

**St. Louis Mary de Montfort, Educator of children and Youth  
and Founder of the Community of the Holy Spirit for Charitable Schools**

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1. The education context of the seventeenth Century

During the seventeenth century many noticed that the children of the poor tended to be antisocial and libertine for want of instruction. The need to provide them with education was keenly felt. Between 1650 and 1700, there were a number of important attempts concerning primary schools and these influenced the pedagogical thoughts of Montfort.

In 1654, Fr. Jacques de Batencour, a parish priest in Paris, published a treatise on pedagogical organization entitled ‘The Parochial School’ and this work marked the birth of modern pedagogy.

Taking inspiration from the book “The Parochial School” Fr. Charles Démia founded charitable schools in Lyons in 1667. He wanted to make Christians of the homeless children roaming the cities. Before the end of the century, sixteen free institutions, administered by the Department of Schools, were established. At the end of his life Démia published a book entitled “Rules for the Schools for the City and diocese of Lyons”. This book is a compilation of pedagogical practices that Démia had instituted in the schools founded through his intervention.

1.3. The third attempt was the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by Fr. John Baptist de la Salle and the establishment of several charitable schools, including the one in Paris in 1688. The shared method and teaching used by the Brothers, as well as the pedagogical characteristics of their instruction were the subject of a publication by John Baptist de la Salle in 1720, under the title “The Administration of Christian Schools”. This manual was inspired largely by the ideas of Démia on pedagogical organization and by Port-Royal method for teaching the native language.

1.4. Mgr. De la Poype, the Bishop of Poitiers, was much taken up by the method conceived and practiced by Fr. Démia at Lyons. He codified that method in a booklet destined to the charitable schools, which he was founding in his diocese. Montfort watched the introduction and the working of that method which became familiar to him.

1.5. Concerning Secondary Schools, there was a pedagogical ferment. This was caused by the decadence of universities. Toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Jesuits controlled more than 120 colleges, where they followed the Ratio Studiorum and pursued their own pedagogical direction. The studies were organized with the goal of ensuring the moral, religious, and literary development of the students. The Curriculum included four years of grammar, from its rudiments to versification, and one year of rhetoric, followed by several years of philosophy and theology. The courses were conducted in Latin, and Greek had priority over French. In addition to their formal education, the students were requested to participate in theatrical presentations, literary exercises and other extracurricular activities.

1.6. Elite groups of students were invited to participate in confraternities, which originated in Italy and was spiritually renewed by the Company of Jesus. They required from these youths a consecration to Our Lady, whose virtues they strove to reawaken in themselves.

## **2. Montfort became a good teacher**

2.1. In the Family School that was undoubtedly organized with the help of the parish priest of Iffendic, Louis received the first lessons of his spiritual training from his parents. As he grew up, he was asked to teach his younger brothers and sisters. He not only taught them the R's, but also trained them in prayer especially in the recitation of the rosary.

2.2. When Louis was studying at the college at Rennes, he was chosen by Fr. Julian Bellier to teach catechism and to visit the poor and sick in the hospitals. The College of Rennes left its mark on Louis the deepening of the interior life and the beginning of an active, concrete and popular apostolate.

2.3. While at the Seminary of St. Sulpice (1695-1700), like all the other Seminarians, Louis was enrolled in the Association of Prayers founded in 1649 by Fr. Bourdoise "in order to obtain Christian teachers for poor children." The masters of St. Sulpice made the older seminarians teach catechism to children. They were about seventy engaged in preparing children for Communion and Confirmation. They went on teaching them even afterwards. On Sundays and feast days, they preached sermons to schoolboys and gave lessons in various boarding schools. From these years of formation in Paris, Louis retained a solid theological training, an informed Marian spirituality, a knowledge of 17<sup>th</sup> century mysticism, a life of extensive prayer, and an enhanced desire to help the poor, especially through catechism.

2.4. While at the St. Clement's Community in Nantes (1700-01), Montfort performed the mission of a catechist and his sense of organization led him quite naturally to this ministry.

