this there is just nothing I can do. Or one can become a beggar who just stretches out his empty hands and asks for help...

Maybe it was that which impressed Jesus in the poor: begging. Since the poor person stands at the centre of the Gospel, it is first addressed almost exclusively to them. "Blessed are the poor before God, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them," he begins the Sermon on the Mount, which is the heart of the Gospel. One could also say: "Blessed are the beggars before God..." Jesus himself can call them blessed because he knows that the Father in heaven does not send beggars away with empty hands.

Jesus himself lived wholly as a pauper who receives everything from his Father in Heaven, everything without exception. Thus he prayed once: "Father, I knew that you yourself would give me everything I need." This was his life-long standpoint. He was aware that he was dependent in all things on the Father in Heaven, and lived and prayed accordingly. And he did not change this attitude even when taken to the limit.

St. Louis Marie decided even during his early years to live as a true pauper, and everything he owned he gave away. He wanted to share his life with the poor, just as the Son of God shared our human life and became like us in everything except sin.

This renunciation arose not only from his solidarity with and compassion for the poor. Louis Marie wanted to take on Jesus' own dependence on the Father completely. His principle was to leave everything to divine providence, and he feared that any personal possessions would impair that trust in the providence of God. It was also in this manner that he prayed. His prayer is the prayer of the poor who wait begging with their hands outstretched to God and expect everything from Him. This attitude is best expressed in his Prayer for Missionaries, that prophetic "burning prayer".

The same attitude that we find in Louis Marie is also to be found in Mary. Therefore, for him, she is the best one to teach us this attitude of the poor before God. The consecration to Jesus through Mary has no other aim than to make us poor by giving up everything we are and have.

Such poverty also characterises the manner of his prayer. Louis Marie set great store by the simplest forms of prayer, those which we tend to dismiss sometimes as poor and "exterior". The rosary is simplicity itself, and is the best example of this poverty. And even simple gestures can form part of this attitude for effective prayer. Thus it is said that Louis Marie gave a popular mission once in a village in Brittany. The parish-priest was very surprised at the great success of the mission. Louis Marie explained to him: "Dear friend, I have walked more than 2,000 miles to obtain mercy from God, to reach the hearts of the people. He has heard me."

### 6. THROUGH MARY TO JESUS

Why pray to Mary? Is this not a detour when I can pray directly to Jesus?

For St. Louis Marie it certainly was not – just like for other saints. Mary has a preferential place in his prayer. The reason for this is simple: Mary is the mother of Jesus. Mary is revered not for her own sake, but because she has borne Jesus for us. This is the reason for her lasting uniqueness.

If St. Louis Marie and with him all the other saints had such a deep respect for Mary, in the end it was because they had a still deeper respect for Jesus. In the Gospel of John Jesus gives his mother to the disciple for his own; from a human point of view, one might imagine that Jesus would not entrust his mother to just anyone, but, surely — as we would see it — only to

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somebody whom he trusts and on whom he can count. St. Louis Marie and the other saints have turned out to be people on whom Jesus could count. And this is why the church reveres them as saints.

However, Louis Marie has completely taken on the attitude of John and how he accepted the gift of Jesus: his mother included. The reaction of the disciple is described in the Gospel in this way: “From that hour the disciple took her into his home.” And in the same way, Louis Marie himself had the experience that the word of Jesus really came true and Mary became for him the mother who would never leave him in the lurch. And, therefore, it was quite natural for him to go with all his concerns to Mary. Thus his friend Blain commented on his leaving home when he went off to study in Paris: “When he left Rennes his thoughts were in heaven, his heart in St Sulpice and a prayer to Mary on his lips.”

Besides, for Louis Marie it is quite clear that it was God Himself who chose Mary to be the mother of his Son. Therefore, he knows that Jesus and Mary cannot be separated. It is the intention of the Father that Mary should work beside her Son and together with him for the welfare of the people. She is the “handmaid of the Lord”. The intention of the Father of Jesus dying on the cross is revealed when he makes Mary the mother of his disciples.

Jesus and Mary are inseparably linked: this is what the prayers and thoughts of the saint impress on us. When he recites the rosary, he begins every decade with a dedication: “Lord Jesus Christ, we offer to you this first decade... We ask you by this mystery and through the intercession of your mother...” He begins his great prayer of Consecration with which he concludes his book on “The Love of Eternal Wisdom” in this way: “Eternal and incarnate Wisdom, most lovable and adorable Jesus, ... I adore you profoundly... I thank you...” And only then does he turn to Mary: “That is why I turn to the intercession and the mercy of your holy Mother... I turn to you, then, Mary immaculate...” He himself always called his Marian consecration “a consecration to Jesus Christ, the incarnate wisdom, through the hands of Mary”.

Louis Marie has truly taken the mother of Jesus to himself. He has given her a firm place in his life. When he was travelling, he held in his right hand his walking staff on the top of which he had fastened the cross which Pope Clement XI had given him. In his left hand he held the small statue of Mary which he himself had carved and which he always carried on his person. It was also in this way that he died: the cross in his right hand, Mary in his left; in this way he felt safe and secure: “I am between Jesus and Mary.” His astonished biographers recount that he recited every day not only fifteen decades of the rosary, but also the “Little Crown”; and always when he prayed, he held his statue of Mary in his hand or placed it in front of him. He confided to a friend that Mary was so close to him and so present to him that he could do nothing without her, and in everything that he did, he acted through her and for her.

He once described his prayer experience in this way: “I was between Jesus and Mary, I believe; both were in my heart, one on the right and the other on the left. I could express my gratitude to them only in silence.”

This experience is certainly a special gift of the mercy of God. But by the fact that Mary is there for us by the will of Jesus, this can become an experience for all of us.

To pray to Mary – a detour? St. Louis Marie gives his answer to that: “It is the most sure and shortest way to Jesus.” If we revere the mother of Jesus and pray to her, we too can be between Jesus and Mary and experience the closeness of both.

### **7. NOTHING WITHOUT THE ROSARY!**

St. Louis Marie is one the great missionaries of the Church. From what we know, he preached more than 200 popular missions in the northwest of France during 16 years of priestly ministry

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– with overwhelming success. In the biographies of the saint we find many reports of “miraculous” conversions of hard-boiled sinners. What was his secret? He himself always ascribed his success to the holy rosary.

The rosary was, as it were, his badge of office and people called him “the priest with the big rosary”. In fact he wore on his belt a big rosary so as to have it always to hand. His love of the rosary was also the reason that he became a member of the Third order of the St Dominic and was given by the Master General of the order permission to preach the rosary everywhere and to receive as many of the faithful as possible into the confraternity of the rosary. Pope Pius XII mentioned in his address at the saint’s canonization in 1947, with admiration, that the saint continuously recited the rosary the whole way from Rennes to Paris. He himself said that no sinner could resist him if once he was able to lay his hand on his head with the rosary.

Thus it is not surprising that the rosary played a special role in his popular missions. He had 15 banners made on which the 15 mysteries of the rosary were depicted with the aim of explaining clearly to the faithful what the rosary is and how one should recite it.

In Pontchâteau, not far from the large town of Nantes, he established a gigantic Mount Calvary, and around it he built a “rosary way” planted with 150 small trees and 15 cypresses: 150 Hail Marys and 15 Our Fathers. In the schools which he founded for the poor rural population he had the rosary recited after lessons.

In the rule which he wrote for his missionaries, he prescribes that the rosary should be recited as a preparation for the mission, during its course and after the mission, so that it might yield much fruit. He wrote to his sisters, the Daughters of Wisdom, in the rule he gave them that they should gather in the morning, at noon and in the evening to recite the rosary in two choirs. Nothing without the rosary!

The rosary, in the communities of his religious foundations, in parishes, in families, recited together or alone, in all circumstances and at all places, was for Louis Marie the most important prayer. He was deeply impressed by the fact that the rosary, in such a simple way, brings Christ home to the person, namely through Mary, and that it is such a powerful and effective prayer, producing such rich fruits.

His personal experience with the rosary encouraged him from day to day in this conviction. No surprise then that, wherever he went, he introduced the rosary or worked for its revival, and that he ascribed all his missionary success to it. And, hence, it is not surprising that he wrote a book with the title “The admirable secret of the rosary”. It is a popular book which offers not only instructions and explanations, but makes use of many stories about the mysterious effectiveness of the rosary as a prayer.

The rosary is quite a simple prayer and yet is a very special means for Louis Marie to deepen faith and to gain strength. It also opens up for the simplest believer a really significant kind of prayer, since everybody can recite it and visualize from decade to decade the life of Jesus. This lets the believer grow closer to Christ a little more with every rosary. Thus the personal experiences of life of the Christian combine easily with the life of Jesus. The rosary also helps a person to understand how to pray and to understand his or her own life in the light of the life of Jesus, to learn to see it afresh with the eyes of Jesus and Mary, and to discover the golden thread running through all the contradictory experiences of life, in joy and sorrow. And this in turn strengthens one’s trust in Jesus, in his word and his divine power and in the powerful intercession of his mother Mary. The rosary is a real treasure for “poor sinners”.

If St. Louis Marie were to come again today, he would not act differently than in his own day: he would preach the rosary. The late Pope John Paul II said:

## MONTFORTIAN PRAYER

“The Rosary is my favourite prayer. A marvellous prayer! Marvellous in its simplicity and in its depth... At the same time our heart can enclose in these decades of the Rosary all the facts that make up the life of the individual, the family, the nation, the Church and mankind. Personal matters and those of one's neighbour, and particularly of those who are closest to us, who are dearest to us. Thus the simple prayer of the Rosary beats to the rhythm of human life.” (*Address at the Angelus, Sunday, 29 October 1978*)

*Emmanuel Guil smm & H. J. Jünemann smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Read “The Love of Eternal Wisdom”, nos. 184-193 (*The Second Means for the acquisition of divine Wisdom - Continuous Prayer*); what qualities of prayer do you find there?
2. How has the Rosary played a part in your own prayer-life?
3. St. Louis Marie has been called a great mystic; what indications of mystical prayer do you find in his life?

### FURTHER READING

In *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, read the articles on *Prayer* and *Rosary*.

St. Louis Marie's book, *The Secret of the Rosary*.

## 11. OBEDIENCE AND LIBERTY

### I. LIBEROS

“What, then, am I asking for? Liberos, ... priests who are free with the freedom that comes from you, detached from everything, without father, mother, brothers, sisters or relatives and friends as the world and the flesh understand them, without worldly possessions to encumber or distract them, and devoid of all self-interest.”

“Liberos: men who are free but still in bondage to your love and your will; men after your own heart who, without taint or impediment of self-love, will carry out your will to the  
the full ...

Liberos: men as free as the clouds that sail high above the earth, filled with the dew of heaven, and moving, without let or hindrance, according to the inspiration of the Spirit...”

“Liberos: Men always available, always ready to obey you... always ready to be on the move and to suffer with you and for you, just as the Apostles were...”

“Liberos: true children of Mary whom she has conceived and begotten by her love, nurtured and reared, upheld by her and enriched with her graces.”

(PM 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)

For a long time, Montfort had harboured a desire: “When I see the needs of the Church I cannot help pleading continually for a small and poor band of good priests to do this work under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin” (Letter 5, dated 6 December 1700).

So Montfort composed his “Prayer for Missionaries” (“Burning Prayer”) with a view to his “small and poor band of good priests”, but this prayer can be extended to all those “ministers of the Lord”, “true apostles of the latter times” (cf. TD 56-59), and in its inspiration and spiritual content, and above all in the ideal it sets before us, it includes that “mighty legion of brave and valiant soldiers of Jesus and Mary, *both men and women*, who will fight the devil, the world, and corrupt nature in the perilous times that are sure to come” (TD 114).

For a deeper understanding of this text, let us look at various elements:

#### 1 - *Liberos*

Montfort uses both possible meanings of this Latin word which can be translated as both “free persons” and “children”.

#### 2 - *Liberty*

A conscious and responsible choice, that is mature and flowing from personal conviction, not just the effect of instinctive tendencies or some sort of external constraint. On the one hand, we could note three levels of liberty:

##### A - THE PHYSICAL LEVEL

An absence of any physical coercion, e.g. being locked up in some place, or being attached to material possessions. Montfort tells us: “I am not particularly anxious to settle down and be attached to a poorhouse” (L 6), and speaks of being “without worldly possessions to encumber or distract them, and devoid of all self-interest” (PM 7).

## OBEDIENCE AND LIBERTY

### B - THE SOCIAL LEVEL

An absence of social constraint, e.g. the family circle, fashion, social conventions, pressures from those around one, etc. Montfort speaks of: “without ... relatives and friends as the world and the flesh understand them” (PM 7).

### C - THE PERSONAL LEVEL

An absence of all internal obstacles, e.g. prejudices, uncontrolled passions, bad habits, fears, etc. Montfort speaks of: “men after your own heart who, without taint or impediment of self-love” (PM 8).

On the other hand, we might mention the greatness of liberty: “authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man” (*Gaudium et Spes* 17).

#### *Questions to ask yourself:*

1. What are my motives in my everyday activity? Compulsion? Sentiment? Obligation? External pressure? Personal and responsible conviction?
2. Liberty is an internal conquest. What means do I take to become more and more free?

### 3 - Obedience

This word comes from a Latin word which means *to listen*. It reminds us of the famous “Listen, Israel”, a leitmotiv that is found throughout the Sacred History of the Bible: To obey is to seek and to do the will of God. In a Christian context, obedience must always be qualified with the word *love*.

Montfort teaches us this in a beautiful text: “Voluntary slavery is the most perfect..., for by it we give the greatest glory to God, who looks into *the heart* and wants it to be given to him. Is he not indeed called *the God of the heart* or of *the loving will*?” (TD 70).

Montfort composed a hymn on *The Merit of Obedience* (H 10). In it he gives 9 reasons to obey:

1. It is the greatest sacrifice of a man and of a Christian,
2. The greatest of the three religious vows, even greater than martyrdom,
3. Without this sacrifice all other sacrifices displease God,
4. Through disobedience Adam doomed us. By Obedience Jesus saved us.
5. The example of Christ (At the beginning of his life; during his life; until death)
6. Obedience is the death of one's own will,
7. It is the mark of the predestined,
8. Without it we cannot be saved,
9. Disobedience is a great sin.

#### *Questions to ask yourself:*

1. For you, what are the three strongest motives?
2. Do you agree with the following statements of Montfort? Justify your response: “See only God himself in the one commanding” (H 10, 25), or again: “In all things obey the king, God speaks in his person” (H 10, 27).

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### 4 - *The Will of God*

This not the pagan notion of fatalism: everything is decided beforehand and I can do nothing to change it. We know that there is a plan of God, certainly mysterious by nature, but whose reality is clearly announced. We are called to become in Christ children of the Father, and to form with our fellow human beings a people of brothers and sisters. The will of God, who is LOVE, is that men and women, “created in his own image and likeness” (Gen 1:26), should continually grow in true love.

In the concrete I do the will of God whenever I take a free and responsible decision in any situation, so as to obtain the best possible result in the light of reason and of faith.

### II. THE PARADOX: LIBERTY-OBEDIENCE

How can I be free while depending on God, or even more so on another person? We could reply that we have freely chosen to obey or to depend, but the key to the paradox is found most of all in love. Clearly not just any love, not sentimental love, or romantic or selfish love; but the true love that is sacrificial, unconditional, only to be found in the gift of oneself for another person.

To acknowledge our radical dependence on God in love, is to accept the truth of our very being, and through this of our freedom.

The more we love a person—ask lovers—the more we become dependent on that person; and the more we love, the more we become free, for true freedom is measured by the love of which we are capable for someone else, and especially in our relationship with God.

To be free is not to do whatever I want, but to depend on the loving will of God, in whom I find the realisation of my ultimate happiness. To be free is, on the one hand, to depend on God, Eternal Wisdom, and on the other hand to be independent of (liberated from) false wisdoms: “worldly, earthly and diabolical” (LEW 75-83).

