

Montfort and his love for the poor

St. Louis Mary Grignion de Montfort, from his early years, developed a special love for the poor. While studying at Rennes (1684-92), he joined the Sodality of our Lady which provided him with opportunity to help the poor. While at school, he saw a poor student being made fun of by his companions because of his torn clothes. Louis addressed the students, took a collection from them and took the affected student to a tailor. He told the tailor, "Here is my brother and yours. I have made a collection for him in my class and got as much as I could in order to have new clothes made. Here it is, and if it is not enough, it will be your concern to make up the balance." The tailor agreed to his request.

Fr. Descartes, his spiritual guide, wanted Louis to be more than a good Sodality member. He introduced him to the saintly Fr. Bellier, the almoner of the City's general hospital, and Louis became one of the priest's small band of helpers, visiting the poor, begging clothing and food for them, praying for the dying, and teaching the little ones. Fr. Julien Bellier, the Chaplain of the General Hospital, guided Louis in his service to the poor. Through this priest he came in contact with human misery. Louis met the poor in General Hospitals and helped them. The discovery of the poor was perhaps the most decisive event of his adolescence. Often Louis visited St. Yves' Hospital in Rennes. One day, Mrs. Grignion was surprised to meet there, a woman whom she had helped before. To her question, "How did you come here?", the poor woman replied, "It is your son, who brought me here and got me admitted."

Towards the end of 1692, Louis left Paris to join St. Sulpice Seminary. After bidding goodbye to his dear ones at Cesson bridge, he gave away the little money that he had to a beggar and then his new clothes to another. He manifested his love for the poor. He knelt down and made a vow never to possess anything. While in the Lesser Seminary of St. Sulpice (1695-1700), he prepared sermon notes in view of becoming a preacher of the rural poor. On Dec. 6, 1700, he wrote a letter to his spiritual director Fr. Leschassier and in it his option in favour of the poor is clearly mentioned. "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)

In November 1701, Fr. Louis joined the Poorhouse as one of its chaplains. He did not accept any salary. He did not eat with the other chaplains. He made himself one with the poor. He ate the food that they ate. Thus he invented a new way of being among the poor. Every morning, he, along with some beggars, went to the town and collected alms and food. He introduced the custom of distributing food thrice a day instead of the usual once a day. He came into close contact with 400 poor people. He looked after them very tenderly.

During 1705-1706, after leaving the Poorhouse of Poitiers, Montfort preached at Montbernage, St. Simplician, St. Radegonde, etc. in Poitiers. Here were the little people, those who counted for nothing. "Montfort was very much at ease with their manners and their moods, the characteristic pitch of their seething crowded life in the winding lanes and alleyways." (Benedetta Papàsogli, *Montfort A Prophet for our times*, p. 265)

Towards the end of 1706, in Dinan, Montfort joined some missionaries to preach a mission. They gladly granted Louis' wish to teach catechism to the children. Louis taught the children about

Mary. He heard confessions and tended the sick. One evening, going along the streets, he found a poor man covered with ulcers. He took him on his shoulders and went to the Missionaries' House. He knocked at the door and cried out, "Open to Jesus Christ." Montfort considered poor and sick people as Jesus Christ himself.

"Wisdom is not identified uniquely with the Cross but also with the poor. Basing himself on the word of Jesus, who identifies himself with man in need (Mt 25:40, 45; cf. H 18:8), Montfort defines the poor man as "the lieutenant of Jesus Christ" and, even more, as "Jesus Christ himself" (H 17:14). Montfort offers us an eloquent sign of this vision of faith in the episode at Dinan (1706), when he hoisted upon his shoulders the ulcerous poor man whom he met on his trip and knocked at the door of the missionary house, crying out: "Open to Jesus Christ!" He had not elaborated a theology on the nature of the presence of Christ in the poor, but through gestures like this one, he demanded it. In any case, our neighbor remains the sacrament of our union with Christ. Our poor neighbor is our forgotten neighbor, the Christ who has been rejected down through the centuries." (Stefano de Fiores, *smm, Jesus Living in Mary*, p. 777)

From 1708 to 1710, Montfort preached a number of missions. "Fr. Barrin, Bishop de Beauveau's vicar general, was on his side. Under these circumstances, Montfort could begin to give his full attention to structuring his personal method of mission. Borrowing the normal ways of doing things at the time, he added to them his personal touch. His spiritual orientation included: living "on Providence," "dependent on the people"; attending in a particular way to the poor; Mary's place in prayer, notably the practice of the Rosary; the Wisdom of the Cross; and above all, renewing the vows and promises of Baptism." (Fr. André Bossard, *smm, Jesus Living in Mary*, p. 771)

Montfort wrote a large of hymns, which helped in catechizing. "They are also written to warm the hearts of simple people and to bring a bit of joy into the lives of the poor." (Benedetta Papàsogli, *Montfort A Pophet for our times*, p. 334) "During his mission, Father de Montfort used to feed hundred poor people relying on whatever Providence might send along. Curious crowds used to come to watch the spectacle. At La Garnache he "starts a new system, which is more discreet and also has the advantage of educating the people to service of the poor. He invites several of the needy to come and eat at his own table and asks each family of the parish to offer a complete meal to one poor person. This more delicate way of offering them charity leaves long-lasting effects among the believers." (Benedetta Papasogli, *Montfort, Prophet of our times*, p. 374)

Towards the end of 1710 in Nantes, Montfort started a House for Incurables at Cathuy House, which was offered to him by Madame Olivier. Here he lovingly looked after the really needy. "If we follow Montfort into the slums of Poitiers, the suburbs of St. Donatien and St. Similien at Nantes, or the Loges de Fontney and Villeneuve at La Rochelle, we find ourselves in the midst of poor, humble folk and squalid bands of deprived, untutored children, We also know that Montfort visited frequently General Hospitals." (Fr. Le Marié, *Artile "Poverty", Montfortian Dictionary*, p. 956)

During his ministry Montfort bestowed a special care on poor children and started free schools for them. 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.” In 1715, Montfort started a charitable school for girls in La Rochelle and Sr. Marie Louise was put in charge of it.

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