

Essential aspects of Montfortian spirituality

Bro. Lawrence Joseph, s.g.

Montfortian spirituality has different aspects. We often tend to equate Montfort to two or three aspects like his love for the poor, Marian devotion and love for children. But it is good to have a global look at St. Montfort.

1. Montfort was a mystic and he spent daily several hours in prayer. All his biographers have pointed out in clear terms Montfort's love for solitude, silence and contemplation. "In order to avoid worldly people and their amusements, young Grignon withdrew into some corner of the house to give himself to prayers or recite his rosary in front of a small picture of the Blessed Virgin. He continued this practice when he was more advanced in years." (Biography by Grandet, p.4). During 1702-04, his Letters 13, 15, and 16 tell us that Montfort had a great desire to be united to Jesus Christ, the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom. "What wealth, what glory, what happiness would be mine if from all this (cross) I obtained divine Wisdom, which I long for day and night!" (L. 15) On Oct. 24, 1703, he wrote to Sr. Marie Louise Trichet, "When shall I possess this loveable and mysterious Wisdom? When will Wisdom come and live in me? When shall I be sufficiently equipped to serve as place of rest for Wisdom in a world where he is rejected and without a home? Who will give me this bread of understanding with which Wisdom nourishes great souls? Who will give me to drink of the chalice from which Wisdom quenches the thirst of those who serve him? When shall I be crucified and lost to the world? ... So pray, entreat God, plead for me to obtain divine Wisdom. You will obtain it completely for me; of this I am quite convinced," (L. 16)

Montfort wrote, "All perfection consists in our being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus." (TD 120) While Montfort was staying in utter poverty and misery at the Pot de Fer Street, Paris during 1703-04, he meditated a lot on the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and also on the mysteries of Christ. Further, he wrote for himself and for the whole Church the book, "The Love of Eternal Wisdom". To get united to Wisdom, one should know him intimately and love him passionately. The best way to know Eternal Wisdom is to contemplate Him. "If we wish to have roots of immortality deeply embedded in our heart, we must have in our mind knowledge of Eternal Wisdom. To know Jesus Christ incarnate Wisdom, is to know all we need. Montfort daily spent four hours in meditation. Further he took time off to make his own retreat. Hermitage of St. Lazar near the town of Montfort, hermitage of St. Eloi in La Rochelle and the Grotto of Mervent demonstrate Montfort's love for solitude and prayer. He celebrated the Holy Eucharist with much fervour. Mass and Meditation provided him with enough enlightenment and strength to preach the missions and to face his crosses.

2. Montfort was very much devoted to Mary and did much to spread her devotion. All biographers have noted Montfort's great devotion to Mary. Blain, his classmate and geographer, has mentioned, "Love for Mary was almost as innate in M. Grignon. As a boy, what he enjoyed most was to speak of her or listen to other people speak of her, and later on, his greatest joy was to propagate devotion to her and increase the number of those dedicated to her service." In his first book, The Love of Eternal Wisdom, Montfort has proposed devotion to Mary as best means to get united to Wisdom. "The essential practice of this devotion is to perform all our actions

with Mary. This means that we must take her as the accomplished model for all we have to do.” (SM 45)

3. Montfort was a great missionary and worked hard to make Jesus and Mary known and loved. On Dec. 6, 1700, Montfort wrote, "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 arouse in sinners a devotion to our Blessed Lady." (L. 5) From 1708-1710, he preached a number of missions in the diocese of Nantes. From 1711-16, he was fully involved with missions in the dioceses of Luçon and La Rochelle. He set about evangelizing a whole territory, traveling slowly and humbly on foot from one village to another, wherever his preaching was requested. Not a single village was neglected. He entered deeply into the lives of the communities, which received him. His was not a passing visit and he went back to the same villages. His relationship with the crowds, which called him affectionately “the good Father Montfort”, was more personal and human than ever before. He gave to a number of people individual spiritual direction. He became a popular leader capable of animating crowds. He was capable of using a language convincing as well as appealing to ordinary people. He also had the gift of touching the hearts. In short, he became an effective preacher, guide and leader.

Montfort undertook many initiatives: 1. he tried to establish a true devotion to Mary and the daily recitation of the rosary 2. constructed Calvary in a number of places 3. organized processions 4. composed a large number of hymns to be used during the missions 5. painted pictures and banners 6. carved wooden statues 7. founded pious associations 8. organized the feeding of the poor 9. wrote a number of spiritual books especially on Mary, Wisdom and Cross 10. founded charitable schools for the poor, etc.

4. Montfort loved children and started charitable schools. Montfort loved children. He noticed that the children of the poor tended to be antisocial for want of instruction. The need to provide them with education was keenly felt by him. He loved children and was an excellent teacher. 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. While at the Seminary of St. Sulpice (1695-1700), the masters of St. Sulpice sent Louis to teach catechism to children. From 1701-03, Montfort was one of the 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 schoolmaster.

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”.

During the second half of 1714, Montfort bought an old building, and repaired it. 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”. Montfort took great care of his school; he drew up the rules for admission, the timetable 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 masters and the pupils according to his own method of teaching... For the Boys’ School, Montfort could find, among the many persons under direction, the right men who would be able and zealous enough to do the work.” He also started a school for girls. Besides La Rochelle and Nantes, there was only the school of St. Laurent-sur-Sèvre, where we could be sure that there was a Montfortian Brother during the Saint’s life time. From Montfort’s biography and from his Last Will, it is very clear that, if possible, a school was to be started at Vouvant.

5. Montfort loved poverty and did much to minister to the poor. Louis Mary Grignon 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. 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. 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 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.

In November 1701, Fr. Louis joined the Poitiers Poorhouse as chaplain. 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. At the poorhouse, his devotion and sense of organization worked marvels. 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. During 1705-06, he 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.”

Montfort considered a poor sick person as Jesus Christ himself. Thus in Dinan he carried a leper to the House of Missionaries, knocked at the door and cried out, “Open to Jesus Christ.” 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.”

“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.” Personally I prefer a simple life style and I tried to educate poor children.

6. Montfort practiced mortifications and loved crosses. Montfort fasted frequently. He has given mortification as the third means to get united to Wisdom. He had to face many crosses in his life. On Sept. 18, 1694, Fr. Barmondier, who looked after Montfort in Paris, died and Montfort wrote, "Whatever happens I shall not be worried. I have a father in heaven who will never fail me." (L.2) When he was asked to leave from the General Hospital of Salpetriere, he sought help from his friends; but no one received him. "Those friends I once had in Paris have deserted me." (L.15) He was forced to take shelter under the staircase of dilapidated building on the Pot-de-Fer Street. Montfort wrote in The Love of Eternal Wisdom, "Among all the motives which urge us to love Jesus Christ, the strongest is, in my opinion, the sorrow which he endured to show his love...Cross is to my belief, the greatest secret of the King; the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom... Never the Cross without Jesus; nor Jesus without the Cross... The cross is good and precious for many reasons... Friends of Jesus Christ, drink of his bitter cup and your friendship with him will increase." (LEW 154, 167, 171, 176, 180)

During 1709-10, Montfort, with the help many people, constructed a big Calvary at Pontchateau. But unfortunately his enemies made a complaint to the King of France. The Calvary could not be blessed and it had to be destroyed. Montfort accepted this heavy cross with resignation. Later this Calvary was rebuilt. Montfort founded an association known as the Friends of the Cross. To the members of this association he wrote a beautiful letter explaining Jesus' request to his disciples to carry the cross.

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