

# ST. LOUIS MARY GRIGNION DE MONTFORT APOSTOLIC MISSIONARY

from a presentation by Brother Jean Bulteau

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## Introduction

St. Louis Marie Montfort was perceived by his first two biographers mainly as a missionary. Grandet, in 1724, entitled his work: *"The Life of M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Missionary Apostolic Priest"* and Picot de Clorivière in 1785: *"The Life of M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Apostolic Missionary, Institute of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit and the Daughters of Wisdom"*.

Through the various missionary activities he carried out from 1700 to 1716, Louis-Marie participated very actively in the ecclesial mission of evangelisation. What is striking at first sight is the amazing fruitfulness of his action, a fruitfulness that does not derive from recipes but from deep roots.

## **I- I- Missionary activities of St. Louis Marie**

Even before leaving the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, Louis Marie presented his apostolic projects to Mr. Leschassier, his spiritual director. *"Like you, I had in mind going to be trained for the missions, and especially to teach catechism to the poor, which is my great preference [...] since I have been here, I feel as if I were torn between two feelings which seem to be opposed. On the one hand, I feel a secret love for retreat and the hidden life, to combat and overcome my corrupt nature which likes to appear. On the other hand, I feel a great desire to make Our Lord and his Blessed Mother loved, to go, in a poor and simple manner, to teach catechism to the poor of the countryside, and to motivate in sinners the devotion to the Blessed Virgin".* (L.5 of 06.12.1700). The following year, in September 1701, he wrote: *"Catechism for the poor of the city and the country is my element"* (L.9, 16.09.1701).

In the same letter, he speaks of "small missions", which include: preaching, catechism and confessions. On July 4th 1702, describing at length to Mr. Leschassier what had happened to him in the hospital of Poitiers during the seven months he had been chaplain there, he pointed out: *"Since I have been here, I have been on a continuous mission, confessing almost always from morning till night and giving advice to an infinite number of people..."*. (L.9, 16.09.1701). He added: *"I forgot to tell you that I give a lecture every week to the students of 13 or 14 who are the elite of the college and this with the approval of the late Monsignor"*. Grandet says that in addition to this, "preaching, catechisms, visiting the sick and sinners, singing hymns were added" (Grandet p. 472).

When he returned from Rome (1706) with the title of "apostolic missionary", Louis Marie preached missions (especially parish missions) and directed many retreats. For the missions, he used the framework then in use with instructions, lectures, catechisms, confessions, prayers, renewal of baptismal vows, processions, planting of crosses, etc. If these missions (or retreats) were intended to be what we would call highlights of Christian life today, Louis Marie made them into true times of lasting conversion, thus realizing his ever-growing desire to "make Our Lord and His Holy Mother loved".

"It is from baptism and their commitments that, since Maunoir, Breton missionaries propose a life-long conversion. Father of Montfort adopted his approach, at the latest in 1705. Like them, he made the renewal of baptismal promises a covenant contract with God that each Christian signs with his own hand. He seems to have gone further than they did by linking this renewal to general confession, by denying absolution to penitents who would not previously ratified these promises. These promises, formulated in a shorter and more incisive way than in Leuduger's, put more emphasis on the rhythm of the whole Christian life, death and life in Christ: I renounce forever the devil, the world, sin and myself [...]. I give myself entirely to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary to carry my cross in his footsteps (*"Louis Perouas: Grignon de Montfort, les pauvres et les missions"*, Paris, pp. 115-126 - See the explanation he gives of this program of Christian life, pp. 126-144).

After the mission, when he could, Louis Marie himself would return to the place to rekindle the enthusiasm of the faithful (cf. L. 21). Towards the end of his life he insisted, reports Besnard, on "preparation for death" (Besnard Volume II, p. 110).

At the same time, he was concerned to initiate concrete means to maintain a renewed Christian life in the parish. Once the land was conquered, it had to be occupied. Thus he set up several associations: societies of virgins for girls, congregations for young people, brotherhoods of white penitents, friends of the Cross [...] To others, he proposed perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and above all, he established the practice of the Rosary. (For all these associations, cf. Grandet, pp. 382-400)

For this same purpose, at the end of his life, he created charitable schools: in La Rochelle, for example, where he wrote to Marie-Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet: *"Name yourselves a Community of the Daughters of Wisdom for the instruction of children and the care of the poor"* (L. 29, 04.04.1715). And in his will: *"All the furniture in Nantes will be for the use of the Brothers who run the school, as long as it survives"* and again on a small house situated at Vouvant: *"If there is no way to build there, the Brothers of the community of the Holy Spirit will remain there to run charitable schools"* ("O.C.", pp. 832 and 833).

Thus, whether during the mission or afterwards, Louis Marie was faithful to the instructions he received from Pope Clement XI in 1706, *"to teach Christian doctrine to the people and children and to revive everywhere the spirit of Christianity, renewing the promises of baptism, with perfect submission to the bishops to whose dioceses he would be called"*. And the Pope added: *"God will hereby give his blessing to your work."* (Grandet p. 101).