Clearly, it is, nevertheless, only through the help of divine grace that human freedom, wounded by sin, can be directed towards God in an effective and integrated way.

When Montfort speaks to us of the reasons to consecrate ourselves to Christ through Mary, he sums up the paradox well: the more we obey, the more we are free in love.

“It gives great liberty of spirit - the freedom of the children of God - to those who faithfully practise it. Through this devotion we make ourselves slaves of Jesus by consecrating ourselves entirely to him. To reward us for this enslavement of love, our Lord frees us from every scruple and servile fear which might restrict, imprison or confuse us; he opens our hearts and fills them with holy confidence in God, helping us to regard God as our Father; he inspires us with a generous and filial love” (TD 169).

We might also quote Hymn 45, in which the scrupulous convert sings the refrain: “I obey and love God, I obey and I love.”

Freedom is not synonymous with independence. In the physical order, a train, in order to pick up speed, depends on the rails; otherwise it is impossible. To bear fruit, a branch depends on the trunk of the tree; otherwise it is a dead branch. The same is true in the spiritual order if I am to realise my deepest reality.

#### *Questions to ask yourself:*

1. Montfort notes various differences between a servant and a slave of love (TD 71); Are you ready to live by what he says?
2. What is your reaction to the expression “slave of love”? What other expression (if there is one) might express the same reality?

## OBEDIENCE AND LIBERTY

### III. JESUS, THE OBEDIENT MAN

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“And that is why he said, on coming into the world: You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but you gave me a body. ... then I said, 'Here I am, I am coming,' in the scroll of the book it is written of me, to do your will, God” (Heb 10:5-7).

“But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8).

“He went down with them then and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority” (Lk 2:51).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

These few texts, among so many others, allow us to contemplate Christ choosing obedience, total dependence on our humanity, represented by the Blessed Virgin. This is the great mystery of the emptying of Christ (the *kenosis*). He takes on precisely the condition of a slave, according to the translation of the Greek word, *doulos*.

It is *the great mystery of the Incarnation*: “the first mystery of Jesus Christ; it is the most hidden; and it is the most exalted and the least known... It was in this mystery that Jesus anticipated *all* subsequent mysteries of his life by his willing acceptance of them... this mystery is a summary of *all* his mysteries since it contains the intention and the grace of *them all*...” (TD 248).

Montfort is ecstatic when he contemplates this mystery, the foundation and key to all his teaching: “Our good Master stooped to enclose himself in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, a captive but loving slave, and to make himself *subject to her for thirty years*. As I said earlier, the human mind is bewildered when it reflects seriously upon this conduct of Incarnate Wisdom...” (TD 139).

### IV. JESUS, THE FREE MAN

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“Now this Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there is freedom*” (2 Cor 3:17).

“The law of the Spirit which gives life in Christ Jesus *has set you free*” (Rom 8:2).

“Christ *set us free*, so that we should remain free” (Gal 5:1).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

If we open the Gospels, we see very quickly the great freedom of Christ, as much at the personal and social level as in his physical movements.

He is free with regard to his family: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (Mk 3:33). he is free with regard to the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes, “you (who) load on people burdens that are unendurable” (cf. Lk 11:37-54). He is free in the face of the morals of his time, with sinners, tax-collectors and prostitutes; free in the choice of his friends, both male and female (Jn 11), free in relation to the Law, giving his own interpretation (Mk 12:28-34), free in relation to the political powers: “Go away,’ they said. ‘Leave this place, because Herod means to kill you.’ He replied, ‘You may go and give that fox this message...’” (Lk 13:31-32).

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What are we to say now of the preaching of Jesus, who so often preaches freedom and liberation, from sin, from death, from all kinds of fear and anxiety, who preaches above all the true love, the loving will of God who always sets free.

Montfort contemplates this freedom of Christ most of all in the virginal womb of Mary, and describes it in very striking paradoxes: “God-made-man found freedom in imprisoning himself in her womb. He displayed power in allowing himself to be borne by this young maiden. He found his glory and that of his Father in hiding his splendours from all creatures here below and revealing them only to Mary. He glorified his independence and his majesty in depending upon this lovable virgin in his conception, his birth, his presentation in the temple, and in the thirty years of his hidden life. Even at his death she had to be present...” (TD 18).

To make all this your own

During his long hours of contemplation, Montfort used the method he had learnt during his days in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, with his own adaptation, for sure:

a - *Jesus before our eyes*: Here we direct our gaze on the person of Jesus, and never on oneself. We make acts of adoration, thanksgiving, praise and honour.

b - *Jesus in the heart*: We make acts of communion, of intimate relationship with the mystery we are contemplating. We become what we contemplate. We submit to the influence of the mystery, as we would submit to the rays of the sun, by the simple fact of resting in his presence, taking into ourselves the intentions and the dispositions of Jesus.

c - *Jesus in our arms*: this is our commitment to bear witness to this mystery, to become a prolongation of the mystery in everyday life, to continue to complete within ourselves what is lacking to the mystical body of Christ.

Take a good amount of time to be recollected, in a quiet place. to contemplate Jesus... the obedient man... the free man... taking your lead from the remarks above.

### V. THE OBEDIENCE OF MARY

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“I am the servant of the Lord” (Lk 1:38).

“Blessed is she who believed” (Lk 1:45).

“Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

These words of the Blessed Virgin portray her for us, according to the biblical and theological renewal, as the *first disciple* of Christ in the obedience of faith.

I quote the Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* of Pope Paul VI on Marian devotion: “The Virgin Mary has always been proposed to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which today scarcely exists anywhere. She is held up as an example to the faithful rather for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God (cf. Lk. 1:38), because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the *first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples*. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value” (*Marialis Cultus* 35).

## OBEDIENCE AND LIBERTY

It was by her “Yes”, her loving consent to the plan of God, that the Incarnation (God-with-us) came about. As Montfort sings in his 7th hymn in honour of Christmas (H 63, 4): “You have achieved by your consent / What the whole world / So ardently desired. / May we glorify, honour and praise your faith! / The Saviour came to us / Only because you believed / The word of an angel.”

When Montfort speaks of the great enmity between Mary and the devil, he reminds us of the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, especially St. Irenaeus: “What Eve ruined and lost by disobedience Mary saved *by obedience*” (TD 53).

And when he lists ten different virtues of the Blessed Virgin, he mentions her “*blind obedience*” (TD 108). Besides, Christ himself on two different occasions proclaims his Mother blessed because she hears the Word of God and puts it into practice (cf. Lk 8 :19-21 and 11:27-28).

### VI. MARY, FREE WOMAN

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“Let it happen to me as you have said” (Lk 1:38).

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (Lk 1:46).

“As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart... His mother stored up all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:19, 51).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

First of all, we must emphasise that the consent of Mary to the great mystery of the Incarnation was a *free and responsible* consent in dialogue with God... she asks questions: “How can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?” (Lk 1:34). As Montfort says: “God the Holy Spirit formed Jesus Christ in Mary but only after having asked her consent through one of the chief ministers of his court” (TD 16). She was free to refuse, but without knowing all the details of such a proposal Mary accepted without any reservations all that might follow from this. She would learn very quickly that “a sword will pierce your soul too” (Lk 2:35), but she would go freely to the limits of love: “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother” (Jn 19:25).

With Mary also we exult (a sign of great freedom) and we “magnify” the Lord! We share with her her spiritual stance, her total freedom, and we become free: “The Mother of fair love will rid your heart of all scruples and inordinate servile fear. She will open and enlarge it to obey *the commandments* of her Son with alacrity and with the *holy freedom* of the children of God. She will fill your heart with *pure love* of which she is the treasury. You will then cease to act as you did before, out of fear of the God who is love, but rather out of pure love” (TD 215).

Finally, Mary is a woman who frees. She “treasures and ponders in her heart” (cf. Lk 2:19) the liberating events of the Bible, such as the Exodus, and she desires the same liberation today for “the poor, the lowly, the downtrodden” (cf. Lk 1:51-53).

#### *To make all this your own*

Use the same exercise of contemplation, but this time to wonder at the person of Mary *before our eyes, in our hearts, in our arms*, so as to contemplate Christ more through the eyes of Mary, to love Christ better with the heart of Mary, and finally to be a continuation of the virginal maternity of Mary, bearing Christ in our arms as she did, so as to give him more to others.

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### VII. MONTFORT, AN OBEDIENT MAN

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“As God's dear children, then, take him as your pattern, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

##### A - IN HIS TEACHING

The great importance that Montfort attributes to obedience comes from his deep conviction that it imitates the very convincing example of the obedient Christ.

This is what he teaches the Daughters of Wisdom: “Just as divine Wisdom, who reigned in the heavens, came down to earth to obey from the first moment of his incarnation to his death (cf. Phil 2:6-8), so, following his example, his daughters have left the world to subject their mind and will to the yoke of obedience” (RLS 46).

What does Montfort ask from his Missionaries? The same very strict and rigorous obedience that the Jesuits practised: “Nevertheless, in this Company, as in the Society of Jesus, it is obedience as we have described it which is the foundation and unshakable support of all its holiness and of all the blessings which God confers or will confer through its ministry” (MR 19).

When Montfort calls for obedience to Mary, it is important to emphasise that this is always in imitation of the example of the obedient Christ, who “has retained the submissiveness and obedience of the most perfect of all children towards the best of all mothers” (TD 27). Having mentioned the obedience of Christ towards Mary for thirty years, Montfort exclaims: “With such a convincing and well-known example before us, can we be so foolish as to believe that there is a better and shorter way of giving God glory than by submitting ourselves to Mary, as Jesus did?” (TD 139).

##### B - IN HIS EVERYDAY LIFE

Montfort himself gives us the key to understanding his unfailing obedience. In his hymn on *The Merit of Obedience* (344 lines) he sings: “Henceforth, my God, I follow you, / I walk in your footsteps, / And obey like a child, / But grant me your grace / To see in my Superior / Your very own plan / And in my father director / Your presence alone” (H 10, 40).

It is in this way that we can understand his own obedience to M. Leschassier, his spiritual director at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. We know that this man was far from gentle with Montfort, and that he even wondered whether Montfort was being led by an evil spirit. All the same, through various letters (L 5, 6, 9, 10), Montfort places great trust in him and offers perfect obedience to him. Let us cite, for example, the end of one of those letters: “This then is the state of my affairs but I consider blind obedience to your wishes as my greatest duty and my greatest desire” (L 9).

In his priestly ministry, Montfort is a model of obedience to the directives of the bishops, even when these are often against him, depriving him of the faculties to exercise his apostolate, or, worse, expelling him from their diocese. There were in all seven dioceses where he encountered difficulties.

Let us look briefly at the famous incident of Pontchâteau. Here Montfort mobilised a whole population from the areas round about, for the construction of an enormous calvary. He composed a hymn to be sung during the long period of construction, which illustrates its

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meaning: “Alas! The Turk still holds Blessed Calvary / Where Jesus Christ has died. / Christians, we must erect one here. / Let’s build a Calvary here, / Let’s build a Calvary” (H 164, 1).

Fifteen months of work with pick and shovel, hundreds of workers each day, to raise a small mountain of earth and rocks on which to mount a very big crucifix that could be seen from a long way off. Everything was ready for the solemn blessing on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, to be accompanied by another hymn: “Dear friends, let us quiver with joy, / We have Mount Calvary here; / Let’s hurry, love impels us, / To see Jesus Christ, dead for us” (H 137, 1).

People came from all the neighbouring parishes; there would have been about 20,000 of them. But alas! permission to bless the calvary was refused on the evening before by the Bishop of Nantes, Mgr. de Bauveau. Montfort wanted an explanation, so he left on foot, and walked all night to meet with the bishop. But alas again! the same refusal. The crowd were waiting for Montfort’s return. He came back exhausted, and calmly explained the refusal to the people, then had to go off immediately to preach another mission.

Clearly we have many examples of this obedience in Montfort’s own inimitable fashion; but let us remember that it was always in imitation of the obedience of Christ himself.

### VIII. MONTFORT A FREE MAN

#### 1 - *The Word of God*

“Brothers, you were called to be free; do not use your freedom as an opening for self-indulgence, but be servants to one another in love” (Gal 5:13).

#### 2 - *Reflection*

##### A - IN HIS TEACHING

The strongest and most complete text on freedom is the one we suggested right at the beginning: PM 7-12. In the course of this lesson we have cited especially nos. 169 and 215 of the *True Devotion*, showing that the more we are consecrated to Christ-Wisdom through Mary, the more free we become. We were speaking above all about *personal or psychological liberty*.

With regard to *social liberty*, we can quote an extract from a letter written in 1704 to his mother: “I love you and I honour you all the more as flesh and blood have no part in it. Please do not burden me with my brothers' and sisters' affairs. I have done all God asked me to do for them in a spirit of love. For the moment, I have no worldly goods to give them for I am poorer than all of them... Let them think of me as dead. Again I say it, so that they will remember, - let them think of me as dead. I want to receive nothing at all from the family into which God caused me to be born. I give up my right to everything except my patrimony which the Church does not allow me to renounce. My property, home, father and mother are up above. I no longer regard anyone on earth as my kinsfolk” (L 20).

To understand the importance of *physical freedom* or availability, we would need to look at numerous texts of Montfort on poverty and on Providence. Let us content ourselves with a little comparison drawn from the three hymns he wrote with a special view to his future missionaries of the Company of Mary, but which, as far as their ideal goes, can be addressed to all who desire to live Montfortian spirituality. They are: Hymn 22, *Resolutions of a Zealous Missionary*; Hymn 91, *The Good Missionary*; and Hymn 144, *The Poor in Spirit*.

“My choice is made! I’ll roam through the world, / Living just like a vagabond, / To rescue my poor neighbour” (H 22, 1).

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“I roam through the world / Like a lost little child, / Seeking, though scolded, / Neither income nor wealth” (H 91, 1).

“I travel the world / Like a lost child. / A vagabond am I, / My possessions are sold” (H 144, 3).

“The less (*he is speaking of money*), lighter is my soul. / Money is like a camel’s load; / Penniless, like a bird soaring / Heavenward, heavenward, into Light” (H 22, 27).

“I live quite comfortably / Like a small bird; / Without money’s burdens, / The higher I fly” (H 91, 9).

“I flit from branch to branch / Like a small bird, / My heart is never heavy, / For no burden I carry” (H 144, 14).

### B - IN HIS EVERYDAY LIFE

Clearly, all the texts of Montfort that we have quoted, and even those from Sacred Scripture, are like an “autobiography” of the saint, revealing to us his spiritual experience.

Here let us note a certain incident that gets its value from a deep symbolism. The scene takes place at the bridge of Cesson, a few kilometres outside Rennes. It is Autumn 1693, a season that is normally cold and wet. Our young student Montfort is 20 years old, and he is leaving for Paris, on foot, a distance of more than 300 kilometres. He has been offered a horse for at least half his journey, but he has refused this. Louis Marie’s uncle, the Abbé Alain Robert, his brother Joseph, and perhaps also his great friend, Jean-Baptiste Blain, accompany Montfort as far as this bridge. It is time to say Good-bye!

The gesture is banal—crossing a bridge perhaps fifteen metres across—but this banality takes on the dimensions of an event that becomes the key to explaining Montfort’s life. As soon as he has crossed the bridge, he *liberates himself* of the little money he possesses in favour of a poor man; he gives his spare clothes to another poor fellow, and with the third one he meets he exchanges the clothes he is wearing for the poor man’s rags; then, according to Grandet, his first biographer, he goes down on his knees and vows never to possess anything. He wants to be *as free as possible*, “without ... relatives and friends as the world and the flesh understand them, without worldly possessions to encumber or distract..., and devoid of all self-interest” (PM 7).

A symbolic gesture that he was to repeat very often, as we can see from the testimony he gives us nine years later in 1702, in a letter to Monsieur Leschassier: “Fr. Lévêque, who is a spiritual father to me, second only to yourself, had given me some extra money to cover the expenses of my journey to Poitiers. This I gave away to the poor before I left Saumur where I stayed to make a novena, and consequently I arrived at Poitiers without a penny” (L 11).

