

MONTFORT PILGRIM OF HOPE

I'll roam through the world, to rescue my poor neighbor

“My choice is made! I'll roam through the world, / Living just like a vagabond, / To rescue my poor neighbor» (H 22: 1, Resolutions of a zealous missionary)

“Through Jesus, through Mary / In you, O Lord, I hope in peace. / I shall hope throughout my life / And I shall never perish” (H 7: 41, Solidity of Hope)

I have chosen these two passages, among others, from the Hymns of Father de Montfort to illuminate the theme that has been proposed for our meditation. The entire missionary life of our Saint was a pilgrimage, but with Christian hope as an inner strength, which allowed him to have many fruits of conversion and spiritual fruitfulness, even in the most difficult moments of his mission.

I believe that we all love to contemplate the artistic representations of Father de Montfort “on the move”, with the bag on his shoulder and the pilgrim's staff in his hands. It is a representation that manifests his pilgrimage to announce the Good News to the poor of the countryside. But in this image we can also glimpse the constancy and fidelity of his missionary action that took its source from the Christian hope rooted in his heart.

Throughout his life, in his writings, in his preaching, in his personal life, the search for and proclamation of the Incarnate and Crucified Wisdom were the reasons that guided him in his missionary pilgrimage, and set him on the paths of Brittany and Vendée. At the same time, he knew how to set himself objectives and choose the means that could help him achieve his goal, and he did this from the “Solidity of hope” (H 7) that always motivated him.

1. Life choices of Father de Montfort which made him a pilgrim of hope

Being a pilgrim of hope for Father de Montfort means having elements which were foundation stones in his life and which he offers to us today if we want to follow the Lord in the footsteps of our Saint.

Seeking and Desiring God

“God alone”: this is the expression that Montfort uses at the end of each Hymn and that he almost always puts at the end of his writings and letters. It is the presence of God that allows him to have joy and strength: “Are you distressed, do you feel weak? Think of God's presence, in Him you will Find / Buttress and brace, / Joy, exhilaration. / Let us then live in the presence of God.” (H 24 : 6).

It is God, therefore, at the centre of the hope of the apostolic missionary, and he tells us how we must proclaim it: “with holiness, having only God in view, without interest other than that of his glory, and practicing first what he teaches to others” (RM 62). This is what Louis Marie writes in the handwritten Rule for his missionaries, but it is in his personal and apostolic life that he experienced that the centrality of God fills with hope to announce and bring the salvation of the Lord in this world, often lost. Montfort sang and had others sing in the countryside, and this not only because he was courageous, but above all because his continuous listening to the word had formed in him a heart open to Christian hope. Familiarity with the Word of the Lord opened Montfort's heart and mind to a full trust in the coming of the Kingdom and this allowed him to live in love towards all and

especially for the poorest. "For you are my hope, Lord Yahweh, my faith from my youth" (Psalm 71:5).

Prayer

On the roads, from village to village to carry the Gospel, Montfort always has prayer in his heart and on his lips: "When I go forth through the fields, My walking-stick in hand, / No shoes, no baggage, / No care, I stride with great pomp / Like a king in his court. / To the sound of the trumpet, trum, trum, trum, trum trumpet, / The day long I ring out: Hurrah for Holy Love!" (H 144:1). In this verse of the Hymn we can perceive the Christian hope that accompanies our Saint on his pilgrim journey and that gives him the possibility of praying by singing, with a free heart and a strong spirit, holy Love.

We can find this invitation to prayer in the regulations for the 33 white pilgrims: "In their journey, they will either sing canticles, or they will recite the Holy Rosary, or they will pray inwardly in silence" (The Holy Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Saumur, 4).

The contemplative attitude of our Saint is marked by places and experiences that have been the support of his mission even in the midst of so many difficulties and contradictions: the pilgrimage to Chartres as a seminarian, to Mont Valérien and to the rue du Pot-de-fer, to Saint Éloi in La Rochelle, to Mervent... Contemplation and prayer are an attitude of his life and are nourishment for his mission full of hope because they allowed him to place in the hands of God the fruits of his missionary pilgrimage: "Pray always with a hope That goes beyond hope; God gives his excellent gifts Only to perseverance" (H 15:44).