When in 1713 he wrote the Rules of the Missionaries of the Company of Mary, he was able to record his own experience in them: *"The purpose of your mission is to renew the spirit of Christianity in Christians. Thus, they renew their promises, as the Pope commands, in the most solemn manner, and they do not give absolution and communion to any penitent who has not previously renewed, with others, the promises of baptism. One must have experienced the fruits of this practice to appreciate its value. (Rule of the Missionaries of the Company of Mary No. 56)*

They establish with all their strength, throughout the mission, whether in the morning readings, in the lectures or in the preaching, the great devotion to the Rosary that is practiced every day; and they gather together in this Confraternity (as they can) all those who can; and they explain to them the prayers and the mysteries of which it is composed, either by their words or by the paintings and images that they have for this purpose; and they set an example by reciting the Rosary aloud every day of the mission, in French, . . . with the offerings of the mysteries, at three different times: The Rosary is prayed in the morning during the celebration of Holy Mass, before preaching; the second at noon before catechism, while the children gather there; and the third in the afternoon, before the last preaching. This is one of the greatest secrets that came from heaven to water the hearts with the heavenly dew and make them bear the fruit of the word of God, as they experience it every day. "(RMCM 57).

## **II-Fruits and roots of his missionary activity**

### **2.1- Multiple and lasting conversions**

Already in 1701, at the age of 28, taking his first steps on the Grand-Champ, near Nantes, for ten days (catechism for children twice a day and three sermons), he noted that "the Good God and the Blessed Virgin were giving their blessings there" (Letter 8 of July 5, 1701).

In July 1702, he noted the conversions that resulted from his activity: "God wanted to serve me to make great conversions in the house (the general hospital in Poitiers) and outside the house" (L.11, 04.07.1702).

In 1703, this young priest of the secular clergy was able to renew the fervour of the hermits on Mount Valérien in Paris.

In 1709, he succeeded in suppressing abuses such as burials in churches, at Campbon or Crossac, an old custom that the Bishop of Nantes had wanted to forbid for a long time, but in vain. This shows his influence on the faithful he was addressing. It was this same ability to mobilise the crowds for God that enabled him to undertake the construction of the Calvary of Pontchâteau.

Father Vincent, a Capuchin, one of Louis Marie's collaborators in his missions, admired in him his "art of touching hearts and gaining souls for Jesus Christ" (Blain LXIX). The repentance of the crowds was often expressed in tears and sobs, as in 1711 in La Rochelle. Some priests did not escape, these men, said Mr. Blain, "whose tears must be taken into account" (Blain LXXII).

## 2.2- The deep roots of its action

Human eloquence alone is not enough to explain the fruits of conversion obtained by Louis Marie's preaching. Certainly, he was gifted, sensitive, intelligent; he had received a solid formation; he had a sense of organization and of the great staging and the art of provoking the active participation of the people (cf. Blain LVIII).

But his secrets were elsewhere. From time to time he would reveal them to a friend, he left them to his future missionaries in his Rule or let them be seen in his life and writings. It seems to us that it is possible to explain some of them here.

- **great desires**

Louis-Marie's entire life was animated and polarized by "great desires" centered on Jesus Christ, Wisdom to be acquired, possessed, made known, loved and served. "Jesus Christ, eternal Wisdom, is all that you can and must desire. Desire him, seek him, because he is that unique and precious pearl for the purchase of which you must not make it difficult to sell all that you have" (LEW, 9). "The first means to acquire and grow in the knowledge of Wisdom (who is Jesus Christ) is **a burning desire**" (LEW, 181-183).

He urged Marie-Louise Trichet to ask for Wisdom with him and for him (cf. L.15 and 16). In the same sense, he asked his sister Guyonne-Jeanne (L.17).

It is this same ardent desire to make Jesus Christ known through the missions that impelled him to stimulate the zeal of the penitents of Saint-Pompain, by undertaking their pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Saumur (in 1715) to "ask God for the holy missionaries". It is this same ardent desire that inspired his "fervent and eloquent" prayer (Grandet), which we call the "Ardent Prayer" in which he asks God for a "new company" of "missionary saints": Lord Jesus [...] give sons and servants to your Mother, otherwise I will die. Is it not necessary that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven and that your Kingdom come? [...] Have you not shown some of your friends, before, a future renewal of their Church? Shouldn't the Jews convert to the truth? Isn't that what the Church expects? Don't all the saints in heaven ask you for justice? [...] Do not all the righteous on earth say Amen, Veni Domine? (P.E. 5-6).