What Montfort wants most of all, is the liberty of the wide-open seas, even in the choice of his apostolate. He sings: “The soul, abroad, is most at ease” (H 11, 8). Let us end with an extract from letter 6, dating from 1701, written to his spiritual director like the one we quoted above. Montfort had not found in Nantes the missionary life he was seeking, and so he wrote from the hospital in Poitiers where he was exercising his ministry: “I must tell you, Father, that I do wish most sincerely to work for the spiritual welfare of the poor in general but *I am not particularly anxious to settle down and be attached to a poorhouse.*”

*To make all this your own*

1. Taking your inspiration from the writings and the example of Montfort, a free and obedient man, try to learn by heart and to recite often the prayer of the Mass of St. Louis Marie: “O God, you enkindled in St. Louis Marie a burning desire to preach the Gospel to your people; by his prayers on our behalf, and under the guidance of the Virgin Mary, may we be always docile to the Spirit, and untiring apostles of your Kingdom, committed in brotherly service to the poor who cry to us for help.”

## OBEDIENCE AND LIBERTY

2. Comparing PM 7 and L 20 in the light of Matt 12:46-50; Lk 14:26; and Mk 10:29-30; what message to you personally draw from them?
3. In the hymns quoted above (22, 91 and 144), underline the significant words that occur more than once. What portrait of Montfort do you draw from them?

*Claude Sigouin, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. In reading the text of PM 7-11, what might seem impossible for me to achieve? What am I still attached to?
2. From your own experience, show how the more you are “closely joined to God”, the more you are free and joyful.
3. Explain how the slavery of love is great liberty.

### FURTHER READING

In *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, read the articles on *Freedom and Consecration*.

## 12. MONTFORTIAN POVERTY

*It is called voluntary poverty,  
Or poverty of spirit,  
Or the great saving counsel  
Given to us by Jesus Christ;  
It makes a wise man put aside  
His goods and any desire for possessions,  
So to follow in His footsteps,  
Like a true Christian. (H 20:2)*

*Holy poverty of heart  
Is the true joy  
Of the children of the light;  
It is the mark of the blessed,  
The pledge, the key to heaven,  
The spouse of the King of kings,  
The companion of his cross  
And his beloved daughter. (H 108:7)*

### 1. THE PARADOX: “THE TREASURES OF POVERTY”

In the context we are dealing with, we need to have an understanding of the word “poverty”. It does not mean material misery, an evil that has to be fought against by directly helping the poor person, even by an alms to supply his need; but an evil that has to be combated most of all in those structures which imply exploitation at various levels in society.

We are speaking here of voluntary poverty (taken on by a free and conscious choice), or again of that holy poverty of heart that Montfort sings about in the text of the two hymns quoted above, both of which have the paradoxical title, “The Treasures of Poverty”.

This is not a poverty that is unwillingly accepted, but on the contrary one that is accepted with all one’s heart. It is a response in love to the call and the example of the Lord himself, as Montfort says: “Poor Jesus, I wish to follow you, / One poor man after another, even unto death. / Have mercy, poverty intoxicates me / And inspires in me this holy delight. / Either let me be like you in my life, / Or else deprive me of life right now; / By your heart and through Mary, / Grant me this great gift” (H 20:59).

Montfort speaks above all of the paradoxes: poverty—wealth, lack—fullness, deprivation—abundance... or in the line of the Gospel saying: “he who loses everything, gains everything.”

Let us take a brief look at the content of the two hymns cited.

#### *a) Hymn 20*

This hymn contains more than 480 lines (60 verses) which offer us a complete catechesis on poverty of spirit. Montfort presents it to us paradoxically as “the precious pearl,... the treasure so hidden” (H 20:1), and he describes for us its brilliance or excellence, giving us twelve different reasons and twelve facets of this pearl.

This poverty is above all the foundation of Christian perfection; it is by this that we must begin to achieve holiness, because it is the imitation of Christ himself and obedience to his teaching: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

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Montfort then says that these poor persons are happy right now, that Paradise is theirs, that Jesus Christ came for them, that it is to them that he reveals his secrets, it is them that he has chosen to build his Church, and that it is they who imitate Jesus through leaving all. Montfort next proposes the example of the first Christians and that of the saints... “this charming poverty / Which Saint Francis preached everywhere” (H 20:16).

The hymn goes on to exalt the *happiness* of the poor: it is God who ensures this, and besides they “are genuine portraits of Jesus Christ”. “They gain all things without exception in time” (*grace in abundance*) and in eternity (*immense glory*). “As imitators of the apostles... they will judge the nations.” They receive the hundredfold promised by God in this world and in the next.

In a surprising way Montfort teaches: “They have, even in this life, / A hundredfold in temporal goods, / And then, in heaven, in their fatherland, / A hundredfold in eternal possessions” (H 20:21). And finally, their poverty “creates wise people,” and delivers the poor from the troubles of the rich.

In comparison, the hymn now deplores the *unhappiness of the rich*. Riches are the god of iniquity, the snares of the devil, the jaws of hell, a smiling executioner. They seduce and damn souls, and unfortunately, the number of fools is infinite and the poor in spirit very rare. The rich person sacrifices his time, his rest, his health; he is eaten away with worry and unnecessary cares. His possessions only increase his desires... like a miserable starving wretch who never cries: “That’s enough” (H 20:34).

In his very concrete way Montfort describes the rich person in this way: “He is a swine wailing and growling / In the midst of all his good fortune” (H 20:35). He has a mercenary soul; he is an idolater and a barbarian all his life, and he dies badly.

Montfort continues: “Wealth is very sticky / And the soul easily becomes glued to it... Money is altogether soiled with the vices / Which it has brought about everywhere” (H20:38-39).

The hymn continues by enumerating the qualities of those who are genuinely poor in spirit: They are patient. They have a heart that is detached from goods, and are without desires. They are laborious and devout. They are detached even from the smallest things, “these useless vanities”, and are an enemy of money. They are joyful and content when they do not have all that is necessary.

Montfort concludes with a long prayer which begins: “How little I have known of the grace in you, / Dear poverty of my God! / But now I embrace you / With a heart all on fire” (H 20:50).

### b) Hymn 108

This hymn is structured as a dialogue between the poor and Jesus. The refrain is sung by the poor in this way: “Let’s all cry aloud: / Wretched the wicked / Living in luxury! / Happy the blameless / Treated so harshly, / Living in penury!” (H 108:4).

The poor pose the questions: “What gives happiness, / Riches or poverty? / Are the poor in heart worth more / Than the proud-hearted rich / Living so comfortably?” (H 108:1). “My loving Saviour, why do / Sinners and the ungodly / Get rich and prosper?” (H 108:10). “Are all the poor saved / And all the rich damned?... Many rich are evil / But aren’t there some / Living as Christians should?” (H 108:14).

And Jesus replies in this way: “Come, my chosen ones, / Elders of my house” (H 108:2). “Beggars, the lowly, / Are my closest friends / For they resemble me” (H 108:3). “Let evil-doers prosper, / Their riches are so fleeting” (H 108:11). “You rich, wail your tragedy: / Mirth will be turned into tears” (H 108:13). “The good rich will be saved, / The wicked poor will perish” (H 108:15).

## MONTFORTIAN POVERTY

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- What does poverty mean to you?
- What personal experience of poverty do you have?
- What wisdom do you see in poverty?
- What challenges you most in Montfort's teaching on this subject?
- What would you say about this verse: "They have, even in this life, a hundredfold in temporal goods," or again: "It is the quality of the brave, and not of mean-spirited people" (H 20:21-22)?
- What response would you give to the questions posed by the poor in Hymn 108?
- What would you say about the verse: "The good rich will be saved, / The wicked poor will perish" (H 108:15)?

### 2. THE POOR JESUS

It is very important to contemplate Jesus who is poor. Montfort has only one desire: to follow the teaching and the example of Jesus himself, the way of Wisdom. Let us recall the famous dialogue between Montfort and his friend, Canon Blain, in Rouen, towards the end of 1714, so when he was spiritually mature. What response does Montfort give to all the objections raised by his friend especially to a life that was so poor, so abandoned to Providence? The Canon wrote:

"By way of answer he showed me his New Testament and then asked me if I could find fault with anything which Jesus Christ had practised and taught, and if I could show him a life more like that of our Blessed Lord and His Apostles than a life which was poor, mortified and founded upon abandonment to Providence; ... (for himself) he had no other course to take but to follow the Gospel, and to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and of His disciples" (*Summary of the Life of Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort*, pg. 101).

Now, to guide our reflection on the poverty of Jesus, let us take two texts from the Word of God in St. Paul:

"You are well aware of the generosity which our Lord Jesus Christ had, that, although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9). We can see here a parallel with the Hymn to Christ in Philipians: "Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross." (Phil 2:6-8).

Here what is being described is a poverty of heart, a spiritual poverty, especially in relation to the voluntary renunciation by Christ of his divine prerogatives, and not a material poverty.

This is precisely how Montfort proclaims it: "This God who cannot resist / The charms of poverty, / And who loves it to the point of making himself / Very poor in our humanity" (H 20:4), and besides he will sing: "To shower us with riches / His majesty became poor; / In order to caress us / The great Lord became poor and small" (H 64:4). Montfort also has Jesus say: "In my wisdom I find / Treasures in poverty, / Splendour in humility, / Greatness in lowliness!" (H 123:3).

As a consequence, through resemblance and likeness, Jesus becomes the friend of the poor: "I prize and deem great / All those considered / Desolate on earth, / Those thought to be last, / In my sight, are first" (H 108:3).

But what can we say of the material poverty of Christ?

Exegetes tell us, with Mk 6:3, that Jesus, before undertaking his ministry, was a "craftsman" on his own account, not a salaried worker dependant on an employer.

## MONTFORTIAN POVERTY

In the course of his ministry, Jesus, along with his disciples, led an itinerant life, with no fixed abode (cf. Mt 8:20). But the Gospels also tell us that Jesus accepted that some pious women should assist him from their own goods (Lk 8:2-3), and that he accepted hospitality offered by well-off persons (Lk 10:38-42). We know also that Jesus and his disciples possessed a common purse (Jn 12:6), which was fed from spontaneous gifts because Jesus, like the prophets and the ancient rabbis, “worked” for nothing.

What attitude should we then take? On the one hand, that of Montfort himself, whereby, through communion with Christ-Wisdom we are led to the experience of poverty... espousing the cause of Christ; or, on the other hand, we are led from the experience of poverty in all its forms (the wretched, the exploited, the marginalised, beggars, etc.) to communion with Christ incarnate and crucified in those who are poor.

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- How am I challenged by Montfort in his dialogue with Canon Blain?
- What is my understanding of the poverty of Jesus? What is the underlying wisdom in this vision of poverty?
- How do I make the link between the slavery of love and Montfortian consecration, and poverty? What is my own experience of total giving of my interior and exterior goods without reserve (cf. TD 121), according to the Montfortian consecration?

### 3. THE POOR MONTFORT

*a) In his teaching*

In the complete writings of Montfort, we can find more than 300 instances of the words “poor” or “poverty”. Let us cite from just the more well-known of his writings, a striking phrase that will take on a great value in our personal search for a greater poverty of spirit.

“...some of the poor, who saw me kneeling there dressed in clothes very much like their own, ...went off to tell the others and they all agreed to take up a collection for me...” (L 6).

“Eternal Wisdom is so rich and generous; how can anyone who possesses him be poor?” (LEW 59).

“A Friend of the Cross ... overcomes the greed of the world by his love of poverty” (LFC 4).

“In asking for our daily bread, we practice poverty of spirit and detachment from worldly goods” (ASR 42).

“Through this mystery ... we ask for detachment from the things of this world, love of poverty and love of the poor” (MSR)

“Poor little slave, let your sovereign Queen...” (SM 51).

“Lastly, we know they will be true disciples of Jesus Christ, imitating his poverty...” (TD 59).

“What, then, am I asking for? Liberos, ... priests who are free with the freedom that comes from you, detached from everything, ... without worldly possessions to encumber or distract them...” (PM 7).

“The priests who enter must be called by God to preach missions in the steps of the Apostles who were poor” (MR 2).

“Men such as you who profess voluntary poverty feel no need for the things of this world because they neither want nor desire them. If they did, they would not be truly poor in spirit...” (LCM 6).

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“He who is truly poor in spirit has no desire for what he does not possess” (RLS 89).

“True happiness on earth lies in voluntary poverty and in imitating me” (Maxims 1).

“This poverty creates wise people, / The great saints, people of worth; / It is the quality of the brave, / And not of mean-spirited people” (H 20:22).

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- Which of these sayings challenged you the most?
- What is your view of Montfort in the light of this teaching?
- How would you inculcate this teaching today?
- Does Montfort propose this teaching literally?
- How would you live out this teaching in our consumer society?

*b) In his own personal experience of life*

We know that Louis Marie’s family were part of the lesser bourgeoisie of his day, and with that in mind we presume that in his childhood and early adolescence, whether at La Bachelleraye in the home of his wet-nurse Mother André, or in the manor-house of his father at Le Bois Marquer in Iffendic, Montfort would not have suffered very much from a material poverty like the peasants of that era.

As a student in Rennes, Montfort was introduced to the apostolate in favour of the sick and the poor, especially by M. Bellier; but during these crucial years of formation, he was above all introduced by his Jesuit teachers to the spiritual attitude of poverty of spirit and abandonment, so as to welcome the love of God within himself.

Later on, in his own teaching, Montfort would insist very much on the state of existential poverty in which our poor humanity finds itself as a result of sin in the world. The great paradox would be between the slavery of possessions, of worldly goods, and the slavery of love by which we give up all our external goods, and even our interior goods. Montfort would insist that “this little worm and miserable sinner” (Formula of Consecration, LEW 226) is nevertheless pure capacity for God, in proportion to his abandonment and poverty of spirit.

His gesture at the Bridge of Cesson, on leaving Rennes en route for Paris, was intended as an external symbol of a deep inner conviction of abandonment to Providence. He exchanged his new suit for the garments of a poor man, he gave alms from the little that he had, and he refused to accept a horse and carriage, preferring rather the freedom of the vagabond in covering a distance of more than 350 kilometres. As he would later sing: “Without baggage I travel, / My walking stick in hand, / With nothing of comfort, / But also without grief. / Having nothing / I possess everything” (H 91:10).

During his time of study in Paris, Montfort was confronted with the reality of a material poverty even in the area of food, in the communities of M. de la Barmondière and, even more, of M. Boucher, a poverty due to the economic crisis of that time, when many were afflicted even with famine. His benefactress could no longer help him, so Louis Marie had to earn the money necessary to pay for his keep by watching over the dead of the rich families of Paris, a work which heightened his conviction of the relativity of the riches of this world.

Later on in Paris, having been expelled from the hospital for 5,000 poor people at the Salpêtrière, and rejected by his former spiritual director, M. Leschassier, Montfort would experience material poverty in his poor hovel in the Rue du Pot de Fer, but he would have more than anything a contemplative experience of poverty of spirit, so as to welcome “the excess of love” of God who is Wisdom, who is nothing but Love (LEW 45; 64).

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That gesture at the Bridge of Cesson was to be repeated by Montfort several times during his life. We might think of the moment when he left his first ministry in Nantes for the Poorhouse in Poitiers: “Fr. Lévêque... had given me some extra money to cover the expenses of my journey to Poitiers. This I gave away to the poor before I left Saumur where I stayed to make a novena” (L 11).

We could mention again the decisive year, 1706. Having been rejected in Poitiers, Montfort wanted to check out his persistent desire to go off to the foreign missions. He decided to consult the Pope and to leave for Rome, depending as always on Providence, and on foot—a long journey, more than 1,500 kilometres, difficult and even dangerous. He still had 18 deniers, which he gave to the poor. A Spanish student wanted to join him on his journey, but he was allowed to do so only on condition that he gave all his money to the poor. Thus unencumbered, “without worldly possessions to encumber or distract them” (PM 7), they set off together for Rome.