Providence

Before as a seminarian and after as an itinerant missionary, Montfort put Providence as the existential attitude that would guide his life. Abandonment and trust in Providence allowed Saint Louis Marie to set out on the path, free from all worries, and with a creative spirit to carry out the evangelizing mission to which he felt called. The enthusiasm that led him was based on "God who is faithful" and allowed him to live in firm hope.

Let us listen to what he writes in the canticle on Abandonment to Providence "Above all, try to understand This great secret of the Savior That He came to teach us (What a remarkable favor!): Hope in God so faithful, / Rest at peace in the bosom of His paternal love, / With no worry for the morrow (H 28, 8). We perceive in these lines of our Saint how all his missionary activity, his attitude in facing the apostolic fatigues, the difficulties and obstacles he encountered, did not turn him away from his path because the hope on which he founded his life was sure.

His abandonment to Providence with a firm hope gave him an uncommon zeal that the saint expresses with dense words in canticle 21, The Flames of Zeal: "True zeal is full of hope/ in divine Providence/.../ it places all its support in God" (H 21, 23). Or again: "Zeal is insurmountable, / Always agreeable and stable, / Its fire can never be extinguished / It is a torrent which topples and shatters Whatever blocks its course. / It speaks and always overcomes, Allowing nothing (twice) to overwhelm it". (H 21, 24) Montfort knows how to put into poetry his concrete experience, the zeal that accompanies it. His trust, full of hope, in God Alone and in his divine Providence.

Desire to save souls

In the epitaph on Montfort's tomb we read: "What are you looking at, passer-by? An extinguished torch, A man consumed by the fire of charity, Who has become all things to all." The predilection

that Father de Montfort had, throughout his life and mission, for the poorest and for poor sinners, is well described by all his biographers.

In his letters, our Saint often expresses his hopeful zeal: “I have indeed much inclination to work for the salvation of the poor in general” (L 6); in another letter he writes “The catechism for the poor of the city and the countryside is my element” (L. 9); to the first daughters of Wisdom he says: “appoint yourselves from the community of the Daughters of Wisdom for the instruction of children and for the care of the poor” (L 29)

The Prayer for Missionaries is another text that reveals the apostolic ardor and the desire of our saint for the salvation of souls. In this prayer he describes the apostles who will give continuity to his mission: “These imitators of the apostles will preach with great force and virtue, and so great and so brilliant that they will stir all the minds and hearts of the places where they will preach. It is to them to whom you will give your word, your very mouth and your wisdom, which none of their enemies will be able to resist” (PM 22). Only an apostle guided by the “firmness of hope” was capable of bringing out from his heart and his pen such an inspired prayer.

Presence of Mary

In his pilgrimage as a missionary and evangelizer, Father de Montfort proposes devotion to Mary as a sure path to reach Jesus: “It is through the Most Holy Virgin Mary that Jesus Christ came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world” (TD 1).

Mary becomes for Father de Montfort the anchor of hope: “a saint compares her to a firm anchor, which holds them and prevents them from being shipwrecked in the rough sea of this world” (TD 175) and invokes her “My life, my sweetness and my hope after Jesus” (LC). And he proposes Mary as the path to salvation: “If there is in us any grace, any hope of salvation, it is a good that comes to us from God through her” (LEW 207).

It is beautiful to read in number 6 of the letter to the inhabitants of Montbernage, before embarking on the pilgrimage to Rome to meet the Pope, where Montfort insists that with Mary and for her one has the perseverance to obtain Wisdom: “for I undertake this long and painful journey, to Providence, to obtain from God, through the intercession of the Holy Virgin, perseverance for you... I seek divine Wisdom, help me to find it... There is no doubt that being unique and poor I will perish, unless the very Holy Virgin and the prayers of good souls, and in particular yours, support me and obtain for me from God the gift of speech or divine wisdom, which will be the remedy for all my ills and the powerful weapon against my enemies. With Mary it is easy, I put my trust in her, although the world and hell roar... It is through Mary that I seek and will find Jesus, that I will crush the head of the serpent and conquer all my enemies and myself, for the greater glory of God” (n. 6)

Everything that Father de Montfort wrote and experienced around the presence of Mary in his life, in his missionary pilgrimage, is for him a sure sign of hope, which allows him to overcome difficulties, adversities, the harshness of his living conditions.