Even if Louis Marie was unable to fulfill his desire to go to India or Canada, nor his desire to "expire at the foot of a tree like the incomparable missionary of Japan, St. Francis Xavier" (Grandet p. 363), he always had in his heart the obsession of saving souls on a global scale. "My heart suffers the greatest pain," he said one day to Mr. des Bastières, "when I think that an almost infinite number of souls are condemned because they do not know the true God and the Christian religion" (Grandet p. 362). (Grandet p. 362) This confidence gives us a glimpse of the universal dimension of his "great desires".

- **ask for the grace to enlighten and touch hearts**

The longing is naturally expressed in prayer, as we have just seen. Louis Marie first of all asks God for Wisdom because "Wisdom not only gives man the light to know the truth, but also a wonderful capacity to make it known to others" (LEW 95). "Acquiring the light and the unction necessary to inspire others with the love of Wisdom" is, according to him, among the three degrees of piety, the most perfect one" (LEW 30).

He also wants his "missionaries to apply themselves unceasingly in study and prayer to obtain from God the gift of wisdom, so necessary for a true preacher to know, taste and make souls taste the truth". Nothing is as easy as preaching and preaching in fashion. But how difficult and costly it is to preach to the apostolic; that to speak as the wise man, *ex sententia or*, as Jesus Christ says, *ex abundantia cordis*, is to have received from God, as a reward for one's labors and prayers, a tongue, a mouth and a wisdom that the enemies of truth cannot resist: "*os et sapientiam cui non poterunt resistere omnes adversarii vestri*" "... because I will give you a language and a wisdom that none of your adversaries can resist or contradict." (Lk 21:15). Out of a thousand preachers -I would say ten thousand without lying- there is only one who has this great gift of the Holy Spirit; the majority have only the tongue, the mouth and the wisdom of man; therefore few souls are enlightened, touched and converted by his words...". (RMCM 60). "Such" as all the children of the Company of Mary must be one day. "*Preachers who have received the gift of the eternal word*" (RMCM 61).

What he says about preachers certainly applies to catechists, since "it is more difficult to find a competent catechist than a perfect preacher" (RMCM, 79).

Louis-Marie had obtained for himself the grace of touching hearts, as he confided to Mr. Hindré, parish priest of Bréal, around the feast of All Saints in 1707, who, "astonished by his success, expressed his surprise: the missionary, in an intimate outpouring, answered: **"My dear friend, I have been to more than two thousand places of pilgrimage to ask God for the grace to touch hearts and he has answered me"** (Besnard).

We know the long moments he dedicated to prayer each day, the times of prolonged retreat he sought among his missions. We can easily guess the meaning of his prayer.

"May my fountain be renewed night and day,  
but that doesn't make me poor;  
that I preach to convert,  
but that preaching (bis), fills me up. "Ct 22:16

One day in 1707, while he was preaching a retreat to the Sisters of Saint Briec, they came to ask him to shorten his prayer; he answered: "Let me go, because if I am not good for myself, I will never be good for others. Is it not necessary to give all the care to one's own tree if one wants it to bear fruit? (Besnard).

- **Letting God speak**

Prayer was, therefore, the moment when he was "filled with the Word and the Spirit of God" (RMCM 61) in order to let God communicate through his preaching.

He believed in the efficacy of the Word of God: "The words which divine Wisdom communicates are not common, natural and human words; they are divine words [...] They are strong, moving, penetrating words [...] which start from the heart of the one through whom she speaks and reach the heart of the one who listens to her" (LEW 96).

"The apostolic missionary preaches with simplicity, without artifice" (RMCM 62), after having placed himself totally in God's hands.

His friend Blain had well understood the cause of Louis-Marie's power of persuasion: "Without hindering his spirit and without subjecting it to tortures in order to compose with art and symmetry superficial speeches in which man speaks, instead of God [...] he gave himself [...] to the spirit of God whom he consulted before preaching, whom he gave himself to after having prepared himself, whom he invoked when he went to preach, whom he gave himself to when he was in the pulpit" (Blain LVIII).

Louis-Marie had experienced this way of doing things from the very beginning of his priestly ministry: "The great God, my Father [...] has given me, since I have been here (in Poitiers) lights in the spirit that I did not have, a great facility for speaking, and for speaking at once, without preparation [...]". How could it be otherwise, if in speaking Louis Marie let God himself express through his mouth? It was in a certain way Jesus Christ himself who gave the mission (cf. Letter to the inhabitants of Montbernage).

- **To live "to Providence" or "to the apostolic".**

In the daily life of the missions, just as when he was in the pulpit, Louis Marie expected everything from God. Since he had left his family to go to the seminary in Paris, he knew that he had "a Father in heaven who is undeniable", and he had as his Rule "to abandon himself always to his Providence" (L.3 of 20.09.1694).

Therefore, he rejected any benefit: he asked his missionaries (Rule of 1713) to do "all their missions in abandonment to Providence, without settling down in any foundation for any future mission... to be founded only on God" (RMCM 50 and 12). He liked to live in a private house which he called "Providence" instead of in the parish house, and to depend for his sustenance on the common people who came to evangelize.