2.5. From 1701-03, Montfort was one of chaplains at the Poorhouse of Poitiers. Like most poorhouses of the period, there was a charitable school and also a factory. There the children of the inmates between seven and thirteen years old and a few illiterate adults, who wished to learn how to read and write, were taught their letters. The chaplain was by right their school master. The Poorhouse Rule stipulated, "He shall teach poor person how to read and write and for that purpose he shall take them away from their work one hour every day." From 1704-1705, Montfort was the Director and as such he had to direct the school as well as the factory where the children were being trained in various trades. He had to supervise their education even after a schoolmaster was appointed.

## **3. Montfort the founder of Charitable Schools**

Like Démiá and John Baptist de la Salle, Montfort was struck by the idleness of the young and by juvenile delinquency. Montfort arrived at a school method, which he acquired mostly when he was at Sulpice. He loved children and he wanted to teach them. "Father de Montfort's main preoccupation during the course of his missions was to establish schools for the boys and for the girls." (Grandet, p. 385) Fr. Clorivière S.J., who wrote Montfort's Biography in 1785, tells us, "Being full of his Divine Master's spirit, he always loved little children tenderly and whether in

town or in the country, he liked to be surrounded by a crowd of them to whom he was teaching the elements of the Christian faith... As Apostolic Missionary who wanted to extend God's Kingdom to its extreme limits, he used to say that 'schools are the nurseries of the Church, that in them the children, being pruned and tended with care, became able to bear good fruits and that for want of this first culture, they would always remain sterile and unfruitful'.

Among the eleven means that made Montfort's mission fruitful, Fr. Joseph Grandet, the first biographer of Montfort (1724) has mentioned as the first "the establishment of Christian schools." (Grandet, pp. 383-384) Fr. Clorivière S.J. says, "Wherever he preached a Mission, one of his chief cares was to provide the parishes with good teachers, both men and women."

**3.1. The Charitable School in Nantes:** There was a school attached to the General Hospital at Nantes. Since 1696 it was taught by Louis Danto whom Montfort recruited for his own society of Brothers later, under the name of Brother Louis. This is the same Brother whom he called to La Rochelle where he stayed two years from 1714 to May 1716, when he returned to his former post as is proved by the acquittance roll of the hospital. During his absence he was replaced by Bro. Philip.

**3.2. The Charitable School in La Rochelle:** Montfort thought of starting a school in La Rochelle mainly because of the religious ignorance of the young and the strong influence of Protestantism. After thinking deeply over the matter, he submitted his plan to Mgr. Champflour, early in 1714. The approval was complete. There were plenty of schools at La Rochelle, but they were paying schools and directed by teachers of suspect belief and beyond Episcopal control. An agreement was made concerning the foundation of charitable or free schools, under the Bishop's control, where teaching would be given by men and women of very sound doctrine.

The young people of the town of La Rochelle would have to be instructed in religion. During the second half of 1714, Montfort did not hesitate to buy a building in need of restoration. He himself became architect and entrepreneur. But the most important task was to find and train good teachers. That is why Montfort "himself went to the school every day to train the teachers in his methods of teaching and to provide a model for these disciples." (Besnard, Vol.II 110-111)

The school was opened in January 1715. "Montfort" says Cloriviere, "put three masters with a priest at their head who was to watch over their conduct, say Mass for the children at the end of their class and confess them at least once a month". But who were those masters? Brothers surely, though in Montfort's time, only one can be identified with certainty, Louis Danto, mentioned in Montfort's Last Will as Brother Louis of La Rochelle.

Montfort took great care of his school; he drew up the rules for admission, the time-table of the various classes, the syllabus to be followed, the prayers to be said, a list of rewards and punishments. Fr/ Cloriviere says, "The prudent Missionary entered into the smallest details, as if he had spent all his life in teaching children., The benches were placed in the form of an amphitheatre, so that the master could see everyone at a glance and that nothing could escape his watchfulness. Montfort visited his schools every day, to train the master and the pupils according to his own method of teaching... For the Boys' School, Montfort that he could find, among the

many persons under his direction, the School, Montfort could find, among the many persons under direction. the right men who would be able and zealous enough to take the work.”

**3.3. The Charitable School at St. Laurent-sur-Sèvre:** Besides La Rochelle and Nantes, there was only the school of St. Laurent-sur-Sèvre, where we could be sure that there was a Montfortan Brother during the Saint’s life time. Fr. Baraud has said expressly that the first master of the school at St. Laurent was Bro. Mathurin. We note that Bro. Mathurin is no longer named as auxiliary to Montfort’s Missions after 1714 and that he joined Fr. Vatel and Fr. Mulot at St. Pompain only in 1718. Most probably he taught in the school of St. Laurent from 1714 till 1718.

