

1. Saint Louis Marie de Montfort (1673-1716)

Biographical Notes

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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

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Grignon, 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).

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 Viseule. 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 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

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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).

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

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Fontevrault 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 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

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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.

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.

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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.

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.

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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.

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

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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 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

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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.

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,

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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” (TD 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 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

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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 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

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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.