His experience has shown him the pastoral and spiritual advantages of such a practice: people exercise charity in a concrete way, ...the preacher and the listener tune into each other more quickly, which engenders union of hearts; the simplicity and humility of the missionary promote God's action and conversion (RMCM 50).

"Isn't that how "Jesus Christ, the apostles and the apostolic men" did it?" For Louis Marie, this first reason would be enough. His missionaries had to "carry out their missions in the footsteps of the poor Apostles" (RMCM No. 1, 50).

Blain uses the expression "apostolic" to describe Louis Marie's mode of apostolate, which he characterized as "a great spirit of simplicity, poverty, penance and abandonment to Divine Providence" (Blain LXV).

- **The secret of the Cross**

Louis Marie de Montfort gradually penetrated the mystery of the Cross and, through a long and hard apprenticeship, experienced its incomparable missionary fruitfulness for the salvation of mankind.

"The Cross is a mystery  
very deep down here.  
Without much light.  
we do not know it" (C 19.1).

"Since incarnate Wisdom had to enter heaven through the Cross, it is necessary to enter, after Him, by the same way [...] True Wisdom dwells so much in the Cross that you will not find her outside of it in this world, and she has become so incorporated and united to the Cross that it can be said with certainty that, Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom" (LEW 180).

The third way of obtaining Wisdom is "universal mortification", which can be summarized as follows: "Leave everything, you will find everything, by finding Jesus Christ, incarnate Wisdom" (LEW 202).

What is valid for acquiring Wisdom is also valid here for communicating her. Louis Marie knows it. On August 15, 1713, he wrote to his sister Guyonne-Jeanne: "Long live Jesus, long live his Cross. If you knew my crosses and my humiliations in detail, I doubt that you would have been so eager to see me; for I am never in a country where I do not give an ounce of my cross to carry to my best friends, often in spite of myself and them [...]. Always alert, always on thorns, on sharp stones, I am like a ball in a kind of game; as soon as it is pushed to one side, it is already rejected from the other, hitting it with violence. That is the fate of a poor sinner. That is how I am, without respite or rest since thirteen years ago, since I left Saint-Sulpice. However, my dear sister, bless God for me, because I am happy and joyful in the midst of all my sufferings, and I don't think there is anything in the world sweeter for me than the most bitter cross, as long as it is soaked in the blood of Jesus Crucified and in the milk of his Divine Mother. But, besides this inner joy, there is a great benefit in carrying crosses. I would like you to see mine. I have never achieved more conversions than after the bloodiest and most unjust prohibitions..." (L.26).

To the Dauvaise ladies who, in 1716, wanted to recruit for the enlargement of the hospice for incurables in Nantes, he gave them as a third piece of advice for the choice of persons: "Let them prepare, if the work is of God, to suffer joyfully all kinds of crosses..." And as to fix concretely before their eyes the ideal he proposes to them, he adds: "The first thing to do in this house will be to plant a cross... It is the first piece of furniture to be taken there" (L. 33 of 04.04.1716).

The last letter we have from him is addressed to Marie-Louise Trichet less than a fortnight before his death, while the Sisters of La Rochelle are faced with many contradictions. Nothing is more normal than the difficulties encountered, "if you are a student of Wisdom [...] you know that I expect other more considerable and more sensitive renunciations [...] to found the community of Wisdom [...] on the wisdom of the Cross of the Calvary" (L. 34).

In his missions he knew from experience that the more opportunities he had to unite with Christ crucified through suffering, misunderstanding and opposition of all kinds, the greater would be his spiritual success. Without provoking them, he rejoiced when the crosses were presented to him. When, during a mission at La Chevrolière, the parish priest himself intervened publicly at the end of a sermon to tell his parishioners that they were wasting their time and that they would do better to stay at home, Louis-Marie heard the parish priest's words on his knees, went to find Monsieur de Bastières and said to him: "Let us sing the Te Deum, my dear friend, to thank the Good Lord for the lovely cross He was pleased to send us: I have a joy that I

cannot express. Mr. de Bastières, who reported the fact, added: "I have never seen in all the other missions a greater number of converted sinners" (Grandet, p. 133).

When a few days later, in the parish of Vertou, everything was going humanly better, Louis-Marie said: "How badly we are here! ..." - Not at all, replied Mr. de Bastières, where would we go to be better off? - We are too comfortable here: our mission will be fruitless. No cross, what a cross! "(Grandet, p. 133)

Louis-Marie was convinced that the Cross is the tree of life (SM 22), that the branch attached to the vine bears fruit if it is pruned (Jn 15:2). The planting of crosses, with which the missions were normally completed, was to remind the converted parishioners that, by their covenant contract, they had promised to carry their cross in following Jesus every day of their lives.