**3.4. Land and house donated at Vouvant for a charitable school:** From Montfort’s biography and from his Last Will, it is very clear that, if possible, a school was to be started at Vouvant.

#### **4. Montfort’s Educational Principles**

4.1. The primary goal of the schools was the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Like his contemporaries, Montfort felt that schools were the nurseries of the Church, where children like young saplings carefully pruned and cultivated, eventually became fit to bear good fruit.

4.2. In his schools the child is loved as a son or daughter of God. Montfort profoundly loved children and young people, in imitation of Jesus, who ordered the Apostles to let them come to him. His passion for catechizing the poor flowed from Jesus’ burning love.

4.3. These schools must give free education to the poor of Jesus Christ. Montfort was partial to the poor and he wanted schools that were charitable and free, that could receive the poor and ensure their access to education. He instructed the teachers “never, either directly or indirectly, under any circumstances, to request money or gift of any kind from the children or their parents.” (Besnard Vol. II, 110-111)

4.4. In these schools order and silence must be maintained so as to improve the education. A minimum of organization and order is necessary to ensure a good education. To this end, he established rules for classes, admission requirements, a schedule of classes, and programmes for study and piety. (RW 275-292)

4.5. The education must be actively geared toward the spiritual life. The teaching of catechism was a must. In his Rules for Catechetical Instruction (RM 79-91), Montfort gives a method, which is dominated by three concerns: “memorization, characterized by questions and brief, clear responses: attention to students, using little stories, praise, and rewards, and questions directed toward many different students and placing of these lessons into the heart by prayer and tender exhortation.” (Louis Perouas, Louis Grignon, the poor and the missions, p. 91)

4.6. For Montfort the Gospel was the Rule of Life for himself and for his students. A number of his hymns testify to his concern to show that the Gospel is the rule of conduct for the Christian. The God, that Montfort presents. is rooted in the Bible. It is a God who is faithful to all his promises (H. 7:3) and slow to anger (H. 51:10), a Father (H. 7:&; 117:3), who worries about all his creatures, even sinners, and who overcomes all iniquity by his great goodness (H.

14:31). The Trinity is the point of departure for Montfort's missionary catechism. God Alone is the most frequent formulation in his works; we find it in one form or another more than 130 times, especially in the hymns. He is conscious that all proceeds from the Father (LEW 19; SM 9). The mystery of Incarnation is central to Montfort's spirituality.

4.7. Montfort's pastoral ministry involved liturgical participation especially in the sacraments of confession and communion, after the renewal of baptismal vows. (RM 56). He encouraged people to enter into the mysteries of Christianity by means of processions, songs, mimes, pageants, and times of silence. He tried to touch the heart and the emotions as well as the mind. Dramatization is notable in a number of his hymns.

4.8. It should be noted that Louis Marie's desire to educate in the faith was also expressed in spiritual direction. Hymn 10 speaks about its importance. Montfort spent a considerable amount of time in his absorbing labours of spiritual direction.

4.9. Educational institutions are, first and foremost, societal institutions. They reflect the religious, political, scientific and business state in which the culture finds itself. Montfort would agree that "transformation, liberation, justice and social solidarity presume the guidelines and goals of an education based on the Gospel.

## **5. Montfort, the Founder of the Brothers of the Community of the Holy Spirit to conduct charitable schools**

5.1. **Montfort's plan:** According to Letter No. 5 dated Dec. 6, 1700, Montfort thought of founding a congregation. Later he thought of founding charitable schools for boys and for girls. The young priest who in 1700 went to St. Clement Community at Nantes was deeply impressed by Bourdoise's master-idea: "For a school to be useful for Christianity, it must have teachers who work like apostles and not like mercenaries who consider their work a means and common task invented to earn a living." For the schools for boys, Montfort chose several Brothers who followed him in his missions after 1705 and carried out the tasks of singing master, catechist, and schoolteacher.