To gain a more precise idea of the spiritual attitude of poverty of spirit and its consequences, let us look at a few passages from the three hymns in which Montfort shares with us his thinking by singing of his own everyday experience.

1. “My choice is made! I’ll roam through the world, / Living just like a vagabond, / To rescue my poor neighbour” (*Resolutions of a Zealous Missionary*, H 22:1).

“We no longer see among us / Those solid, true apostles / Who shone so brightly years gone by. / Why? There are no voluntary poor; / One seeks to be well settled, / Another seeks, though indirectly, / A little money, money for his business” (H 22:25).

2. “I envy no one / His wealth or good fortune / And I strive only to be / Like the poorest of heart. / Having nothing / I possess everything” (H 91:5).

“O precious pearl, / O divine poverty, / How happy the soul / That truly loves you!” (H 91:18).

3. “From here or there, I find, / Without searching far, / Just like the apostles, / Enough bread for the day. / My foresight is shrewd, / I lack nothing at all; / Without kitchen or cellar, / I have fine food and drink” (*The Poor in Spirit*, H 144:8,9).

“If someone wants to follow me, / Most welcome is he! / But he must agree to live like me, / No belongings, no income; / Let him follow me without show! / So let us sing merrily, / To the sound of the trumpet, trum, trum, trum, trum trumpet, / The day long I ring out: / Hurrah for Poverty! / Hurrah for Poverty!” (H 144:21).

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- Why does Montfort insist on voluntary poverty?
- What are the consequences of this poverty of heart in his missionary practice?
- How can we follow Montfort today in this practice?
- How are we to reflect in our day-to-day living, in an outward way, our personal convictions on poverty?

*c) In his missionary apostolate*

Already in his years of formation in Rennes and Paris, Montfort exercised a fruitful apostolate in favour of the poor. He had great success in Paris, teaching catechism to the poor of the disadvantaged suburbs.

From the early years of his ministry, he wanted to dedicate himself to the same apostolate. He shows this in a letter dating from 1700 to his spiritual director, M. Leschassier: “...I feel a tremendous urge to make our Lord and his holy Mother loved, to go in a humble and simple way to teach catechism to the poor in country places” (L 5). And he manifests his joy at being able to

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realise this apostolate in letters 8, 9, 10 and 11 to the same M. Leschassier: "...I arrived at Poitiers without a penny... for about two months, I gave instructions to the beggars that I encountered in the town" (L 11).

In 1702, Montfort entered the Hospital in Poitiers, "this poor Babylon" (L 11), as its chaplain, giving himself body and soul to the poor inmates, despite the machinations of the administrative body and a jealous staff. Eventually he was chased from the Hospital, but the poor inmates wrote to the bishop: "We, the poor of Poitiers, beg you very humbly... to get our venerable pastor, who loves the poor so much, M. Grignon, to come back to us" (quoted by Louis Pérouas, *Grignon de Montfort, les pauvres et les missions*, pg. 23).

Let us look at the way in which Montfort involved himself with the poor. First of all, it was by a faith vision. He saw and served in them Jesus Christ himself. "He looked upon them as a sacrament which contained Jesus Christ under their repellent exterior. A poor man, he said, is a great mystery, and we must learn how to penetrate it" (Grandet, *The Life of Monsieur Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort*, pg. 99).

It was also a listening attitude... he would write a hymn on *The Cries of the Poor*, in which he likens this to God himself listening: "O dear poor of heart, / I hear your just complaints / And deeply feel your sorrow, / I suffer the same blows... / All the evil done to you / Is done also to me. / Anyone who helps you out / Is proof that person loves me" (H 18:7,8).

It is a realistic vision. He is able to distinguish between the good poor and the bad ones. He describes their faults and their vices (H 20:43-46). Yet always he seeks to promote their human dignity: "...he honoured them and respected them as his lords and masters. When he met any of them in the street, he would greet them, would not speak except bare-headed..." (Grandet, pg. 99).

He wanted an apostolate that would last. Clearly, Montfort gave alms and demanded of the rich that they should do so. His friend Blain calls him "the friend of the poor" (Blain, pg. 252). He also practised what might be called "the apostolate of the table": "My retinue, my glory, / These poor beggars compose; / Whatever I eat or drink, / All with them is shared" (H 144:20).

But Montfort was not satisfied with an occasional, passing, intervention; which is why he wanted to give a more permanent structure to his apostolate among the poor. In this sense he wanted a reform of the customs and rules of the Hospital in Poitiers, and he wanted to get the poor themselves to participate in their own human development by setting up, within the hospital, a community of a dozen or so poor women with a blind woman as superior.

Later in La Rochelle, he was to establish "charitable schools" for the instruction of the poor children of the town. And he was to establish in Nantes, with the help of Mlle Dauvaise and a companion, a home for Incurables.

Yet his most valuable and enduring work in this regard was the establishment, with Marie-Louise de Jésus, of the *Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom* for the education of children and the care of the poor. "O Daughters of Wisdom, / Succour poor invalids, / Those overwhelmed by sorrow, / The disabled, the outcasts. / Those whom the world rejects / Ought to touch you the most. / I must love, I must love / God hidden in my neighbour" (H 149:1).

It is interesting also to look at his missionary method with the poor, a mission always in *dependence on Providence*. It is significant that the place where the missionaries were lodged was called *Providence*. In the writings of Montfort we find this word more than 70 times, and in the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary* alone, 15 times. In this rule, Montfort considers the members as "committed to voluntary poverty" (MR 18).

"As already stated, they are to have neither inherited possessions nor income from a benefice as this is contrary to apostolic detachment. Their sole resource must be God's providence. God will

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decide who will provide for them and the manner in which this provision will be made” (MR 10). Over three pages, Montfort explains and insists on their detachment or apostolic poverty. Later, he continues: “Be it during the time of their missions or not, the poor are to be the especial objects of their care. They must never refuse to help them, materially when possible, and spiritually, even if they say only one Hail Mary” (MR 47). “After each catechetical instruction, they will provide a meal for all the poor of the parish who have attended the instruction and every morning and evening they will bring one of them in to eat at their table” (MR 48).

Let us finish with the recommendations Montfort gives to the *Members of the Company of Mary*. Having emphasised poverty of spirit and abandonment to Providence, he writes: “To increase the rich treasure your poverty brings you and remain in possession of the kingdom you have conquered, there are three things you must put into practice:

(i) You must set a great value on this real and effective poverty to which you have committed yourself and have a real love for it...

(ii) Feel then for yourselves the effects of poverty...

(iii) Let all your longing be centred on eternal things. Knock on the door which opens to you the mercy of Jesus Christ who recognizes and hears without fail those who are dressed in the livery of his poverty...” (LCM 9, 10, 11).

*Claude Sigouin, smm*

### EXERCISES

- What is the method used by Montfort in his practice of poverty? How could we integrate this method in our current practice?
- Would the poverty of spirit proposed by Montfort be different in the cultures of different countries? What is your own experience of the three practices proposed by Montfort for the members of the Company of Mary?
- What originality or special emphasis do you see in Montfort’s teaching on poverty?

### FURTHER READING

Apart from the writings of St Louis Marie mentioned in the lesson:

The articles *Poverty* and *Providence* in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*.

Any good life of St. Louis Marie.

### 13. A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE APOSTOLATE

#### SPIRITUALITY AND APOSTOLATE IN ST. LOUIS MARIE'S LIFE

On 6 December 1700, just six months after his priestly ordination in Paris, St. Louis Marie wrote to Fr. Leschassier, his spiritual director during the last years in Paris, describing his disappointment at what he had found in the house of St. Clément in Nantes<sup>22</sup>. He had been sent there, as he said, “to prepare for mission-work, and especially for teaching catechism to the poor, since this is what attracts me most.” His conviction that his was an “apostolic” vocation certainly dates back to at least the end of his philosophical studies in Paris, when, as his friend and biographer, Jean-Baptiste Blain, wrote, “his only thought was to study theology in depth, so as to prepare himself for the apostolic life; that was his aim.”<sup>23</sup> What he found at Saint-Clément, however, did not promise well for such a training as he had in mind. There was virtually no mission-work carried out by the residents of the house, nor any hope (it seemed to him) that it would be. In these circumstances, he wrote: “With conditions as they are, I find myself, as time goes on, torn by two apparently contradictory feelings. On one hand, I feel a secret attraction for a hidden life in which I can efface myself and combat my natural tendency to show off. On the other hand, I feel a tremendous urge to make our Lord and his holy Mother loved, to go in a humble and simple way to teach catechism to the poor in country places and to arouse in sinners a devotion to our Blessed Lady.” Already here we have an indication of the tension always within St. Louis Marie between a desire for a *contemplative* life (or at least a contemplative element in his life), and the conviction he had (which only strengthened as time went on) that he was called to exercise *an apostolic ministry of catechesis* especially towards the poor.

We find the same tension reflected in another letter which he wrote almost a year later, on 16 September 1701<sup>24</sup>, although by this time he is becoming more confirmed in his conviction of his specific calling. He writes: “When I am teaching catechism to the poor in town and country, I am in my element.” In this case he is commenting on the prospect of his being restricted to working in the *Hôpital Général* in Poitiers, which does not seem to offer a wide enough scope for his energies. And again, in a further letter to Fr. Leschassier on 4 July 1702, he speaks of his “own inclinations which have always been and still are for mission work.”<sup>25</sup> This was a tension which seems to have persisted throughout his life, even though his primary orientation (towards the ministry of catechesis) was clear to him even at this time. It is evident that the various setbacks he encountered in his ministry in the early years (the difficulties in the *Hôpital Général* in Poitiers, the opposition he later met with in the Diocese of Poitiers and in other dioceses, the terrible disappointment of the banning of the Calvary at Pontchâteau, and so on) played a part in maintaining this tension. Yet these do not explain adequately other manifestations of it.

At various times in the years that followed, St. Louis Marie was drawn to spend time in relative solitude and inactivity, in places far removed from the bustle and business of an active ministry. Sometimes this was perhaps imposed by circumstances, as, for example, his stay of almost a year (1707-1708) with two of his companions at Saint-Lazare just outside Montfort-sur-Meu (he had been asked to leave M. Leuduger's team of missionaries, and seems to have been waiting for a sign from God). At other times it was clearly a choice he made, in response to a need within himself, for time to renew in prayer and meditation his attachment to God. His attempt to create a “hermitage” for himself in the Forest of Mervent, and the times he spent in Saint-Éloi in La Rochelle, fall into this category. Were there others? We do not know. But we should not

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<sup>22</sup> Letter no. 5, to be found in *God Alone. The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore, NY, 1987, pg. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Baptiste Blain, *Summary of the Life of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort*, Rome: Centre International Montfortain, 1977, pg 13.

<sup>24</sup> Letter no. 9, in *God Alone*, pg. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Letter no. 11, in *God Alone*, pg. 15.

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exaggerate the amount of time he spent in such “retreats”; he did not have more than three or four weeks, for example, to enjoy the solitude of Mervent, before it was wrenched from him by the law. Despite his occasional withdrawals from society, his was essentially an active and very busy life.

This was because his own personal spirituality, based on the call he recognised within himself, was essentially a “missionary” spirituality, in the sense that it was oriented always towards the proclamation of the “good news” of the Gospel, especially to the poor. And the spirituality he taught in his missions and in his writings, as we shall see, was also in view of a practical acceptance of the Gospel in the lives of those he taught, and of a further dissemination of the truths of this “good news”. What he developed for himself, and what he taught to others, was always “a spirituality for the apostolate”, never a purely personal possession.

### “KNOWING AND RELISHING THE TRUTH AND GETTING OTHERS TO RELISH IT”

In his *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*<sup>26</sup>, St Louis Marie says: “The preaching of God's word is the most far-reaching, the most effective and also the most difficult ministry of all. The missionaries will, therefore, study and pray unceasingly that they may obtain from God the gift of wisdom so necessary to a true preacher for *knowing and relishing the truth and getting others to relish it*.” In this last phrase, he sums up his whole aim in his own ministry (to preach the truth to others and bring them to “relish” it) and the aim behind his own constant search for “wisdom”, that “wisdom” which brings a particular stamp to the spirituality he practised and taught. This spirituality was never an end in itself, but always in view of preaching the Gospel truths, most especially for those called to the ministry of preaching, but also for all Christians who are called to witness to the Gospel by their lives. For these too, he prescribes the search for “the gift of wisdom in order to know, relish and practise virtue and to lead others to know and relish it.”<sup>27</sup>

As has been seen in other lessons in this course, the vision of Jesus Christ as the “Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom of God” is fundamental to St Louis Marie's spirituality. He believes that the only way to true happiness is through the search for this only true Wisdom, and this applies to all Christians. In LEW 56 he says: “We have no real teacher (Mt. 23:8,10) except the incarnate Wisdom, whose name is Jesus Christ. He alone brings all the works of God to perfection, especially the saints, for he shows them what they must do and teaches them to appreciate (*relish*) and put into practice all he has taught them.”<sup>28</sup> For St. Thomas Aquinas, that gift of the Holy Spirit known as *wisdom* is a kind of affinity with the things of God.<sup>29</sup> In this he is perhaps following the thought of William of St-Thierry, for whom *wisdom* is the eminent virtue which renders the soul capable of “savouring” or “tasting” God.<sup>30</sup> The sense of “relishing” the truths of our faith (French *goûter*, “to taste”) is, according to the Thomist theologian John of St Thomas, the real meaning of that gift of the Holy Spirit known as *wisdom*: it is a “taste for the things of God”.<sup>31</sup> It is natural therefore for St Louis Marie to connect the search for true Wisdom with the ability to “savour” or “relish” the truths of faith.

He uses the same idea and the same terminology in many other places in his writings, e.g. in LFC 26 he claims (referring to the mystery of the Cross): “It is only Jesus, through his all-powerful

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<sup>26</sup> “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, no. 60, in *God Alone*, pg. 422.

<sup>27</sup> “Rule of the Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Saumur”, no. 1, in *God Alone*, pg. 496. Note that the translation of this part of the text given in *God Alone* does not accurately reflect the original French.

<sup>28</sup> “The Love of Eternal Wisdom”, no. 56, in *God Alone*, pg. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on three Sentences*, 35

<sup>30</sup> William of Saint-Thierry, *De natura et dignitate amoris*, 10, 28

<sup>31</sup> John of St. Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus*, In 1<sup>am</sup> 2<sup>ae</sup>, q. 70

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grace, who can teach you this mystery and give you the ability to appreciate (*taste*, *relish*) it.”<sup>32</sup> And in no. 45 of the same work, he explains how we must pray continually for the gift of wisdom if we are to be able to “delight in” or “savour” this mystery of the Cross: “If you stand in need of ... this gracious and consoling spirit, which enables us, in the higher part of the soul, to take delight in things that are bitter and repulsive; ... pray for wisdom, ask for it continually and fervently without wavering or fear of not obtaining it, and it will be yours.”<sup>33</sup> Again it is the gift of wisdom, indeed the only true Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ, who can enable us to “savour” the mysteries of the Gospel, and bring others to the same ability.

### “TO INSPIRE OTHERS WITH THAT LOVE FOR WISDOM”

It is especially when he speaks of the love of Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom and its connection with sanctity that St. Louis Marie shows most clearly his understanding that this love and this sanctity is not something to be kept for oneself, but is, on the contrary, to be passed on to others. In no. 30 of LEW, he writes: “In verses 30 and 31 (*of Ecclesiasticus, ch. 24*) divine Wisdom lists three degrees in holy living, the last of which constitutes perfection:

- (1) Listen to God with humble submission;
- (2) Act in him and through him with persevering fidelity;
- (3) Seek to acquire the light and unction you need to inspire others with that love for Wisdom which will lead them to eternal life.”<sup>34</sup>

St. Louis Marie would agree with all the spiritual writers of his own day that all Christians are called to *seek perfection*, even if they do not succeed in achieving this perfection; and that holiness consists in this seeking for perfection. And here he makes it clear that an essential part of the perfection which all must seek, is to inspire others with that love for Wisdom which will bring Eternal Life with it. So the search for holiness is not just a personal preoccupation, but is necessarily apostolic. One's spirituality cannot be kept to oneself; it must seek out others to share in it, if it is of any real value at all. Certainly this was true of his own personal spiritual life, and it is part and parcel of the spirituality he seeks to impart.