(cf. the Letter to the Friends of the Cross on this subject).

### • **Mary's Secret**

Through intuition and grace, study and contemplation (TD 118), spiritual experience and missionary practice (TD 110, 250), Louis Marie gradually discovered Mary's privileged place in God's plan of salvation.

"Mary is the tree of life [...] and her fruit is none other than Jesus Christ" (TD 218). She is God's "mould" in which the saints are "moulded" (TD 219).

It is through Mary that "Jesus Christ came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world" (TD 1). God the Father wishes to make children through Mary until the consummation of the world (TD 29); God the Son wishes to be formed and incarnated every day, through his beloved Mother, in his members (TD 31); God the Holy Spirit wishes to form the elect in her and through her" (TD 34).

Since Mary is entirely relative to God, "the wonderful echo of God" (SM 21), "the more a soul is consecrated to Mary, the more it will be consecrated to Jesus Christ" and therefore the holier it is: "Our whole perfection consists in being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus Christ" (TD 120).

Consecrated to God through Baptism, but so often unfaithful to the demands of life that this consecration entails, the Christian who gives himself entirely to the Blessed Virgin, the faithful Virgin, chooses "an easy, short, perfect and sure path to union with Christ" (TD 152).

"Therefore, the perfect consecration to Jesus Christ is nothing other than a perfect and complete consecration of oneself to the Blessed Virgin [...] or, in other words, a perfect renewal of the vows and promises of Holy Baptism" (TD 120). This is "the greatest of all means and the most wonderful of all secrets for acquiring and preserving divine Wisdom [...]" (LEW 203).

"Louis Marie calls secret the knowledge and practice of a marvelous means of sanctification, "too little known" - Cf. O.C. p. 442, note 1 - This is the means that Louis Marie used for himself in an eminent degree - C. 77:13 - This is the means he used in all his missions or retreats - Cf. the contract of Covenant : "I give myself entirely to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary".

If he gives, as we have said, a privileged place to the Rosary, both during the mission and afterwards, it is because he knows its value. It is another secret: "The Admirable Secret of the Most Holy Rosary for conversion and salvation" (title of the treatise on the Rosary). "For me, I find nothing more powerful to bring about the Kingdom of God, Eternal Wisdom, in our midst, than to unite vocal prayer with mental prayer by reciting the Holy Rosary and meditating on the fifteen mysteries it contains" (LEW 193). The Hail Mary makes the Word of God germinate in souls (TD 249). Here, as always, Louis Marie refers to his experience (SAR no. 2).

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- **God's will and communion/obedience to the bishops**

After having sought for a long time, from 1700 to 1706, his field of apostolic action, Louis Marie received from Pope Clement XI a precise mission: to remain in France, to teach Christian doctrine to the people and to children, to renew solemnly the promises of Baptism, to work always in perfect submission to the Bishops who would call him to their dioceses (cf. Grandet, p. 100). The Pope has spoken, the demand is heard.

"In Paris as in Rome,  
in those who legislate,  
I can't see the man anymore,  
but God alone, my Lord."  
(CT 91.30)

"Without reason and without prudence,  
with no will of their own,  
the holy Obedience  
keeps me safe."

CT 91.26

Even if later, especially because of the Gospel which is his only Rule, and no doubt also because of certain peculiarities of which he is not aware (cf. Blain, LXXX), he continues to be "dragged" (L.26) from one diocese to another; he always accepts the requests, advice or [...] prohibitions of the Bishops or General Vicars, as an expression of the will of God. And he sticks to the letter. Like Jesus Christ, his Master, he learned obedience in suffering and thus became for many the cause of eternal salvation (cf. Heb 5:8).

"He was convinced that obedience was the sure sign of God's will and that we should never deviate from it" (Blain, pp. 179-180). He would make of it his "capital".

During the last five years of his life, stabilized so to speak in the dioceses of Luçon and especially in La Rochelle, he turned to the bishop for every initiative, as the following examples show.

"Bishop de La Rochelle, to whom I have spoken several times about you and your projects, finds it appropriate that you should come here to begin the work so longed for. For this purpose he has had a house rented, while waiting to buy and give perfect organization to another [...] I am writing to you in the name of the Bishop. Keep my secret" (L. 27, beginning of 1715) to Marie-Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet, who were thus invited to leave the hospital in Poitiers where there were still only two of them, to go to La Rochelle to open a free school for girls [...].

The following April 4, the two sisters arrived in La Rochelle within a week when he was preaching a mission about 30 kilometers away. He wrote to them: "I would like to go and see you, but I doubt if I can go to La Rochelle immediately after this mission, because I have another one for which the Bishop is urging me (L.29).

On August 12th, he begged Marie Régnier to become a Daughter of Wisdom. "Take care of yourself! The Bishop, to whom I spoke a few days ago, wants you to come with the Daughters of Wisdom, and I, in turn, wish and ask you." (L.30).