2. Montfort's attitudes as a Pilgrim of Hope

Montfort preached several popular missions with true passion and evangelical fidelity. Being a witness to the dead and resurrected Christ allowed him to mature in an attitude of courage and fidelity, receiving an uncommon missionary fruitfulness. This Christian hope, allowed him to grow in three main attitudes.

Freedom

In his apostolic life, Father de Montfort put aside fear and mediocrity to be filled with audacity. He made his talents available to creatively seek paths of life and propose horizons of human and Christian hope.

In the Prayer for Missionaries numbers 7-12, we still read today the cry of Father de Montfort asking the Lord, for his Company, disciples "Liberos": "priests free of your freedom", "men according to your heart", "clouds... that fly on all sides according to the breath of the Holy Spirit", "true servants of the Blessed Virgin... who go everywhere, the shining and burning torch of the holy Gospel in their mouths and the holy Rosary in their hands". In this text Montfort wants to transmit to his missionaries the spirit of freedom that has permeated him throughout his life as an evangelizer.

The spirit of freedom allows him to live in abandonment in God: "Whatever happens to me, I do not worry about it. I have a Father in heaven who is unfailing": he writes this on the occasion of the death of M. de la Barmondière who had welcomed him into the seminary for the poor in Paris (L 2). And to Marie Louise Trichet, from the basement of the rue du Pot-de-Fer, during the crisis experienced in 1703, writes: "You must therefore put your trust in God: be sure that you will obtain even more than you believe. Heaven and earth would rather pass away than God should break his word by allowing a person who hoped in him with perseverance to be frustrated in his expectation" (L 16). Montfort knew how to live in an attitude of freedom, with perseverance, founded on hope, but aware that Christian hope is not the certainty of achieving something, but certainty in the path towards the Lord who progressively reveals his will.

Peace and Joy

Peace and joy are inseparable in the life of evangelizers. Saint Peter in his first letter writes: "in your hearts the Lord Christ, always ready to answer anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (3:15).

To be able to observe this attitude of peace and joy, which springs from Christian hope, in the missionary life of Louis Marie, it is enough to read the testimony of the Jesuit Fr. Préfontaine, from the community of Nantes, where Montfort had retired for a spiritual retreat, after he had received the order to destroy the Calvary of Pontchâteau: "I considered him a good man... but his calm, his equanimity, his tranquility... this patience, the submission to Providence in this very delicate occasion, the serenity, the joy that one observed on his face... made me look upon him as a saint"; or the answer that Montfort gave to M des Bastières who asked him if he was not sad about the destruction of Calvary: "The Lord allowed me to do it, He allows that today it be destroyed: may his holy name be blessed" (see Grandet).

Faced with the many difficulties that Father de Montfort had to experience in his life as a pilgrim-missionary, it is not easy for us to see him in joy, but if we look at his writings, we can see how joy manifests itself, spontaneously in his heart. In number 98.3 of LEW he writes: "Eternal Wisdom being the object of the happiness and the complaisance of the eternal Father, the joy of the angels is to the man who possesses it the principle of the purest sweetness and consolation... It rejoices his spirit by the brilliance of its lights; she pours into his heart an indescribable joy, sweetness and peace, even in the midst of the harshest bitterness and tribulations". The hope lived daily allows him to live in joy, and joy helps him to love, to fight, to seek new paths of evangelization and to dream of always doing "something great" for the Lord.

Ability to face cross

We all know how Montfort experienced, during his missionary pilgrimage, a lot of criticism, refusals, prohibitions, contradictions, crosses ... we can affirm that our saint was an expert in living these situations, leaving fear aside and following in the footsteps of the Lord with firm hope. Montfort, a disciple of Jesus, loved the lives of others, and in a very special way, those crucified in his time; and he was not afraid to risk his life, his security, his prestige and his tranquility.