St. Louis Marie firmly believed that this Wisdom that he sought was apostolic. In no. 100 of LEW, he makes this claim quite explicitly: “As ‘nothing is more active than Wisdom’ (Wisd. 7:24), he does not leave those who enjoy his friendship to languish in mediocrity and negligence. He sets them on fire, inspiring them to undertake great things for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”<sup>35</sup> His own life shows to what extent the Wisdom which he had sought and acquired filled him with this spirit of “enterprise” in the service of the Gospel, a spirit which he was at pains to defend resolutely to his friend Jean-Baptiste Blain during the visit he paid to him in Rouen in 1714: “Missionaries and apostolic men,” he said, “have always something new to take in hand, some holy work to establish or defend.”<sup>36</sup>

Far from hindering personal spiritual growth, this apostolic zeal which was so evident in himself, he had found by experience to be productive of a deeper personal holiness. He expresses this in a hymn he wrote on “The flames of zeal”: “If zeal is indeed so necessary, / it is also very salutary / for those who possess it in truth; / to zealous hearts is given grace in abundance, / the greatest treasures the Saviour has to give, / the greatest flames of fervour, / the greatest gifts of

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<sup>32</sup> “Letter to the Friends of the Cross”, no. 26, in *God Alone*, pg. 132

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 45, in *God Alone*, pg. 138

<sup>34</sup> “The Love of Eternal Wisdom”, no. 30, in *God Alone*, pg. 57.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 100, in *God Alone*, pg. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Baptiste Blain, *ibid.*, pg 180.

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innocence.”<sup>37</sup> This contrasts rather sharply, however, with what he says in TD 196, where it seems that God’s chosen ones “have an esteem for quietness, love the interior life, and are assiduous in prayer” to the point where they only “venture out into the world... to fulfil the duties of their state of life.”<sup>38</sup> Here again we have a reflection of the continuing tension within St Louis Marie himself between the contemplative and the active. But it was a tension which seemed to gain its resolution (at least for himself) in the fact that he revealed to Jean-Baptiste Blain in 1714: “He told me that God had granted him a very special grace, which was the continual presence of Jesus and Mary in the depth of his soul.”<sup>39</sup> In this special grace he was able to combine the contemplative, even mystical, awareness of God with the burning zeal which pushed him to reveal God to others. This grace is the “grace in abundance, the greatest treasure the Saviour has to give” which he promises to the truly zealous apostles in H 21:11.

### EVANGELISATION

The word “apostolic” for Montfort had various layers of meaning: it indicated a link with the Apostles of the early Church, as well as a similarity between their spirit and that of preachers like himself and those who would join him, and even a lifestyle seen as based on that of the Apostles.

The link with the Apostles which St Louis Marie prized so much was at once a question of reality and an ideal. “Sent” himself by the Church of his own day (the etymological meaning of “apostle”), which in its turn was founded on the preaching of the Apostles who were sent by Jesus (as he himself was sent by the Father), he was therefore linked directly with the plan of God for mankind, through his link with the Apostles. His mission was thereby authenticated, and it was certainly, in part at least, in a concern to be reassured concerning this authentic link, that he travelled to Rome in 1706 to seek the approbation of the Pope for his life’s work.

But it was not enough simply to be linked authentically with the Apostles; it was also necessary to have their spirit, to imitate them closely (“followers of the Apostles”), to follow their example.<sup>40</sup> He often expresses this as “following in the footsteps of the poor Apostles”, depending on divine Providence (as they did), courageously doing battle with the world, but especially imitating the Apostles in their preaching of the Word: “These followers of the Apostles,” (among whom he placed himself) “will preach with great power and effect. So powerful will their impact be that they will stir the minds and hearts of all who hear them.”<sup>41</sup> In his own case, he recognised very early on the presence of this special gift within himself. In his letter to M. Leschassier from Poitiers, 4 July 1702, he writes: “Almighty God, my Father, whom I am serving in spite of my great unworthiness, has enlightened me to a degree I have never experienced before. He has given me the gift of making myself clear, a facility for speaking without preparation, a good health and a great capacity for sympathising with everyone.”<sup>42</sup> He recognises the rarity of this gift of eloquence “under the impulse of divine Wisdom”: in LEW 97, he says, “How few preachers there are today who possess this most wonderful gift of eloquence and who can say with St Paul, ‘We preach the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 2:7). Most of them speak according to the natural light of their minds, or from what they have taken from books. They do not speak under the impulse of divine Wisdom or from a heart filled to

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<sup>37</sup> Hymn no. 21:11. Cf. *Oeuvres complètes de saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, pg. 1044.

<sup>38</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 196, in *God Alone*, pg. 350.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Baptiste Blain, *ibid.*, pg 183.

<sup>40</sup> “Prayer for Missionaries”, no. 22, in *God Alone*, pg. 406; “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, no. 50, in *God Alone*, pg. 419.

<sup>41</sup> “Prayer for Missionaries”, no. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Letter no. 11, in *God Alone*, pg. 16-17.

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overflowing with wisdom (Mt. 12:34).” And this is what he prescribes, and prays for, for the missionaries in his Company of Mary: “It is the easiest thing in the world to be a fashionable preacher. It is a difficult but sublime thing to be able to preach with the inspiration of an apostle.” But “let a preacher full of God's word and spirit merely open his mouth and all the powers of hell sound the alarm and do their utmost to defend themselves... A preacher of this calibre can, by a simple, unpretentious statement of the truth, rouse a whole city or province by the conflict he stirs up there.”<sup>43</sup>

What is involved here is certainly an “interior” spirit, but St. Louis Marie was a great believer also in “exterior” practices or manifestations of one’s interior dispositions. And so, for St. Louis Marie himself, this “following in the footsteps of the poor Apostles” went as far as taking on a particular lifestyle, that of a “vagabond apostolate” which he describes in Hymn 22: “The die is cast; I will travel the world, / I have taken on a vagabond style / to save my poor neighbour”<sup>44</sup> This hymn is entitled “Resolutions and Prayers of a Perfect and Zealous Missionary”, indicating that he believed that the style of life it portrays is one to which all missionaries (“apostolic men”) should aspire. It may well be that others are not called to such a life-style: in his conversation with Blain in 1714, he says as much: “They who do not wish to follow me are walking by another path, less laborious and less thorny, and I approve of it.”<sup>45</sup> But he certainly believed that it was the best and most effective way for those called to be “apostles”, and that certainly included those who would be missionaries in the Company of Mary, and indeed many others to whom he appealed to come and join him in the ministry which would “renew the face of the earth and reform your Church.”<sup>46</sup> Again it seems that if we follow his thought to its logical conclusions, his spirituality is essentially apostolic.

What is involved in this “vagabond” life-style? First of all, a freedom, a lack of encumbrances, a readiness and an ability to go, to “run wherever God may call them.”<sup>47</sup> This is summed up succinctly in PM 7: “men who are free, priests who are free with the freedom that comes from you, detached from everything, without father, mother, brothers, sisters or relatives and friends as the world and the flesh understand them, without worldly possessions to encumber or distract them, and devoid of all self-interest.” Or more poetically, in PM 9: “men as free as the clouds that sail high above the earth, filled with the dew of heaven, and moving, without let or hindrance, according to the inspiration of the Spirit.”<sup>48</sup>

Then this lifestyle also implies a bold and enterprising spirit, quite contrary to the “sedentary or even solitary life” lived by so many “whose motto is *habitatores quietis* (lovers of the quiet life).” The motto of the true missionary, on the other hand, “is one which enables him to say in all truth like St. Paul: *Instabiles sumus*, we have no permanent home of our own.”<sup>49</sup> As he said to Blain in 1714, “There are different kinds and different degrees of wisdom. The wisdom of a person living in community is one thing, the wisdom of a missionary and an apostolic man quite another... the former (has) nothing new to undertake, and nothing to do but let himself be guided by the rule and customs of a well-regulated house... (but) the latter, on the contrary,

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<sup>43</sup> “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, nos. 60, 61, in *God Alone*, pg. 422-23.

<sup>44</sup> Hymn no. 22:1. Cf. *Oeuvres complètes de saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, pg. 1048.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Baptiste Blain, *ibid.*, pg 178.

<sup>46</sup> “Prayer for Missionaries”, no. 17, in *God Alone*, pg.405. Cf. the whole of this prayer for the sense of this “vagabond lifestyle”.

<sup>47</sup> “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, no. 6, in *God Alone*, pg. 412.

<sup>48</sup> “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 7 & 9, in *God Alone*, pg. 403.

<sup>49</sup> “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, no. 2, in *God Alone*, pg. 412.

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(has) to procure the glory of God at the cost of his own glory, and to execute new designs.”<sup>50</sup> St. Louis Marie is clearly not afraid to be different in the pursuit of his “apostolic” spirituality.

St. Louis Marie sums up his sense of “being an apostle” when he prescribes for his Missionaries of the Company of Mary that they should “feel free at all times to repeat after Jesus Christ: ‘*The Lord has sent me to preach good news to the poor*’ (Lk. 4:18), or, as the Apostle said: ‘*Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel*’ (I Cor. 1:17).”<sup>51</sup> They are to “evangelise” - to preach the Gospel wherever it needs to be preached. That might be in new lands or new continents (he himself dreamed of going to India or North America, but was told by the Pope to return to France); or it might be (and was so in his own case) in places where the Gospel *had* been heard, but where a “new evangelisation” was necessary to “renew the face of the earth and reform (the) Church”.

It should come as no surprise then that Pope John Paul II, who several times proclaimed his indebtedness to St. Louis Marie for his own spirituality,<sup>52</sup> should place such an emphasis on a “new evangelisation” as the Church draws near the end of the second millennium of the Christian era. In a letter he wrote to the Montfortian Family on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Canonisation of St. Louis Marie, Pope John Paul said: “Now that the need for a new evangelisation has become imperative in most parts of the world, Father de Montfort’s zeal for the Word of God, his solicitude for the very poor, his ability to make himself understood by the simplest folk and to stimulate their piety, his qualities for organising, his initiatives to sustain fervour by founding spiritual movements and to involve the laity in the service of the poor, all that, with practical adaptations, can inspire the apostles of today...The teaching of your founder and master coincides with the themes that the whole Church meditates on at the approach of the Great Jubilee; it marks out for us the path of true Wisdom that must be laid open to so many young people who search for meaning in their lives and for an art of living.”<sup>53</sup>

### LIFE WITNESS

If “evangelisation” is the natural outcome of St. Louis Marie’s spirituality, this is not confined to the explicit proclamation of the Word of God from a pulpit or elsewhere. Just as important, and in practice more frequent, is the witness to the Gospel given by a life lived according to its values, a life truly committed to the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, the Incarnate Wisdom. St. Louis Marie’s aim, in his formulation of his spiritual teaching, whether in his written works or in the pulpit during his many missions, was to rekindle in his audience the awareness of the reality of Christian Baptism - the commitment of the whole person in Baptism to Jesus Christ, so as to become a child of God, a member of God’s household. And not only to rekindle awareness, but to bring about once again a willing, and indeed enthusiastic re-affirmation of that commitment. He expressed this in terms of “total consecration to Jesus Christ”, the word “total” bearing above all the connotation of “constant, daily, all-embracing” dedication. As he says in SM 28: “this devotion consists in surrendering oneself in the manner of a slave to Mary, and to Jesus through her, and then *performing all our actions* with Mary, in Mary, through Mary, and for Mary.” To which he adds, in TD 257, “(doing everything through Mary, with Mary, in Mary, and for Mary), *in order to do it more perfectly through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus, and for*

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<sup>50</sup> Jean-Baptiste Blain, *ibid.*, pg 180. Note that, in the English translation of this passage, “sagesse” has been rendered as “prudence” rather than “wisdom”.

<sup>51</sup> “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”, no. 2, in *God Alone*, pg. 411.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. for example, the *Address to the Religious of France at St. Laurent-sur-Sèvre*, 19 September 1996, where he said: ““I am happy to begin my pilgrimage on French soil under the patronage of this outstanding saint. You know that I am very indebted to him and to his *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.” Cf. also *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*”, pg. :”Thanks to St. Louis Marie de Montfort, I came to understand that true devotion to the Mother of God is actually Christocentric, indeed it is very profoundly rooted in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, and the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption.”

<sup>53</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the Montfortian Family*, nos. 5,6.

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Jesus.”<sup>54</sup> “Performing all our actions”, “doing everything”: living out our commitment in our ordinary, everyday life - this too is “evangelisation”, especially when it involves, as it must, our service in love of those around us.

One of the explicit motives given by St. Louis Marie for adopting the “devotion” he teaches is that: “It is of great benefit to our neighbour. For by it we show love for our neighbour in an outstanding way since we give him through Mary's hands all that we prize most highly - that is, the satisfactory and prayer value of all our good works, down to the least good thought and the least little suffering.”<sup>55</sup> To our ears, this may not appear such a great boon for our needy brother or sister; but St. Louis Marie also offers another motive: “It helps us to imitate Christ,”<sup>56</sup> not only in his “submission to and dependence on” Mary, but in all his ways and all his virtues, since it is a total dedication of ourselves to him so as to be a “committed disciple, imitator and slave of Jesus”, to quote the words of St. Louis Marie's own formula of consecration.<sup>57</sup> He goes to great pains, in LEW, chapters 4, 6, 9-11, and 13-14, to show the love of Jesus for men and women, stressing his “gentleness” towards them (LEW, chapters 10-11). He is clearly inviting us to be captivated by this love, and to imitate it in our own lives. This is the way, for most Christians, to proclaim the message of the Gospel, which is, in its simplest form: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that all those who believe in him may not perish, but may have eternal life” (Jn 3.16).

### MARY, MOTHER OF APOSTLES

The first line of the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, “It was through the Blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world,” encapsulates the Marian as well as the Apostolic nature of the spirituality St. Louis Marie proposes to us. Jesus “came into the world” because “sent” by the Father; and he in turn “sends” his Apostles and those who will follow them so that the reign of God (which is the reign of his Son, Jesus) may be established in the world. That is the task of the Apostles. And just as the coming of Jesus into the world involved the active participation of Mary, so (in St. Louis Marie's thought) the establishment of the reign of God must involve her. In fact, he sees Mary's “Fiat” as one, including the beginning of the process of salvation and its fulfilment in her one, freely-given consent. And so, he insists on the fact that Mary, as Mother of Jesus the Saviour, is also Mother of all men and women who are joined to Christ. “God the Father wishes Mary to be the mother of his children until the end of time... God the Son wishes to form himself, and, in a manner of speaking, become incarnate every day in his members through his dear Mother... God the Holy Spirit wishes to fashion his chosen ones in and through Mary.”<sup>58</sup> Thus Mary's “Fiat” is apostolic - it is not a momentary consent concerning herself alone, but a consent with world-wide and never-ending influence, which is part and parcel of the building of the Kingdom.

So too, those who, in consecrating themselves to Jesus Christ through Mary, undertake to imitate her in all things (to do all things “with Mary”), imitate her apostolic “Fiat”. As she declared herself the slave-girl of the Lord, they enter into what St. Louis Marie calls a “slavery of love” towards the Lord. And the purpose of this consecration as “slaves” is to fulfil the Gospel proclamation: “The Kingdom of Heaven is in your midst” (Lk 17:21). It too is essentially apostolic.

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<sup>54</sup> “The Secret of Mary”, no. 28 in *God Alone*, pg. 270; “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 257, in *God Alone*, pg. 371.

<sup>55</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 171, in *God Alone*, pg. 343.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 139, pg. 332.

<sup>57</sup> “The Love of Eternal Wisdom”, no. 227, in *God Alone*, pg. 113.

<sup>58</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, nos. 29, 31, 34, in *God Alone*, pg. 297-9.