The work of the hospitals and charity schools of La Rochelle was thus born of Louis Marie's unconditional obedience to the Bishop.

In April 1716, he planned to go to Nantes for a fortnight's rest: "If the Bishop of Nantes judges it opportune, because I will not leave without his authorization, I will be in Nantes on the evening of the 5th of May... If he refuses, it is a sure sign that it is not God's will that I go to Nantes" (L. 33 of 04.04.1716).

It is not surprising that he gives the following rule to his future missionaries: "They obey the bishop in whose diocese they are, the general vicars and the other ecclesiastical superiors who take the bishop's place" (RMCM 22). And to show the institutional dependence on the Bishop, he asks that the Society have only two houses of its own in France, one for formation and the other for retired members. As for the rest: "The Society can receive from the hands of Divine Providence the other houses that will be given to it in the various dioceses where God calls it; but it will only receive the use of it as a tenant [... ...] If any charitable person gives it a house, it will leave the property in writing in the hands of the local Bishop and his successors, and will only

retain the use of it...: the Bishop of the place and his successors thus having all the power and right to take the said house from the said missionaries, in case they become sedentary and do not fulfill their duties" (RMCM 12).

### **III-Preferential attention to the poor**

To conclude this brief evocation of Louis Marie's missionary activity and the profound reasons for his apostolic fruitfulness, let us remember that he always paid preferential attention to humble means and the poor.

*"It is a fact, I run through the world,  
prey of vagabond humor;  
to save my poor fellow men."  
(Montfort CT 22,1)*

#### **A look at St. Louis Marie de Montfort in his time: poor at the service of the poor.**

Louis Marie de Montfort was a disciple of Jesus Christ. He lived a voluntary and uncompromising poverty based on a radical choice of God.

At the same time, and as a consequence, he was an evangelizer, a missionary, with an extremely effective action that he manifested throughout his life (student, young priest, "apostolic missionary"), a particular predilection for the most disadvantaged, materially or spiritually.

#### **3.1- Louis-Marie and the poor of material goods**

Clothing those who are naked, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick were his constant concerns.

##### **a) During his studies (before 1700)**

"Grignon de Montfort was marked by the discovery of the poor during his adolescence" (Louis Perouas: Grignon de Montfort les Pauvres et les Missions, p. 162). From the age of 16 or 18, in Rennes, he was a member of a student association which, under the impulse of Mr. Bellier, chaplain of the General Hospital, visited the sick, the homeless, those who were taken in at the General Hospital or at the Hospice of Incurables. They gave them the services they needed and taught them catechism.

Louis Marie was attentive to students who were poorer than him. He did not hesitate to ask his other classmates for their favors. And when one day the collection made had been insufficient to properly clothe a student so poor and poorly dressed that he had become an object of scorn and derision, Louis Marie knocked on the merchant's door and said, "Here is my brother and your brother. I asked in class what I could get him to wear. If this is not enough, it is up to you to add the rest..." (Jean-Baptiste Blain: Abrégé de la vie de Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort p. 6).

At the age of 20, in the house of Monsieur de La Barmondière in Paris, he lived like the other seminarians, that is, poorly, but in his poverty he knew how to find treasures even for the poor. He became a "seeker" of wealthy clerics and the "considerable sums he received" were not for him. They were immediately distributed to other seminarians and to the needy (Blain, idem, pp.22-23).

At the same time, he began to study catechism under the direction of M. Bauyn. The most dissipated children of Faubourg Saint-Germain were entrusted to him, and during Lent, the rogues of the Saint-Sulpice district.

##### **(b) In 1701-1703 and 1704-1705 in Poitiers**

In spite of his very lively attraction to the mission and his little inclination to shut himself up in a hospital, events and obedience led him to that of Poitiers (cf. L. 6, 9, 10, 11, O.C. pp. 15-36). At that time hospitals gave shelter to the most miserable.

In October and November 1701, while waiting to assume his duties as chaplain, he visited the prisons and all the places where the humble and the less privileged gathered. He taught catechism to the poor, whom he gathered in a chapel and then under sheds.

As a titled chaplain, he became poor with the poor. Even before meeting him, the inmates had considered him poorer than themselves and had loved him with special affection. He put himself at their service. He was content with their food and wanted to serve them at the table. He went to town to beg for them for three months. He organized the life of the hospital for the good of all, in spite of the contradictions that soon arose from his conduct, no doubt also from his success.

It was at this time that he formed an Association that he wanted **to dedicate to Wisdom**, with the crippled, lame or broken girls chosen from among the residents and staff of the hospital.

He did not forget, however, the elite of the College: "thirteen or fourteen students", to whom he gave "a lecture every week".

### **C) After 1705**

Louis Marie was not made to settle down and be tied to a hospital as he writes (L. 6, OC p. 18). His inclination led him to "work for the salvation of the poor in general" (idem) or to "go in a poor and simple way to teach catechism to the poor of the countryside...". (L. 6, OC p. 18). (L. 5, OC p. 14).