5.2. **Montfort recruited Brothers as his disciples:** The great missionary period of Montfort's life began at his return from Rome in 1706. Two years later, he had already four Brothers with him, Mathurin, John, Pierre, Jacques, and others. In Montfort's Lst Will seven Brothers were mentioned of whom four had made their religious profession. The list of Brothers is given below:

1. Bro. Mathurin Rangeard (1687-1760) was a native of Bouille-Loretz in Poitou. He was born on Nov. 7, 1687 and he wanted to be a Capuchin. In 1705 in the Church of the Penitents, Poitiers, Montfort recruited him. He remained as a faithful Brother to Montfort till Montfort's death. He fully shared his master's life. He used to call the people to the missions, maintain order in the processions, sing hymns, make the people recite the rosary, distribute holy pictures and small crosses, teach catechism, teach in charitable schools and prepare meals for the missionaries. In 1718, he came to St. Pompain and joined Fr. Mulot. In 1721 he received the tonsure. He died at St. Laurent on July 22, 1760.

2. Bro. John joined Montfort in 1707, while Montfort and Mathurin were staying in St. Lazarus Hermitage, near Montfort-sur-Meu. He looked after the material concerns during the

missions. In 1715, he accompanied Srs. Marie Louise and Catherine Brunet from Poitiers to La Rochelle. After Montfort's death, he might have left for his native place.

3. Bro. James (Jacques Marie Burgard) was born in 1680. He joined Montfort in 1708. He accompanied Montfort during 23 months at a stretch. In 1714, he brought the Pontchateau statues to Nantes. His signing converted the parish priest of St. Pompain. Some of the writings, especially the Secret of Mary, have come down to us through him. He came to stay in St. Laurent latest by 1717, because on Aug. 26, 1717, he received from the Parish Priest a sum of three crowns. He recruited Bro. René Joseau. In 1719, Bro. Jacques left St. Laurent for the House for the Incurables in Nantes. We do not know how long he stayed there; but we know that he died in 1727 and was buried on Aug. 11, 1727.

4. Bro. Peter (Pierre) joined Montfort in 1709, when the latter was preaching a mission at Vertou near Nantes. Fr. Besnard tells us about a miraculous cure of this Bother effected by Fr. Montfort. (He is not mentioned in the Last Will)

5. Bro. Nicholas is mentioned for the first time in 1711. In 1714, he accompanied Montfort during his journey to Rouen. During the return journey, as he was very tired, Montfort almost carried him. He was a trained as sculptor. Once Montfort punished him for breaking the rule. He took his vows on June 9, 1715. After Montfort's death we do not know what happened to him.

6. Bro. Gabriel stayed with Montfort only for a short while. He took the vows on June 9, 1715. He was with Montfort in St. Laurent when the latter died. Most probably he taught in the school at St. Laurent. We have no further information about him.

7. Bro. Louis joined Montfort towards the end of Montfort's life. He took his vows on June 9, 1715. When Montfort died, Louis was in La Rochelle, and in 1716, he was replaced by Bro. Philip. Bro. Louis came to Nantes and this we know from an account submitted by him on May 16, 1716. He later tried to join the Lazarists, and he died on Oct. 8, 1716.

8. Bro. Philip joined Montfort towards the end of Montfort's life. He took his vows on June 9, 1715. He along with one Bro. Dominic worked in the charitable school at La Rochelle. On May 9, 1717, Bro. Philip signed an acquittance in the name of Fr. Clemençon, who was the director of the school.

“In length of time as well as in depth of service it is Brothers Mathurin and John, Jacques and Nicholas, Philip, Louis and Gabriel and other unknown to us who were the full associates of Montfort's Missionary epic. They bore the thorns in their flesh, trials in their soul. – They shared its deadly dangers. Whether they cooked or kept the shop, set the order of processions or sang hymns, walked miles and miles with their master or taught Catechism and schools according to his spirit, they were the volunteers of the great spiritual combat, the poor, the mortified ones, the humble of heart on whom rained mockeries and insults, often getting their food and lodging only from Providence, sometimes thrown away from presbyteries with their master and spending the night in the open air at the foot of some Calvary, their head resting on the last granite step, in short such as Montfort wanted them, lifted up by his own enthusiasm and hopes, espousing his deceptions and failures, learning from him how to bless them, taught by him the whole day long discovering through him the message of Jesus with greater light as days went on. With him they experienced the fervour of the crowds who were carried away by his words, with him they wept

on the ruins of Pontchateau. It is they who informed Fr. Bastières about so many small or great events which form the best part of his memoirs. They were his truest companions in good and evil fortune, in the storms and lulls of life, in time and in eternity.” (Gaëtan Bernoville, Montfort Apostle of schools and the Bros of St. Gabriel, Translation given in D+S, Vol. XIV, No. 2, September 1962, pp. 85,86)

