



### **St. Ermelindis Procession in Meldert**

**HOEGAARDEN, Belgium** - Even non-believers will have to admit that the Ermelindis procession has tremendous power to strengthen people in faith and unify them in the spirit of togetherness. This village feast, which is indeed a commemoration and veneration of the patron saint of the village, is the highlight of the Pentecost weekend in the surroundings of Meldert, Hoegaarden. The village of Meldert has just over 1,100 inhabitants, yet it is known for this feast celebrated on the Monday after Pentecost. This celebration includes three days of revelry with lots of music, a running race, usually a cycle race, and a village breakfast. With about 120 figuring participants, one of 10 residents participates in the procession taking the Blessed Sacrament in the procession.

What makes the veneration of St. Ermelindis special is certainly that she is a 'local' saint or a saint of this locality. By definition, 'saints' in the Roman Catholic Church are understood to have a 'universal' significance and relevance. They are preached and presented as sources of inspiration and intercessors for the entire Christian people. But when the patron saint is a saint from the locality, then the stories about him/her, his/her embedding in the familiar, popular traditions and surroundings, can more effectively and dearly speak to the believers no matter even she lived before fourteen centuries.

Ermelindis was born of nobility around 550 in Lovenjoel. But she renounced her nobility and the earthly pleasures at a very young age for confirming her wholehearted love in Jesus Christ and to do her service for God alone. As a result, marriage did not fit into the plans of her royalty. Hence, she went into hiding in Bevekom, but was besieged there by one or more would-be

husbands (various versions of stories circulate about this). She left Bevekom and sought refuge in Meldert, as the legend goes, on the instructions of an angel. There she continued her ascetic life, with prayer, penance, fasting, and the adoration of God until her last breath.

On 29 October 600 AD, she made her journey to God's eternal abode while angels buried her on the earth. Her tomb was discovered half a century later by an official of Pepin of Landen, who while passing through this village heard the singing of angels and smelled a heavenly fragrant scent. This God-fearing man, Hugo of Wareloos, decided to stay here and build a chapel. This laid the foundation for pilgrimages and for the veneration of Ermelindis in Meldert, which is continued to this day by carrying her relics in a procession. Both the relics of St. Ermelindis and the Blessed Sacrament are carried through the village in a sanctifying spirit of veneration, with two stops by temporary altars where the Blessed Sacrament is adored as the people fall on their knees in worship.

This year, as usual, the procession was preceded by the blessing of the well in St. Ermelindis' chapel. Above that well is the actual tomb of the saint. This was followed by the Eucharist presided over by Father Nepo JAMES RAJ, SMM, a Montfortian and administrator of the Hoegaarden pastoral zone. He was assisted by two lay people, representing the churches in Hoegaarden and Hoksem. This indicates the emerging unity of the pastoral zone, Hoegaarden, which is enthusiastically fostered by Fr. Nepo. He helps the lay collaborators to take up their role in organizing their local churches. Fr. Nepo has a great respect for popular devotion, and he is a priest of the people. He undertakes initiatives that meet the pastoral expectations of the believers and are appealing to their religious sentiments. He is an excellent leader who speaks the language of the people of time and profoundly inculturated in our cultural practices and customs. His listening attitude is highly appreciated by people and his gentle collaboration with the laity is an indispensable need of the time if faith must be renewed in the West and to re-evangelize the secularized world.

Heartfelt congratulations and thanks to Fr. Nepo, SMM for his selfless service and dedication and to the organizers, participants or spectators, who made this procession to be a sign of communion in this time of the search for the deeper spiritual meaning in our lives. I end this short article with a sentence which is often repeated by Fr. Nepo, *"I do not hesitate to take risk for God nor am I afraid to introduce myself as a priest. This is my identity, and this is my life. To be priest means not to be a leader or shepherd of people but (mens voor de mensen zijn) become one among them."*

*Peter Haegeman*

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## **The procession as a means of evangelization in Europe**

**BELGIUM** - Father de Montfort is known for conducting processions which were remarkably integral to his preaching of popular missions. I have read about them and have greatly admired the charismatic power of Montfort in gathering the ordinary believers and organizing such spectacular processions for the purpose of renewing and rejuvenating their faith in Jesus, the Eternal Incarnate Wisdom. Coming from an altogether another culture, it was indeed a refreshing and enriching experience for me, as missionary in Belgium, to lead and preside over

the yearly processions conducted in honour of the patron saints of the village churches, where I render my pastoral service.

Every village is proud to conduct its village feast. What amazingly surprises me is the willingness of people to continue their traditions of honouring the patron saints at the popular level. They make extraordinary preparations to make it ever appealing to the people of the present generation and faithful to the century old popular devotional practice of their village. As a Montfortian, I can easily relate with this tradition as it resonates well with the popular missions of Montfort and our Montfortian charism. While secularism and the feelings of anti-Church are high in the western world in which the religious life is not exception to it, popular pious practices as these offer us hope for renewing faith and the evangelical life in the west.

In the pastoral zone where I lead the faith communities belonging to four churches which were formerly independent parishes, I have presided over four processions. These processions were coloured with a solemn flavour as the enthusiastic piety was high among the folk. In one of the villages we, three missionaries (Aimé, Trésor and myself), carried the Holy Sacrament at turn. At the end of the procession and during the reception, a sick elderly lady told us: “I thought the existence of the Church is almost at its end in Belgium, but God works in mysterious ways to ensure the continuation of His Church. You, young missionaries, give us practicing Christians hope and now I can close my eyes in the Lord with peace, thankfulness, confidence, and consolation.”

In the biographies of Montfort, I have learnt the order which Montfort followed in organizing the processions. While in academia where Mother Mary is a forgotten figure, mostly specifically in many of the well-known universities, the simple folk in the West has not forgotten the Blessed Virgin Mary and continue to show their reverence and fall in adoration when the Eucharistic Sacrament is carried on in the procession. While the cross and participants impersonating saints and Mary are at the first rows of the procession, following them the statue of Our Mother is carried in a sort of Chariot accompanied by children and groups of women clothed in heavenly blue. Preceded and heralded by music bands, the Holy Sacrament is carried on thereafter under the heaven-like tent, followed by the office-bearers of the municipality and the faithful. When the Holy Sacrament approaches the houses, people fall on their knees to adore the Lord present as the bread of life.

In the secularized Western Church, these faith-experiences give me hope to look for new methods to evangelize and proclaim the gospel. While many religious congregations have given up their hope, as a Montfortian trusting in the providence of God, I wish to take risks to give witness to Christ. Although the way of living faith in the West is much changed, the centrality of Christ and the veneration of Mary that are alive and cherished among the simple folk, invite us to learn to work with those people of goodwill who desire to re-evangelize the Western Church, rather than unwilling to make our rich Montfortian Spirituality relevant to the changed contexts, culture, times, thinking, lifestyle, and generations.

*Fr. Nepolean JAMES RAJ, SMM*