After receiving the title of "Apostolic Missionary" from Pope Clement XI in June 1706, he was able to dedicate himself to his vocation through parish missions. "His preference for the poor remains just as strong, but it manifests itself in a different way. From now on, we will see him give to the poor, not all his time and all his life, but the 'first fruits', the best part which means the whole" (Pérouas, idem p. 163).

At the beginning of Lent in 1711, in La Garnache, "he inaugurated a new method of feeding the poor. While he himself made two or three of them sit at his table, chosen from among the most sickly, each family adopted, at his request, a beggar to be fed" (Le Crom p. 252). In Dinan, he organized a charity dispensary where the most disadvantaged were served the things necessary for life (Grandet).

When in 1706 he accepted to eat with his family, he began by separating the part of the poor that was the most beautiful: "He took a white plate and filled it with all the best things of the table, to send it to the poor of the parish" (Le Crom, p. 1715). Everywhere he treated the poor "as their lords and masters" (Grandet p.354).

As for the rich or the notables in the parishes where he preached, he was interested in them, especially in view of their conversion. A certain number of them, converted during the mission, prolonged, at the local level, the action undertaken by Louis Marie in favor of the poor.

### **3.2- The poor of spiritual goods**

Throughout his life as a missionary, but even more after 1706, "he will show his love for the poor by adhering preferentially, insofar as he can choose, to the religiously less favored areas: generally, the countryside rather than the cities, the disadvantaged neighborhoods of the cities, the lukewarmest region of the diocese of La Rochelle, Aunis" (Pérouas, idem, p. 163).

It is understandable that he should leave this instruction to his missionaries: "Even if you do not limit the grace of God and your zeal to the countryside alone [...] and even if you go interchangeably to do the mission in the cities as well as in the countryside, according to the will of God marked out by your superiors, you nevertheless participate in the most tender preferences of the Heart of Jesus, your model, as he said: *pauperibus evangelizare misit Dominus*', which usually makes them prefer the country to the city and the poor to the rich" (RMCM No. 7, OC p. 691).

### **3.3 The Poor in the nearest neighbor**

For Louis Marie, the poor man is sometimes the closest neighbor

During Fouras' mission in 1715, "one of his collaborators, jealous and somewhat unbalanced, described him publicly: a sorcerer, he said, who sells the Sacraments. Monsieur de Bastières (one of the missionaries) warned

Montfort; but the latter responded with a redoubled benevolence towards the poor priest and did not want to part with him until after the mission".

"At the end of the previous year, after three months of almost uninterrupted travel, Brother Nicolas accompanied Louis-Marie on his way to Nantes. Exhausted by such long weeks of walking, Brother Nicolas felt worn-out and unable to move forward. It was then, he tells us, "that this man, so admirable and full of charity... to relieve me, begged me with all kinds of insistence and with a truly paternal heart, to climb on his shoulders to carry me, and I had serious difficulty in refusing, because he kept asking me for almost a quarter of a mile, but not being able to get it, he made me take off my huge and shameful habit and put it on his shoulder, holding it with one hand, while with the other he held me under his arm to help me walk and carry me, almost three leagues, in this situation. From time to time we met troops of men and women and other people from Nantes. I said to him:

- My dear father, what will all these people say?

- My dear son, he answered, "what will our good Jesus who sees us say?" ("The Crom", pp. 337-338).

### 3.4 Jesus Christ in the poor

If Brother Nicolas was sensitive to the "what will they say", Louis Marie was moved interiorly only by the evangelical reality of things. "What you have done to one of my people..."

For him, the poor man, whoever he is, is Jesus Christ. Louis-Marie sang this vision of the poor in several of his hymns: the credit of alms, the cries of the poor, the treasures of poverty.

C. 17

«14. "What is a poor man? It is written that he is the living image, who is the lieutenant of Jesus Christ, his most precious legacy. But, better yet, is Jesus Christ himself. We help or we reject in them that supreme monarch."

15. He suffers in one of them poverty, in the other, misery, in the other, captivity, in the other, famine. Finally, Jesus, who suffers in them countless pains, seems the most needy of all the miserable ones."

The alms credit

C.18

«7. (GOD) Poor at heart, I hear their moaning, I feel their bitterness, I'm looking forward to it; a little patience and they will see my wrath; I am God, I am powerful, and I'm also their father.

8. "They are my children and best friends, are my fates, my temple and my abode; all the evil that is done to them, it is done to myself and when they help them they manifest their love for me."

*The cries of the poor*

C. 20

"17. Impossible as it may seem, how happy the poor are! This is for sure, God himself says so, There's no doubt about it, They are the perfect portrait Of Jesus Christ, poor for us, They're his brothers all the same, Worthy of being honored by us all."