Montfort sought to transmit this experience. We know well what he wrote to Marie Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet (L 27), inviting them to leave Poitiers to begin a new mission in La Rochelle: "I know that you will have difficulties to overcome; but it is necessary that an enterprise so glorious to God and so salutary to our neighbor be strewn with thorns and crosses. And if we do not risk something for God, we do nothing great for Him".

Often in his letters we find expressions that reveal his ability to face crosses, always with the aim of transmitting life and hope to those most in need: "The hospital to which the Lord Jesus has destined me is a house of trouble, where peace does not reign, and a house of poverty where spiritual and temporal good is lacking. But I hope that our Lord Jesus, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, my good Mother, will make it a holy, rich and peaceful house. This is why I have great need of your grace and help" (L 10).

Living hope in the Risen One means remaining open to difficulties, to persecutions, losing fear by following the Lord.

3. Montfort: two great testimonies of Hope

He wrote a Triptych for a congregation that did not yet have any members

Already in the first year of priesthood, in his first experience in the community of Saint Clement in Nantes, where he had not found what he had desired, writing to his spiritual director, Father Leschassier, he wrote: "I cannot help, given the needs of the Church, continually asking with groans for a small and poor company of good priests who exercise it (the ministers of missions), under the standard and protection of the most holy Virgin" (L 5).

Montfort, looking at the emergencies of the Church, since his youth has the desire to seek vocations to respond to the challenges of his time. The meeting with Marie-Louise Trichet in Poitiers (1701), with Mathurin Rangeard (1706) and the collaboration with other missionaries gives him the hope that the Lord will grant his request.

In 1713, three years before his death, he wrote the triptych (PM – RM – LCM), a triptych that is in the current Constitutions of the Company of Mary. "Memento congregationis tuae: it is up to you alone to make this assembly by your grace" (PM 26). Montfort did everything to realize his dream, but at the same time linked the impatience of his zeal with abandonment to the divine will, trusting, with hope, in Providence.

At the beginning of Lent in 1716, shortly before dying, he organized a pilgrimage of 33 white penitents to Notre Dame des Ardilliers with this goal: "1. to obtain from God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin good missionaries who walk in the footsteps of the apostles by complete abandonment to Providence and the practice of all the virtues. 2. the gift of wisdom" (RPS 1).

We are aware that at his death there was a very poor and limited reality, but our saint had an invincible faith in divine power. The weaker the means, the smaller the number of disciples, and the more Montfort was convinced of the solidity of his work.

He believed in the future of the Calvary of Pontchâteau from the crosses endured.

Montfort, in writing to the priest of Pontchâteau (M. de la Carrière) who guarded the statues after the destruction of Calvary, clearly shows his hope for the future of this sanctuary: "I have more hope than ever. But, it requires all the more work, waiting and prayers and crosses as this work must be great" (L 22). And he also makes a prophecy in the canticle on Calvary "Oh! That in this place one will see wonders!/ what conversions,/ healings, grace without equal" (H 164:9).

This hope of Father de Montfort has been realized throughout the years. So many generations have been able to make their pilgrimage to this holy place and be nourished by the fruitfulness of its message.

Father François Gouray, with courage and audacity, was able to set the people of the surrounding area on the path to rebuild the Calvary and make this sanctuary a place of pilgrimage.

The Bishop of Nantes, Mgr Antoine-Matthias-Alexandre Jacquemet (1849-1869), by affirming that "this is my Calvary", involved the entire diocese in embellishing and improving the sanctuary: It was he who called the sons of Montfort as guardians and missionaries in this holy place (1865).

Father Barré, helped by the Zouave Gerbaud, and always with the passion and collaboration of the volunteers and the inhabitants of the surrounding area, carried out the enlargement of the sanctuary to make this place the "Holy Land in Brittany".

Today, it is the entire Montfortian family, supported by the Bishop of Nantes, Mons. Laurent Percerou, and always with the numerous and generous presence of volunteers, who are committed to making this Montfortian place a sanctuary of welcome, of spirituality, of animation of the reality of young people, of attention to creation, to allow pilgrims and visitors to find hope and strength to continue the path of life in the light of the Lord, who died and rose again for us.