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It is perhaps curious that St. Louis Marie, so familiar with Mary's role, so devoted to her, does not mention (at least explicitly) in his writings the fact that, after the Ascension of Jesus her Son, his disciples gathered together *with her* in prayer (Acts 1:14) - an image it is difficult to see him not relishing. Nor does he show any sign of being aware of the pious assumption illustrated in a number of the great paintings depicting the event, that she too was present at the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles (Acts 2:1-4). Yet that relationship which we today might describe in terms of "Mary, Mother (or Queen) of Apostles", is clearly in his mind when he writes the Prayer for Missionaries. He may not use the terminology, but the reality is present there. The "new company" of apostles for which he prays is to be "given" to Mary through whom the era of grace is to be brought to a close. So they will be *her* company, and they will "call her Mother and serve her." They are to be "*Liberos*: true children of Mary... true servants of the Blessed Virgin..." whose "inspiration will be their authentic devotion to Mary..." These "holy missionaries" will be "Mary's children, whom you are to gather together and set apart from the rest of men for the good of your Church." These "followers of the Apostles" will have "the silver wings of the dove... because of their total dependence on Providence and their devotion to Mary."<sup>59</sup> We find similar phrases and ideas in SM 58-59, and in TD 48, 50, 54 and 55-59, where St. Louis Marie speaks in prophetic tones of the "Apostles of the Latter Times".<sup>60</sup>

### "APOSTLES OF THE LATTER TIMES"

The apostolic nature of St. Louis Marie's spirituality is perhaps nowhere more evident than in what he writes of the "Apostles of the latter times". The part they are to play in the final establishment of the reign of God, is the culmination of their relationship with God, which always includes a strong reference to Mary. St. Louis Marie's own predilection for the itinerant mission, which he felt within himself from very early on (as we noted above), is a product of both his desire to live the life of the early apostles, and of the urgency he felt (in view of what he perceived as the state of the church and the world of his own day) to proclaim the reign of Jesus Christ. The same sense of urgency, he was sure, would cause God to raise up, "in these latter times" (TD 50), great saints who would on the one hand battle against sin and Satan, and on the other hand work positively for the reform of the Church and its extension into the world.

St. Louis Marie certainly saw the missionaries of his Company of Mary as among these expected "apostles of the latter times", as is clear from the "Prayer for Missionaries", where he identifies them as "missionaries" and "priests"<sup>61</sup>. But he did not restrict their scope to these. In two other passages of a prophetic nature and tone (TD 114, 217) he refers to "a mighty legion of brave and valiant soldiers of Jesus and Mary, both men and women, who will fight the devil, the world, and corrupt nature in the perilous times that are sure to come" (TD 114), while in TD 217 he speaks more generally of "many souls, chosen by Mary and given her by the most High God."<sup>62</sup>

The spirituality which inspires these "apostles of the latter times", while it partakes of the general nature of all genuine Christian spirituality (e.g. in its insistence on union with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, being "true disciples of Jesus", etc.), nevertheless is understood by St. Louis Marie himself to be that which he proposes for those "chosen souls" (cf. SM 1, et al.) he addresses in SM and TD as well as the Company of Mary. It therefore has a

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<sup>59</sup> "Prayer for Missionaries", nos. 6, 11, 12, 20, 22, 24, in *God Alone*, pgs. 402-6.

<sup>60</sup> "The Secret of Mary", nos. 58-9, in *God Alone*, pg. 277; "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin", nos. 48, 50, 54 and 55-59, in *God Alone*, pgs. 302-307. The phrase "apostles of the latter times" is used by St. Louis Marie in TD 58. It should be understood correctly, without any admixture of the sort of "millenarianism" associated with Joachim de Flore (which claims that Jesus will reign visibly for one thousand years on this earth at the end of the world). A thorough discussion of this question is to be found in the article "End Times" in *Jesus Living in Mary. Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore, NY, 1994.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. "Prayer for Missionaries", nos. 3, 25 (among others), in *God Alone*, pgs. 401, 407.

<sup>62</sup> "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin", nos. 114, 217, in *God Alone*, pg. 324, 360.

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strong element of genuine Marian devotion, and ideally will take the form of consecration to Jesus Christ through Mary: “They will be exceptionally devoted to the Blessed Virgin” (TD 48), and “they will consecrate themselves entirely to her service as subjects and slaves of love... They will see clearly that she is the safest, easiest, shortest and most perfect way of approaching Jesus and will surrender themselves to her, body and soul, without reserve in order to belong entirely to Jesus” (TD 55). “True children of Mary... True servants of the Blessed Virgin... their inspiration will be their authentic devotion to Mary” (PM 11, 12).<sup>63</sup> Although not as clearly expressed as the Marian dimension, St. Louis Marie’s understanding of the place of the Cross is also hinted at in his description of these apostles: “They will be... thoroughly purified by the fire of great tribulations and closely joined to God... They will carry... the myrrh of mortification in their body” (TD 56). The cross will be theirs because “the devil will lie in wait to attack the heel of this mysterious woman, that is, the little company of her children who will come towards the end of time” (PM 13).<sup>64</sup>

One aspect of the spirituality of these “apostles of the latter times” which clearly underlines the “apostolic” nature of St. Louis Marie’s spirituality is their total availability to the Holy Spirit: “They will be like thunder-clouds flying through the air at the slightest breath of the Holy Spirit... they will have the silver wings of the dove enabling them to go wherever the Holy Spirit calls them” (TD 57, 58); “as free as the clouds that sail high above the earth, filled with the dew of heaven, and moving, without let or hindrance, according to the inspiration of the Spirit... always available, always ready to obey you when those in authority speak. Always with the words of Samuel on their lips: *praesto sum*, here I am; always ready to be on the move and to suffer with you and for you, just as the Apostles were: *eamus et moriamur cum illo*, let us go and die along with him” (PM 9, 10).<sup>65</sup>

St. Louis Marie insists on the apostolic zeal which is a characteristic of these chosen souls: “great souls filled with... zeal” (TD 48); “superior to all creatures by their zeal” (TD 54); “they will be ministers of the Lord who, like a flaming fire, will kindle everywhere the fires of divine love” (TD 56).<sup>66</sup> This zeal will be directed towards love of neighbour: “They will carry the gold of love in their heart... They will bring to the poor and lowly everywhere the sweet fragrance of Jesus” (TD 56); they “will have the kindly nature of a man - witness their selfless and beneficent love of their neighbour... They will look kindly on their fellow-men... for them the silvered pinions of the dove will be the perfect love they have for their neighbour which enables them to bear with his shortcomings, and their great love for Jesus Christ which enables them to carry his cross” (PM 21, 24).<sup>67</sup> And their zeal will be manifested in their preaching the Word of the Gospel, by their evangelising spirit: “they will shower down the rain of God’s word and of eternal life... they will pierce through and through with the two-edged sword of God’s word all those against whom they are sent by Almighty God... They will have the two-edged sword of the word of God in their mouths” (TD 57, 59); “with the holy Gospel issuing from their mouths like a bright and burning flame... These followers of the Apostles will preach with great power and effect. So powerful will their impact be that they will stir the minds and hearts of all who hear them” (PM 12, 22).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., nos. 48, 55, in *God Alone*, pg. 302, 306; “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 11, 12, in *God Alone*, pg. 403.

<sup>64</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 56, in *God Alone*, pg. 306; “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 13, in *God Alone*, pg. 404.

<sup>65</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 57, 58, in *God Alone*, pg. 306; “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 9, 10, in *God Alone*, pg. 403.

<sup>66</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 48, 54, 56, in *God Alone*, pg. 302, 305-6.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., no. 56, in *God Alone*, pg. 306; “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 21, 24, in *God Alone*, pg. 406.

<sup>68</sup> “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin”, no. 57, 59, in *God Alone*, pg. 306-7; “Prayer for Missionaries”, nos. 12, 22, in *God Alone*, pg. 403, 406.

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### CONCLUSION

We have seen in this lesson that St. Louis Marie de Montfort's spirituality is essentially a spirituality for the apostolate. This was the natural pattern that it took in his own life - he was drawn by the grace of God working in him, not to keep his relationship with God to himself, but to share it with others whom he regarded through the compassionate eyes of Jesus himself, and to preach the Gospel message of God's love for each individual, especially the very poor. At the same time, he was able to achieve a contemplative awareness of Jesus and Mary in his own life. This enabled him to "taste" or "relish" the truth of the Gospel message, and to be filled thereby with a desire and an ability to help others to do the same. He saw the highest perfection of the spiritual life to lie in inspiring in others the love of Jesus, Eternal Wisdom. This led him to see evangelisation as the natural goal of his own life and of the lives of those who would follow him, whether in his Company of Mary, other congregations, or indeed any who would follow his path of spirituality. This evangelisation extends also to the witness of ordinary, everyday life, especially when this is shaped by the total dedication to Jesus through Mary that he teaches, with its concomitant efforts to live "through, with, in and for Mary". Mary is always the supreme example for the apostle, the Mother and Queen of Apostles, who inspires them by her own all-embracing "Fiat". And finally, in what he says in prophecy of the "apostles of the latter times", St. Louis Marie describes the zeal and effectiveness of the apostle formed in the spirituality which he proposes to us.

*Paul R. Allerton, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. Reflect on your own sense of your vocation. What place do *contemplation* and *action* hold in your awareness of this? How do you resolve any tension between these?
2. Describe how St. Louis Marie's teaching on *Total Consecration* implies the apostolic dimension.
3. How will you "preach the Gospel" in your own life today?

### FURTHER READING

Apart from the various citations given in this lesson, it would be good to read the whole of Letters 5, 6 & 8-11, TD 48-59; the Prayer for Missionaries, and (if possible) Hymns 22 and 91 (not yet available in English translation).

The articles "Apostle" and "End Times", and the more relevant parts of the articles "Consecration" and "Montfort Spirituality", in *Jesus Living in Mary. Handbook of the Spirituality of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort*. (Bay Shore, NY, 1994).

## 14. CHURCH - COMMUNITY

The theology of the Church has made much progress during the last century. Especially in the documents of the Second Vatican Council we find the modern vision of the Church. In the time of Montfort the sense of belonging to the Church was experienced particularly as a means of winning a personal eternal salvation; the most common ways of seeing oneself as belonging to the Church were the sacraments and indulgences, respecting the laws of morality and being faithful to certain religious practices.

Montfort was certainly a child of his time, but he made choices in his own life and missionary activity that indicate a profound sense of the Church, and that lead his disciples today towards an ecclesial sensitivity that is very much in line with the theology of our own time.

### 1. THE PASSIONATE LOVE MONTFORT HAD FOR THE CHURCH

Montfort lived during a period of history when the Church in France was engaged in putting into effect the reforms asked for by the Council of Trent. During the 17th Century a new spirit was spreading for the renewal of the life of the Church. The good fruits of this were evident: zealous bishops, priests who were better prepared in the seminaries and who were present in the midst of their people, religious very numerous, available for charitable works and offering new or renewed spiritual paths to follow. But at the popular level, on the whole but especially in the countryside, a genuine and profound reform of Christianity had not yet come about.

The day Montfort decided to become a priest, he made his first ecclesial choice—the most radical of all. In this way he wanted to consecrate his whole life to the service of the Church. Afterwards, during his formation, he came to understand clearly that his priestly mission must be above all a missionary service at the level of the people: to preach missions and “to teach catechism to the poor in country places.” This was the choice he made “when I see the needs of the Church” of his own time (Letter 5).

To show his love for this Church, Montfort became a specialist in popular communication. His *preaching* presented fundamental teachings of Christian doctrine, based on the Word of God and given in such a way that the ordinary people could understand. *Catechism* took up a great deal of his time, but Montfort knew the importance of a well-appropriated faith when up against the fashions of the world. *Popular itinerant missions* were the formula chosen by Grignon de Montfort for being at the service of the greatest possible number of the faithful. And during the mission, liturgical or paraliturgical *ceremonies* were prepared down to the smallest detail and celebrated with pomp and solemnity: the missionary was intent on strongly engaging the religious sentiment of the people; after the mission, everyone would have been able to retain the memory of this spiritual experience for a long time. The *language*, the *style* and the *words* used by Montfort were both rich and profound, simple but precise, creative and imaginative, just like the people liked to hear. The few writings left to us by him are all quite short, but rich in content, filled with the “science of the saints”, at the service of the Church right down to our own day. The *symbolism* used by Montfort in his missionary activity (banners and statues, crosses and calvaries, rosaries, processions, pilgrimages, etc.) were pedagogical devices for the people of God that he encountered in his wanderings.

Montfort was keen to represent himself as an “apostolic missionary”, appointed by Pope Clement XI. He wanted to show his obedience to the Church, in dialogue with the bishops, even when he had difficulties with them; for his missions he usually used the church of the local parish rather than other particular chapels, so as to emphasise the centre of the community life of the faithful.

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Beginning with some pages of Montfort's writings, we can pick out his idea of the condition of the Church in the world, and of the need for reform, especially on the spiritual level. In the *Prayer for Missionaries*, with its inspired style, Montfort complains of the fact that "Your divine commandments are broken, your Gospel is thrown aside, torrents of iniquity flood the whole earth". On the contrary, the will of God must be done, on earth as in heaven; the Kingdom of God must come; everything must be restored. The Holy Spirit must come with his "fiery deluge of pure love", that must be enkindled all over the world, to convert all nations, renew the world and reform the Church (PM 5 and 17).

The protagonists of the genuine reform of the Church are principally God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who continue operating in the world for the salvation of humanity (ID 22). The saints of the past are also such protagonists, first of all the Blessed Virgin, who collaborated with the Holy Spirit in the realisation of God's plan. And today we are all called to become saints (SM 3) and apostles for our own times (ID 55-59), men and women, religious and lay-folk, by dint of the Baptism we have received, and in order to respond to the love God has shown us first.

### 2. HOW THE CHURCH-COMMUNITY CAN COME ABOUT AND GROW

As in his own time Montfort wanted to draw Christians to a genuine conversion for the coming of the Kingdom of God in the whole world, in the same way today he invites us, through the teaching contained in his writings, to follow the path of faith, which leads us to live fully the vocation to be alive in the Church, the people of God called to be holy.

Montfortian spirituality proposes the total consecration of oneself to Jesus Christ through Mary as a "practice of devotion" which is capable of leading us from a first conversion to the highest degree of sanctity. This path allows us also to give expression to the ecclesial dimension of our faith, in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters.

The consecration to Jesus through Mary is proposed by Montfort as a "perfect renewal of the vows and promises of holy baptism" (ID 120). In this way we are led to the sources of our faith and of our belonging to the Church. To give better effect to our own baptism means to give deeper expression to the Church that we are. In fact by our baptism we are incorporated into Christ, who died and is risen, to live with him as a risen people, with other brothers and sisters in the faith, members of the Mystical Body of Christ, walking behind him who is our leader and the first-born of many brethren.

The consecration, as Montfort again says, is meant to make us capable of carrying our own cross in the footsteps of Jesus Christ every day of our lives (LEW 225). In this way we are made participants in the history of salvation and become collaborators in the work of the Holy Spirit in the era of the Church, as apostles announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God present in the world and enabling its growth until the last times. We are on the march with the whole people of God; in our persevering fidelity, the final coming of Jesus Christ in his glory is being prepared and even hastened, when he will be all in all. Thus will the mission of the Church be brought to an end.

According to Grignon de Montfort, the apostolate constitutes the perfection of spiritual life (LEW 30, 95, 153). When we live out of love for God, when we possess Wisdom, we cannot avoid passing on to others these marvels and riches of the soul.

To live out the consecration to Jesus through Mary also means to recognise the history of salvation and to accept to be saved. In his *Love of Eternal Wisdom*, Montfort speaks of the love God has for us, a "bond of friendship... beyond our understanding..." an "earnest desire... to give himself to men" (LEW 64). With the Incarnation of divine Wisdom, God enters our lives and our history; it is us that he addresses, that he desires, that he seeks, that he claims; he wants

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to draw us powerfully to himself, to make us happy (LEW 66). Finally, the love of God for us provides its ultimate proof in the mystery of the glorious cross. We are introduced into this mystery by our baptism, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are then given to us with faith, hope and charity and all the great virtues (LEW 99). Then this work of salvation continues throughout the era of the Church, this era that is ours, in which the love of God manifests itself still. Inserted into the history of salvation, we are inserted into the Church.