*The treasures of poverty*

In the eyes of Louis Marie, the poor are like a "Sacrament". And the missionary that he is, would like his deep conviction to be shared by all. At times, he does not disdain to give a practical lesson.

In 1706, he presented himself as poor at the abbey of Fontevrault, where his sister Sylvie, a Catholic religious, lived. He asked for charity "for the love of God". As he did not want to declare his name, Mother Abbess dismissed him. When a little later she realized his identity and went to look for him, he answered: "The Abbess did not want to do this charity for the love of God, now she offers it to me for the love of me, I thank you". And he left without accepting either the rest or the food (Blain p. 141).

Shortly afterwards, it was the turn of her former nanny, mother Andrea. (near Montfort la Cane). Louis-Marie sent Brother Mathurin with the instruction to ask for charity "for the love of God" for him and for a poor priest. Mother Andrea, in agreement with her son-in-law, answered that they did not accommodate strangers... When she learned the next day that this poor priest was none other than Louis-Marie, she was completely confused. Louis-Marie, with indulgence, agreed to take a meal at her house. Before leaving her, he told her: "Mother Andrea, you have taken good care of me, but on another occasion, be charitable. Forget Mr. Grignon, he doesn't deserve anything: think of Jesus Christ. He is everything and it is He who is in the poor" (Le Crom p. 176-177).

Not far from there, in Dinan: "One night, passing by the street, he found a poor leper, all covered with ulcers. He did not wait for this unfortunate man to implore his help: he spoke to him first. He picked him up, put him on his shoulders and went to the missionaries' door, which was closed, because it was a little late. He knocked, shouting repeatedly: **"Open the door to Jesus Christ, open the door to Jesus Christ"**.

The one who came to open the door was greatly surprised to see him carry the poor man: he entered with this precious cargo, put the poor man to bed, warmed him as best he could, for he was cold, and spent the rest of the night in prayer" (Besnard, T1, pp. 206-207).

### **Some texts for meditation**

Louis Marie is part of the great evangelical tradition lived from the first centuries of the Church to the present day.

1- Reread Mt 25, 31-46: The theme of the final exam: "I was hungry, you gave me food... I was naked, you clothed me..."

2- "...We... even when (the poor) man is hungry, we do not give him food... And yet, if you saw Christ in person, each of you would give him all your riches. Yet it is also He who presents Himself now: it is truly He who declares: It is I. Then why do you not give Him everything? In fact, to this day we hear Him say: "You do it to me... If it were not for Him who really receives what you give, He would not grant you the Kingdom". If it were not really him whom you reject when you despise him in any man, he would not send you to Gehenna; but because it is Him whom you despise, the fault is great, precisely because of this". (St. John Chrysostom)

3- "With your heritage... give food to Christ..." (St. Cyprian)

4- "Lend your money to the Lord through the hands of the poor. It is He who receives, preserves and writes down everything that the poor have received. The guarantee is in his gospel... Why do you hesitate to give? For you the poor are the Lord of Heaven and the Creator of this world. And you still have to keep thinking about it: what richer guarantor can we find?" (St. Ambrose).

5- "We often think we are relieving a poor person and it happens to be Our Lord. It is He who clears up a doubt that can arise in everyone when it comes to helping a stranger: "There are those who say: 'Oh, he/she is making a bad use of it'" (of almsgiving). Let him/her use it as he/she wishes, the poor man will be judged by the use he/she has made of his/her alms, and you will be judged by the very alms you could have made and did not make" (The Parish Priest of Ars).

6- "My daughters, know that when you leave prayer and Holy Mass for the service of the poor, you will lose nothing, for it is to go to God that you serve the poor; and you look at God in their persons" (St. Vincent de Paul explaining the Rule to the first "Daughters of Charity").

7- "...are destined to a kind of perpetual adoration which is not that of the Lord under the Eucharistic species, in his real presence, but that which Bossuet calls the human presence of Christ, of Jesus in those who suffer" (Paul VI to the educators dedicated to the care of suffering children).

8- "When a poor person came to us, we chose the most beautiful tablecloth, the best dishes and cutlery and his food often consisted of everything we had deprived ourselves of during lunch or dinner" (Chiara Lubich speaking of the beginning of the Focolare Movement).

"Today, moreover, the Movement as a whole is living a springtime of resurgence under the guise of the 'New Humanity' which, in a still timid but determined way, has placed itself at the service of society and especially of the poor of today: drug addicts, the marginalized, the unemployed, fishermen, the amoral, the non-believers.

"And 'to die for his people' is the motto of such an operation that repeats and revives what Jesus did. This is how we await the day when Jesus will be able to say to all of us: I was on drugs and you gave me real happiness; I was without work and you found me a job; I was without morals and you taught me the Law of God; I was without Him and you made me discover Love by launching me into the same divine adventure as you" (Chiara Lubich 12 October 1978).