**5.3. Montfort thought of a Community to conduct Charitable Schools:** Montfort, in his journey and during his Missions, was accompanied by only one or two Brothers. Therefore the other Brothers had some other work. If Montfort gathered round him, so early in his career, so many helpers it shows clearly his intention of founding a congregation of Brothers destined to the Missions or to the charitable schools. Later on some of them made their religious profession. There were only four professed Brothers when Montfort died, but all, whether they had vows or not, lived their religious life from the day they joined themselves to him. That is to say, they practiced obedience, poverty and chastity. They had, if not a real religious rule, at least a rule of life and a regular time-table and a set of customs. We do not have the text, but its existence is proved by the fact that once Bro. Nicholas was refused communion because he had “broken the rule which requires that you should retire to your quarters by nine o’clock and you held indiscreet conversation about me with the main servant”. (Fr. Cloriviere)

**5.4. Montfort’s Last Will:** Montfort’s Last Will contains the following passage, “As the house at La Rochelle is reverting to its natural heirs, there will only be left for the community of the Holy Spirit the house at Vouvant, which was given to me by Mme de la Brulerie by an agreement, the condition of which Fr. Mulot must fulfill; and the two pieces of land given by the Lieutenant of Vouvant’s wife, and 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.” Here we notice Montfort effort to establish the Brothers of the Holy Spirit to conduct charitable schools. We know, from Montfort’s Last Will that at least one Brother was teaching in Nantes.

## **6. Immediately after Montfort’s death**

On June 6, 1716, Fr. Mulot registered Montfort’s Will with the notary in Nantes. He gave up the idea of accepting the properties in Vouvan. Then Fathers Mulot and Vatel came to St. Pompain to stay with Fr. Mulot’s brother, who was the parish priest there. Latest by June 2, 1718, Bro. Mathurin came and joined the two Fathers. From 1716-19, Bro. Jacques was in St. Laurent to look after the school for boys. On June 20, 1720, Sr. Marie Louise came to St. Laurent to establish the first community in a property donated by Marquis of Maganane and his niece Mme de Bouillé. A young man named René Joseau helped her. Later the Sisters requested Fr. Mulot to come to St. Laurent to be their superior. The same benefactors bought another property for Fathers and Brothers. The property was registered in the name of Brothers, who were to teach in the parish. “The property known as ‘Chêne-Vet’ House (The Holm-Oak House) along with the garden ‘Les Huelles’ and the end portion of a prairie was bought on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1721 from René Pabaut by Françoise-Renée Le Vacher, widow of Marquis de Bouillé... In the name of the Brothers, who are to teach small boys of the parish.” (Card. Tisserant, Montfort and the Brothers of St. Gabriel, p. 263)

In June 1722, Fathers (3 more joined the group) and Brothers came to St. Laurent to start their first community. After a retreat they elected Fr. Mulot as their superior and on June 29, 1722,

made their religious vows in the hands Fr. Mulot. Bro. Joseau too made his first vows. He looked after the school from 1722-52. In 1723, there was an exchange property between the Fathers and Sisters. Brothers were in La Rochelle and Nantes only for a short period only and thus the school at St. Laurent was only one where Brothers taught till the end of the century: Bro. René Joseau (1722-52), Bro. Pierre (1752-1770), Bro. Hilaire (1770-1780) and Bro. Aulaire (1780-1791).

Then came the French Revolution. In March 1792, a part of Western France revolted against the Republic. The war that followed, called the War of Vendée. Was ruthless. During the French Revolution, 34 Sisters, 6 Brothers and 6 Priests lost their life. In 1795, Fathers and Brothers returned to Holy Spirit House. Bros. Hilaire and Pierre escaped from the revolution. Bro. Elie joined the novitiate in 1805 and he, as a Brother, looked after the parish school in St. Laurent.

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