Our consecration to Jesus Christ is made “through Mary”. This form of devotion leads us to recognise and accept the presence and the mission of Mary in the Church. It is through Mary that the Saviour came into the world, “and it is also through her that he must reign in the world” (TD 1). Mary is not only the Mother of Jesus Christ, but is also the spiritual Mother of all the faithful, that is to say, of the Church. The one who lives “in dependence on Mary” highlights the role of Mary in the Church: she is the collaborator with the Holy Spirit for the formation of the great saints of these latter times (TD 54); she is the way to the Church, and enables this community of the people of God to accomplish its own mission.

The fundamental spiritual attitude of the Montfortian consecration consists in a perfect and total dependence on Jesus and Mary. It is radical obedience to the will of the Father, like that of Jesus Christ himself, who on entering the world said: “See, I am coming to do your will, my God” (cf. TD 248; this text from Heb 10:7, is, however, missing from the English text of TD). He wished also to depend on Mary (TD 18 and 27). Mary herself gave her free consent to the call of God, who wanted her to be the Mother of Christ and the Mother of the faithful in the Church. Still today, Mary collaborates with God the Father in bringing forth the children of God, with God the Son in forming other Christians fully conformed to him, and with the Holy Spirit in producing the great saints (TD 2-36). These great mysteries are brought into being in the era of the Church. The soul who actively cooperates in this process of transformation becomes a true child of the Church.

In this mystery of the construction, growth and renewal of the Church, Mary is also the perfect model for each of the faithful. A true disciple of the Lord, she freely welcomed the Word of God, kept it faithfully in her heart and caused it to bear abundant fruit. All the faithful, men or women, religious or lay, are called to become adult in the faith, welcoming the proclamation of the Word, living it out in their life-experience, and witnessing to it before others in the apostolate. “Blessed are those who understand these eternal truths... Most blessed of all are those who believe them, put them into practice and teach them to others...” (LEW 153).

The practice of the consecration proposed by Montfort causes us to manifest in our lives the various aspects of the face of the Church: it is the proclamation of the *kerygma* and calls together the people of God; it is the celebration of the mysteries that bring transformation, and the *diakonia* in fraternal service and mutual interdependence; it is also communion with God and communion of men and women with one another in charity; finally the Church is an eschatological community in its progress through the centuries, moving towards the perfect manifestation of the Lord.

### 3. IN TODAY'S THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

Keeping in mind especially the ecclesiology of Vatican II, what points of harmony can we pick out with the spiritual doctrine of Grignon de Montfort?

#### *The Kingdom of God*

One of the things achieved by the Second Vatican Council was the rediscovery of the historico-salvific dimension of theology. Theologians today prefer to describe what was and what is the plan of God, the plan of salvation willed by the Father, accomplished in the mission of the Son,

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and actualised each day among human beings by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 24). This is the Kingdom of God. The Church is the seed and the beginning, while it continues to grow and aspires for full realisation (LG 5). The believer is called to construct the Kingdom of God, in his own heart and in the world, living by the Spirit, conquering evil, until the full manifestation of Christ in glory.

By the choice that Montfort made, not to become a doctor of the Sorbonne, but to dedicate himself to the people, not to write for intellectuals, but for the simple people (TD 26), he manifests a predilection for a positive presentation of the history of salvation, showing the various phases of its realisation and those involved in them. Montfort always brings out explicitly the Trinitarian dimension of God's action (TD 4, 16, 17-21, 22, 23-26), as does LG (24). Human beings are called to make Christ reign in their hearts, since "the kingdom of Jesus Christ exists primarily in the heart" (TD 38). In this second coming, Jesus Christ must be known, loved and served (TD 49); he "must be the ultimate end of all our other devotions (...) foundation for our salvation, perfection and glory" (TD 61). By the finger of God, Jesus expels the demons and renders visible the kingdom (LG 5); the struggle against the reign of evil increases day by day, in this last era of time (TD 50-51), but true believers will be given the strength to gain the victory (TD 58). It is therefore a question of the same Trinitarian and historico-salvific context; initiated by God, but with the collaboration of human beings; a commitment within history, until the end of time. Montfort, like LG, prefers to use the image of the kingdom.

### *One Church, one people*

The idea of the Church as the people of God is certainly present in the Bible and now it has been taken up as fundamental by LG (9 ff.). In the time of Montfort, the main emphasis was on the salvation which affects each person in the freedom of his or her choices, and over and above any belonging to the bulk of Christians. A stronger sense of the communitarian dimension of our faith came only later, but nevertheless it is not a rare thing for the difference to be more in the forms of expression rather than in the real content.

The writings of Montfort tell us that spiritual salvation is to be sought within the Church, which is the dispenser of the sacraments, and that progress in grace comes through ascetic zeal and the practices of devotions. Yet certain elements merit particular attention. To be holy means to free oneself from the spirit of the world and to fill oneself with Jesus Christ (TD 227), to deny oneself and follow Christ (LFC 13), to acquire and preserve Wisdom (LEW 14, 223); not so as to isolate oneself in an individualist asceticism, but rather "to inspire others with that love for Wisdom which will lead them to eternal life" (LEW 30), to belong to the party of Christ (LFC 7-12), to be apostles through ministry, by whom the world will be renewed and the Church reformed, a church which will welcome pagans, Muslims, Jews and all the converted (PM 17).

If then we examine the options taken by Montfort at the pastoral level, we see ever more clearly his sense of the people of God that he gathers together, the parish communities to which he preached missions, the liturgical assemblies he convoked to listen to the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, the public renewal of baptismal vows, the processions he arranged. If the renewal proposed by Vatican II achieves the same result (LG 13-17), that means that the same spirit is to be found at the root, the same understanding, even if it is expressed in different formulas.

### *All called to holiness*

The Council brought about a great change in mentality, recognising that every state in life, if lived with genuine faith, is capable of making saints; not only monks, priests and religious, but

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also the lay state and the married state can be open to the heroic practice of virtue, to the contemplative dimension of the Christian life, and to witnessing and being of service to one's neighbour. The ways and means of sanctity are above all charity, listening to the Word of God, the sacraments, prayer and the exercise of all the virtues (LG 42).

The spirituality taught by Montfort has its unique foundations in baptism, lived out in practice, and in the *sequela Christi* (the following of Christ), proposed for all. Holiness is certainly willed by God for every man and woman (SM 3); the great saints and the apostles of the era of the Church, "both men and women" (TD 114), will be true disciples of Jesus Christ, with the strength of his Word alone and of his Cross alone (TD 58-59). Montfort taught this particular form of spirituality to the people at large; his missions were for every sort of person, for every age and every state in life. Therefore it was a profoundly ecclesial spirituality, also in the sense of being adapted to the whole people of God.

### *Eschatological character*

"Already the final age of the world has come upon us" (LG 48): the Church is now already adorned with a genuine sanctity, even if it is imperfect; strong in the faith, we await the manifestation in glory of Jesus Christ.

Montfort shows a particular sensitivity to the future of the Church and uses a particular language (TD 49-59; SM 58-59; PM 2, 5, 6, 13, 17), to the point of being wrongly suspected by some of millennialism. Montfort is waiting for the glorious coming of Christ, as "the whole Church expect(s) him" (SM 58), but it is true that the missionary sees the manifestation of the kingdom of God as being caught up in a progressively accelerating process. He insists on the time of conversion, since the struggle between good and evil is "now more than ever" in a decisive period. Every time he speaks of the future, we see expressions coming up like: "more than ever", "more each day", "as soon as possible", "above all", "increasing day by day" (TD 50, 51, 55, 113, 114). This is a dynamic way of convincing us that the time for salvation is this time, without waiting any further, for the Lord is coming.

In looking at the future of the Church and the world, Montfort sees the eternal fidelity of God, who does not change in his thoughts or his way of acting (TD 15) and whose love crosses the centuries, from the beginning until the end. Between the past and the future, there is a continuity, and a dependence of the future on the past, and a sense of the past setting the example for the future. But the defining feature is that history is linear and is moving towards the end.

### *Mary*

In the Montfortian presentation of the history of salvation, Mary becomes the key to reading the different stages. Through Mary as intermediary, God begins and ends his most important works (TD 15-19); the Holy Spirit willed, and still wills, to choose her as a collaborator (TD 20, 35); through the mediation of Mary, the saints of the past found grace before God, and it will be the same in the future (TD 45); the apostles of the latter times will be the work of the Spirit in union with Mary, and they will be educated, formed and sustained by her (PM 6, 11; TD 35, 55-56).

One might say that, in Montfort's view, in the era of the Church and "more than ever" in "these latter times" there emerge three protagonists: the Holy Spirit, Mary and these spirits who are "great and exalted before God in holiness" (TD 54). If all are called to holiness, then the time of grace given to each one in the Church is a time of perfect docility to the Spirit; Mary is the great *secret* for living fully in the Holy Spirit; the practice of devotions taught by Montfort, total consecration to Jesus through Mary his mediator, the renewal of baptismal vows, then become

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simply, but powerfully, a way of being and of living in fullness the Christian life, of being part of the number of those “great saints” who characterise “more than ever” the Church, which is little by little approaching the end.

It is not by chance that the development of teaching that Vatican II makes regarding the Church, ends with the presentation of Mary (LG 52-69). Her presence in the mystery of Christ demands that this continue in the mystery of the Church. Mary thus becomes an image and a model of the Church (LG 53, 63). What Mary has been and is, the Church is called to become: virgin and mother (LG 63-64), rich in virtues to be imitated (LG 65), and especially her faith, her hope and her charity. And finally, as the sign of the people of God, Mary is glorified in God as forerunner of the Church, anticipating the final destiny that will be that of every believer and of the whole community of those who are saved (LG 68).

Montfort, in the journey of faith that he proposes, places Mary in an analogous function. In effect, he presents the global plan of salvation, beginning with the plan of God, and the action of the Trinity, to come finally to the Incarnation and the realisation of Redemption in Christ. Here, Montfort enables us to discover the presence and the role of Mary in the historical realisation of salvation. And here there appears the formulation of the foundational principle of his spirituality: since God made use of Mary to come to us, we must go back to him through the mediation of Mary. This is the translation in other terms of what the Council understood by the title itself of chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium*: Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church.

*Battista Cortinovia, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. How did St Louis Marie view the Church in France of his own day? What was his own response?
2. How does St Louis Marie’s teaching on Consecration to Jesus through Mary relate to the growth of the Church?
3. In comparing St Louis Marie’s writings with *Lumen Gentium*, what element seems to you the most striking similarity?

### FURTHER READING

The article *Church in Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*. See it online: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/Handbook/Church.htm>

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican Council II (*Lumen Gentium*), which can be found at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), or [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/vc2/lumen\\_gentium.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/vc2/lumen_gentium.html).

## 15. TO JESUS THROUGH MARY

### I. ENTHUSIASM FOR MOTHER AND SON

In his presentation of the public ministry of Jesus Luke mentions Mary only twice (Lk 8:19-21 and 11:27-28). The first one is the passage on the true family of Jesus, the second one deals with the truly blessed:

“It happened that as Jesus was speaking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said, 'Blessed the womb that bore you and the breasts that fed you!' But he replied, 'More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”

A woman has heard Jesus speaking and is so impressed that she must express her enthusiasm: A mother who has such a son...

Luke has taken these two verses from his special source. There the blessing of the woman refers to Jesus himself, but in the context of Luke's preaching it also refers to Mary's maternity. In the context of the whole Gospel, the answer of Jesus cannot be understood as a strict refusal to call Mary blessed, but rather as a warning of a false kind of devotion, which only concentrates on Mary's maternity. In fact, it is an affirmation: Mary is already to be blessed because of her maternity, but the blessing is also for all those who hear the word of God and keep it – like Jesus himself – which is so very true for Mary.<sup>69</sup>

Reading the writings of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, it is quite clear that he is in the grip of the same enthusiasm: A woman, a mother who has a son like this!

Montfort does not quote these two verses in his writings but he uses the same scheme: the Son and his mother, that is, from the Son to the mother, and his enthusiasm for Mary flows from the fact that she is the mother of Jesus, the mother of Eternal Wisdom. He never forgets that Jesus Christ is true God and true man and therefore Mary is the Mother of God. We honour Mary because she is the mother of our Lord and our God. And she is so, as Jesus himself tells us, because she has heard the word of God and kept it. This already expresses Montfort's whole Marian doctrine.

Then it is also quite evident that the mystery of the Incarnation is at the centre of his Marian doctrine and spirituality. For Montfort the Incarnation of Eternal Wisdom, Jesus Christ, is the summit of the history of God and man. The way of Christian perfection he offers is totally in accordance with this mystery which he calls “the mystery proper to this devotion”. “Loving slaves of Jesus in Mary should hold in high esteem devotion to Jesus, the Word of God, in the great mystery of the Incarnation” (TD 243). Here he offers us the key which opens the door to his doctrine and to the spiritual way that he teaches.

Montfort was a well-trained theologian with a specialisation in Mariology, and at the same time a missionary who wished to lead Christians to a renewed and deepened faith. He was capable of uniting theological principles with devotional practices and of teaching both interior attitudes and their external expression. He had great confidence in the poor and simple, presenting to them not a ‘second class’ Christianity but rather an authentic and complete spirituality including the giving of oneself to Christ through Mary (TD 120-133).

In this he shows himself to be a true master. Only two works of the very extensive Marian literature of the 17th and 18th centuries have found their way into our own days: the *‘True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin’* of Saint Louis Marie and the *‘Gloriae Mariae’* of Saint Alphonsus de

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. J. Zmijewski, *Die Mutter des Messias. Maria in der Christusverkündigung des Neuen Testaments* (The Mother of the Messiah. Mary in the Kerygma of the New Testament). Eine exegetische Studie, Kevelaer 1989, 129-132.

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Liguori, both presenting the fundamental truths about Mary and Marian devotion in a balanced manner.<sup>70</sup>

Montfort's *True Devotion*<sup>71</sup> is very clearly structured. In a short introduction he underlines the necessity for a real knowledge of Mary so that Christ may reign in the world (1-13); then Montfort writes about the task that God has conferred on Mary in his plan of salvation (14-36), and concludes that Mary is necessary for men to attain their final goal (39). Then he explains authentic Marian devotion in the context of the whole Christian life (40-110) and devotes the greater part of his book to what he calls the perfect Marian devotion, which consists in "giving oneself entirely to Mary in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her" (121). And the purpose of the work is, as he says, "to fashion a true servant of Mary and a true disciple of Jesus" (111).

The manuscript of this treatise, written probably in 1712, was not published before the year 1843. During the French Revolution it was buried for safety in a chest and hidden in a field. After the revolution it remained forgotten until it was found in 1842. Quite a few leaves of the manuscript as found are missing and therefore we do not know what title Montfort himself had chosen. In No. 227 Montfort gives us a definition of his work: "preparation for the Reign of Jesus Christ".

### II. AT THE CENTRE: THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION

This is why today the treatise begins with the phrase: "It was through the blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus Christ came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world" (TD 1). This is like a programme for the whole work and already presents its structure, which has two parts. At the same time it gives us some insight into Montfort's understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. The first part of the sentence, "It was through the blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus Christ came into the world," presents the fact of the Incarnation. The second part, "it is also through her that he must reign in the world," indicates that for Montfort the Incarnation of Christ is not yet completed but is on-going: Christ must – after his return to the Father – now become man in the baptised in order to reign in the world. This is made possible for him thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out and given to the baptised by the sacrament itself, and thanks to the action of Mary, who — according to the will of God — received a unique task in the Incarnation of Christ, which she has to carry out until the end of time and which refers also to the Incarnation of the Word in the baptised.