4. Montfort pilgrim of Hope: light and strength for his disciples

"Do not be afraid! I know that you are looking for Christ crucified. He is not here, ... He has risen, and behold, he is going before you into Galilee" (Mt 28:5-7). It is an exclamation that fills us with hope and invites us to come out of ourselves, out of closed places, to proclaim Christ, our only hope. I am sure that Montfort would tell us the same thing so that we can abandon our closed and mediocre places to follow the Risen Lord, animated by Christian hope.

Montfort, missionary of Hope, invites us to proclaim Life

We are called to proclaim life where there is death: violent deaths, slow destruction due to famine and misery, active abortion and euthanasia, wars and arms production, destruction and disrespect for nature, radical rejection of migrants who seek hope for their lives, selfish search for one's own well-being, are all realities that propagate a sense of anguish, and that will sow worry and fear and weaken hope in life.

Montfort himself lived in an era and a society with challenges and difficult situations, but his witness urges us today to make our contribution for a more dignified life in the light of hope, as was the life of our saint. We cannot remain calm in the face of this reality, the search for paths and encounters that can give light and hope, this is our mission today.

Let us listen to what Pope Francis tells us: "Christian hope sustains the journey of our life even when it is tortuous and full of fatigue; it opens the way to the future when resignation and pessimism would like to keep us prisoners; it makes us see the good that is possible when evil seems to prevail; it gives us serenity when our hearts are heavy with failure and sin; it allows us to dream of a new humanity and gives us courage to build a fraternal and peaceful world, when it seems that it is not worth it" (Pope Francis, Homily at Vespers of the Feast of the Ascension 2024).

Montfort, the pilgrim, invites us to set out on the journey

We are on the way, everything is still mixed and confused, but we are invited to have courage and not remain in mediocrity, to make hope and life spring forth, as our Saint knew how to do.

If in the world there are always women and men attentive to the Spirit of God, following the example of Father de Montfort, it will be possible to continue to hope and believe in a church as a community of hope. Setting out does not mean that everything is planned, that everything is calculated, we are invited to be realistic and this presupposes humility, availability, openness and commitment. Hope supports us on the way, but allows the horizon to be open and free to God's plan.

It is beautiful to see that pilgrims from all over the world arrive at the high Montfortian places: visiting these places helps to concretize and actualize the message and legacy of our Saint. Seeing with his own eyes the missionary path taken by Father de Montfort in a few years of missionary life and knowing the fruits of his missionary action helps to illuminate the path of our life.

Let us dare the present and the future with Father de Montfort to experience the 2025 Jubilee year

The face of our Saint, capable of looking at and recognizing the reality of his time, with realism, but also responding with creativity and audacity, constancy and hope, is, for all of us, an invitation to come out of ourselves and know how to overcome the fear of risk. The path that awaits us in a church and a society that are going through tortuous and tiring times, is not the easiest, but if we live from Christian hope, like Father de Montfort, all this gives us serenity and courage.

This is what Pope Francis proposes to the whole Church for the Jubilee of the next year 2025 with the Bull of indiction "Spes non confundit", "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5).

"May the Jubilee be for everyone an opportunity to rekindle hope" (1).

"To bring to all the Gospel of Jesus Christ who died and rose again, as the proclamation of the hope that fulfills the promises, leads to glory and, founded on love, does not disappoint" (2).

"Christian hope, in fact, neither deceives nor disappoints because it is based on the certainty that nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God" (3).

"We boast in our affliction itself, because we know that affliction produces perseverance; perseverance produces proven virtue; proven virtue produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4) (4).

"From this intertwining of hope and patience it becomes clear that the Christian life is a journey that needs powerful moments to nourish and strengthen hope, the irreplaceable companion that allows us to glimpse the goal: the encounter with Jesus." (5)

Pope Francis concludes the text of the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee 2025 by writing: "The next Jubilee will therefore be a Holy Year characterized by the hope that does not pass away, the hope that is in God... Let us allow ourselves today to be attracted by hope and let us make it contagious through us, for those who desire it. May our life say to them: 'Wait on the Lord, be strong and courageous; wait on the Lord' (Sal 27:14)".

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