From the very beginning Montfort makes clear that the Mystery of the Incarnation is the core of his doctrine. All Marian devotion has its origin and its reason in that mystery, which therefore must shape Marian devotion in its interior and exterior form.

The passage about the Annunciation is not meant by Luke as an episode in Mary's life. Rather it is the account of God's redemption, which comes to us through Mary's maternity, and of Mary's freely-given answer and her virginal conception. Montfort was fully aware of this. In his first writing "*The Love of Eternal Wisdom*", written about ten years before the *True Devotion*, he recounts the story of our redemption as the story of the Eternal Wisdom of God, which he identifies with the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ. For Montfort it is an unfathomable story; it is the story of an incomprehensible friendship. Her friendship for man urges Wisdom to become man. In his presentation, the decision on the Incarnation is made at the very moment, when sinning man for his part terminates his friendship with God.<sup>72</sup> For Montfort the Incarnation of Christ has only one goal: the Cross, and therefore is already the Redemption.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. S. de Fiores smm, *Maria in der Geschichte von Theologie und Frömmigkeit* (Mary in the history of theology and piety), in: *Handbuch der Marienkunde*, ed. W. Beinert and H. Petri, 21996, 197-198.

<sup>71</sup> See *God alone. The collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore N.Y. 1987.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. LEW 41-46.

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For him it is quite clear: the Redemption, that is, the new creation, comes from God; it is not a heroic human deed, not the result of our acumen. We, by ourselves, are not able to bring about our salvation.<sup>73</sup> It is the initiative of God alone, who makes the decision and carries it out. But God does not treat us like puppets. That means he does not bring about our redemption without us. Salvation history shows us God's method. Again and again he chooses men and women to act together with him for the sake of many others. It is the same in the Incarnation. God chooses a young girl, Mary, and gives her the fullness of his grace from the very first moment of her being, in order to prepare her for her unique task. Montfort does not discuss the details of Mary's fullness of grace. That Mary is full of grace means, in the eyes of Montfort, that she is brought into an extraordinary and unique relation with the triune God; it is the will of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that Mary participates in their divine life in a unique manner. And so she becomes the way, the means, the river bed, the aqueduct of redemption (TD 24), in bearing a child and giving the Redeemer to the world.

Devotion to Mary means for Montfort first of all to give thanks and praise to the Triune God for the great things He has done for Mary and for all that He has done through Mary and with her for all men and women, and what He still does. Marian devotion accepts with gratitude that God himself has brought forth the new creation and has made use of a woman from our midst.

### III. GRACE AND FIDELITY

Mary's fullness of grace is obvious for Montfort. But much more important for him is the fidelity with which Mary corresponded to God's grace: "It is impossible on the one hand to put into words the gifts with which the Blessed Trinity endowed this most fair creature, or on the other hand to describe the faithful care with which she corresponded to the graces of her Creator" (LEW 105). Montfort knew very well that God's grace can only become effective if we are willing to collaborate. All the gifts of God have to be accepted in order to bring forth fruit. They are like seeds put in the furrows of our heart, where we have to lavish care on them.

It is this fidelity<sup>74</sup> which Montfort appreciates so much. "She stands alone as the Virgin most faithful to God and to men" (LEW 222), he says. This is the reason why we can put our trust in her. Therefore Marian Devotion means confidence in Mary, which becomes more and more a commitment; therefore Mary is a powerful help, offered by God himself, so that she may lead us to an ever greater faithfulness to Him. In daily life this faithfulness is expressed by our faithfulness to our baptismal vows. So Montfort can conclude: the true and perfect Marian devotion, in confidence in Mary and in commitment to her, is nothing else but the fulfilment of all the promises we made in Baptism. For Montfort only this is authentic Marian devotion.

### IV. THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION AND BAPTISM

Moreover, Montfort has clearly seen that baptism is connected with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, like all the other sacraments as well. But in his thinking baptism is – one could say – the continuation of the Incarnation. For in Baptism Christ took possession of us and He himself is – symbolically speaking – something like a seed planted in our heart, and he should grow within us. He has made his home in us and he will live in us. More than five times and at important places in his writings Montfort quotes Saint Paul: "... until we all reach unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God and form the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Eph 4:13). ("Until we arrive at the fullness of the age of Jesus Christ" says Montfort in line with the Vulgate). And that's the point, everything else is in his eyes unworthy

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. TD 78-79, 213; H. J. Jünemann, Art. "Man" in: *Jesus living in Mary. Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore N.Y. 1994, 485-492.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. H. M. Guindon, Art. "Fidelity" in: *Jesus living in Mary*, 415-424.

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of a Christian, it is merely an underdeveloped Christian being. “Christ must reign in the world” says Montfort and in this time during the Ascension and the second Coming of Christ He reigns in and through the baptised; in and through them He will live in our world. The reign of Christ is only and precisely where He can reign, where we let Him reign. But that becomes real only when we allow Him to reign, when we say Yes and accept that Christ may grow and come to life in us.

Mary was the first one who spoke this Yes, “Let it happen to me as you have said” (Lk 1:38). Montfort stresses that God asked for Mary’s consent before bringing about the Incarnation (LEW 116; TD 16).<sup>75</sup> The freely-given consent of Mary is necessary because it is willed by God (TD 14, 39). And Montfort insists that her Yes at the Annunciation is given in the name of the entire human race (LEW 203). The mystery of the Incarnation as summit of God’s acting in our history, and the role and the attitude of Mary, offer Montfort the pattern that is valid for ever. He says, “The plan adopted by the three persons of the Blessed Trinity in the Incarnation, the first coming of Jesus Christ, is adhered to each day in an invisible manner throughout the Church and they will pursue it to the end of time until the last coming of Jesus Christ” (TD 22).

Then he takes up Saint Paul’s image of the head and the members and concludes that a mother does not give birth to the head without the members (TD 32). Mary therefore is the mother of the head and the members. What Christ himself made official, when he said on the Cross, “Woman, this is your son” (Jn 19:25-27), making Mary the mother of the disciple, for Montfort is already given by the mystery of the Incarnation.

Once again it must be said that for Montfort Marian Devotion is to acknowledge and accept Gods acting in salvation history and the role He has given to Mary. It means also to acknowledge not only that God once did something for Mary but also that He has done something for me. It means to acknowledge that the Father has chosen and called us to be baptised so that His Son Jesus Christ may again become man in each one of us until what Paul said of himself can be attributed to all of the baptised, “It is no longer I, but Christ living in me” (Gal 2:20). That is the perfection of the Christian, as Montfort says, “All perfection consists in our being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus” (TD 120). We cannot achieve this perfection by moral efforts, but only by and in being constantly united to Christ. To that unity, to that being one with Christ, Montfort will lead us with his spirituality. The way he has found and which he calls a “smooth, short, perfect and sure way” (TD 152-168), is the way together with Mary in whom unity with Christ is perfectly realised (TD 63).

### V. IMITATION OF MARY

For Montfort Marian Devotion therefore means also to imitate Mary. The imitation of Mary will bring it about that Christ can come to life in us as He did in Mary at the moment of the Incarnation. We will become Christians as Mary was. She is the prototype of a Christian. Montfort refers above all to the three most excellent virtues of Mary, her faith, her humility, her purity (TD 260).

- Her faith is characterised by an unconditioned trust in God, which is the first condition for spiritual life in general, a confidence which believes God capable even of the impossible (Lk 1:37).
- Mary’s humility is rooted in her love of God. She is so fascinated by God that she is not able to take her eyes off Him and therefore has no eyes for herself. Only a loving person can be really humble and therefore God is the most humble.

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. P. Gaffney, Art. “Mary” in: *Jesus living in Mary*, 687-724.

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- Mary's purity is not first of all sexual purity. Rather it is the purity of the heart that Jesus speaks about in the sermon on the mount, "Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). The human heart only achieves such purity in the fire of God's love. When God's love is burning in us, then the heart will become pure.

Everyone who looks upon Mary, who, as Montfort says, "is the perfect model of every virtue and perfection, fashioned by the Holy Spirit for us to imitate, as far as our limited capacity allows" (TD 260), will grow in these virtues which are indispensable for a life with God. To explain what happens during this process, Montfort uses the symbol of the mould: "Remember what I told you before, that Mary is the great, unique mould of God, designed to make living images of God at little expense and in a short time. Anyone who finds this mould and casts himself into it, is soon transformed into our Lord because it is the true likeness of him" (TD 260).

### VI. THE PERFECT CONSECRATION

To cast oneself into Mary, that is what Montfort calls the "perfect consecration".<sup>76</sup> What we said at the beginning, we find again here: Mother and Son cannot be separated. The perfect consecration is always an entire commitment to Jesus and Mary, to Jesus through Mary. "The perfect consecration to Jesus is but a perfect and complete consecration of oneself to the Blessed Virgin" (TD 120). "This devotion consists in giving oneself entirely to Mary in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her" (TD 121). It requires us to give our body, our soul, our material possessions and our interior and spiritual possessions.

In this context we have to see the difference between consecration and sacrifice. When we offer something to Jesus as a sacrifice it is lost for us, we don't have it any longer. But all that we give to Jesus by consecration remains in our possession. By the consecration everything we are and have is brought into contact with Jesus, and everything that has been in contact with God, is consecrated now, it receives a new quality, it has become sacred. Therefore, all that we have brought into contact with God we cannot use any longer simply as we'd like to do. We cannot no longer follow merely our natural inclinations or do what everyone else does, what is done. The consecration requires us to open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit more than before. We must be led in all things by the Holy Spirit which is the spirit of Mary (TD 258-259).

In his understanding of the consecration to Jesus through Mary, Montfort clearly took inspiration from the mystery of the Incarnation, in which the three divine persons and Mary – representing all of us – are acting together. As our freely-given answer to our being chosen by the Father we give ourselves entirely to Him like Mary; as He did upon Mary, the Holy Spirit will come upon us and enable us to say "Yes" like Mary and together with her: "Let it happen to me as you have said" (Lk 1:38), so that the Son, the Eternal Wisdom, who already took possession of us in baptism can come to life in us.

### VII. TOTUS TUUS

"Totus tuus ego sum – I am all yours and all I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through Mary, your holy Mother" (TD 233), that is the short formula of the consecration Montfort gave us for every day. I am all yours – Montfort speaks from the stance of holy slavery – speaking these words and starting to grow into this union with him and to be more and more depending on him, I will be conformed to Him. Gradually I am guided and begin to live out what was the fundamental rule in the life of Jesus: to do the will of the Father. Giving everything that I am and that I have to Jesus through Mary, which really means to put everything, the whole of life in all its dimensions, under the will of the Father and – that's the point – in advance. Saying, "Let it happen to me, as

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. P. Gaffney, Art. "Consecration" in: *Jesus living in Mary*, 199-234.

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you have said” which is the same as “Your will be done”, I say: “My life, O Lord, with all that belongs to it, is yours. Your will be done in all that will happen to me, and no longer my own will.”

Everybody who has given himself to Jesus through Mary in this manner, may say with good cause what Jesus said dying on the Cross: “It is fulfilled” (Jn 19:30). Here Montfort found something which we can understand as a fruit of the Cross of Jesus: When we give ourselves entirely to Jesus, then our life is already fulfilled, even if we still have to live out what is in the future. In our union with Christ, who has entirely fulfilled the will of the Father, we too can say: It is fulfilled. That gives us a new confidence. Our life then is in the loving hands of Jesus, at least as long as we do not retract our commitment. The consecration leads us to a deeper faith and confidence in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and in the Mother of Christ (TD 214-222).

### VIII. THROUGH, WITH, IN AND FOR MARY

The way, the practice, how to live the consecration to Jesus through Mary, Montfort calls the “interior practices” of his devotion, which consist in “doing everything through Mary, with Mary, in Mary and for Mary, in order to do it more perfectly through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus and for Jesus” (TD 257; SM 45-49).

Through, with, in, for: these four prepositions stand for the secret of life and love. All created things live through, with, in and for the Creator (cf. Ac 17:28; Col 1:16). Every loving person lives through, with, in and for the beloved. These four words also characterise the mystery of God, for He is life and love (1 Jn 4:8). Jesus himself lives through the Father (Jn 6:57), he lives with the Father (Jn 16:32). He lives in the Father and the Father in him (Jn 17:21) and he lives for his Father (Jn 17:1; Lk 22:42). Through, with, in and for, that is the divine life Jesus wants us to participate in. The perfect consecration makes this participation possible.

- Through Mary: For Montfort this means above all that we must be led by Mary’s spirit and act in her spirit, that we assume her way of thinking, her life-stance. Then we will look at all things and situations not only with our own eyes, from our own perspective, but with the eyes of Mary, with her spirit, which is the Spirit of God.
- With Mary: Montfort recalls the simple fact that Mary is present. And she is not only present, but she is for us, because Jesus wants it (Jn 19:25-27). Montfort knows: When we live with Mary and look at her, then we are shaped by her. And when we look with her in the same direction, then not only has she an influence on us, but first of all we see her child, whom we look at together with her. We are gradually transformed into his image (2 Co 3:18).
- In Mary: There are men and women we like to be with, because they radiate a certain something, which does us good. Montfort has found such a person in Mary. He uses a biblical symbol for that: “The Blessed Virgin is the true earthly paradise of the new Adam” (TD 261). The new Adam is Christ Jesus, as Saint Paul tells us (Rom 5:12-21). Montfort concludes: When by baptism we have been made new beings in the image of Christ, then the paradise of the new Adam is the paradise of the baptised, too. Montfort tells us to enter this paradise and to live there. So Mary becomes our “life space”, a room in which we can really live because first of all here dwells the one who says of himself: “I am the life”. In Mary therefore we find new communion with God, we find freedom, peace and joy which have been promised to the children of God. When we dwell in Mary, “we may be formed in our Lord and our Lord formed in us” (TD 264). Because Mary is perfectly one with the Lord, we may come to the point of being in Christ dwelling in her.

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- Finally we shall live for Mary. Therefore Montfort wants us to make a choice: either I live for my own sake, that is, my own needs and interests are in the centre of my thinking and acting; or I live for someone else. Through the consecration we begin to live more and more for Christ and like him, and that means together with Jesus for the Father. Montfort has discovered that also the Mother of Jesus has a place in this movement. It is Jesus himself who extends the circle, when he gives the disciple to his mother. John characterises the reaction of the disciple by the following words: “From that hour the disciple took her into his home” (Jn 19:27). The beloved disciple, that is the true disciple, lives with Mary and for her; and with her for Jesus, and with her and Jesus for the Father. “Glory to God alone”: that is the last phrase of the *True Devotion*.

### IX. FOR THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

After all this it seems to be quite clear that Montfort does not understand his Marian devotion as a means of personal sanctification. Or better: the personal sanctification, which the consecration brings about, is in itself only a means in order to form apostolic men and women, men and women who bring about the Kingdom of Christ here and now.<sup>77</sup> All those who consecrate themselves to Jesus Christ through Mary, must be aware of being called to leave their own small room and of being sent out to bear testimony to Jesus. Mary went in haste to see Elisabeth, she became the mother of the disciples and stayed in the midst of the first Christian community as an expert on Christ. Montfort wants to form men and women like her. He was convinced: Where a man or a woman – like Mary – consecrates his or her life entirely to God, there the gates of heaven are opened and once more God can pour out the fullness of his love and life into our world. But for that he needs consecrated people.

*Hermann-Josef Jünemann, smm*

### EXERCISES

1. How is the mystery of the Incarnation central to Montfort’s spirituality?
2. What does Montfort mean by “total consecration”?
3. What is your own experience of being made over to God by your Baptism?

### FURTHER READING

The articles “Man”, “Fidelity”, “Mary” and “Consecration” in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, Bay Shore NY, 1994.

Either *The Secret of Mary*, or *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, both by St. Louis Marie de Montfort.

Patrick Fannon, *The Message of Montfort*.

All these books are available from Montfort Press, 28 Burbo Bank Road, Liverpool, L23 6TH; <http://www.montfort.org.uk/catalog>.

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. TD 47, 56-59; PM 8.