

Casa Generalizia  
MISSIONARI MONFORTANI  
Viale dei Monfortani, 65  
00135 ROMA  
ITALIA  
Tel. (0039) 06.30.50.203

SG 19-2021  
Rome, 19 March 2021

*Circular Letter on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

**“TO BUILD MONTFORTIAN FRATERNITY IN THE NEW NORMAL”**

*Dear Religious Brothers,  
Dear Brothers All.*

On the occasion of the solemnity of Saint Joseph, as I have done in previous years, I send you a most cordial greeting in the form of a “circular letter”. I hope that each one of you may be in good health, happy in community life and enthusiastic in the mission, especially in this prolonged time of the pandemic.

The solemnity of Saint Joseph holds a very special place in my life. Despite the fact that our parish, in Sao Paulo where I was born, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary under the title “*Nossa Senhora do Retiro*” whose patronal feast was celebrated on August 15<sup>th</sup>, the feast of Saint Joseph was the best attended, the best prepared. In the parish there was the “*Sorority of Saint Joseph*”, whose specific objective was to “pray for priestly vocations”; my first catechist was the one in charge, and my mother belonged to this sorority that met every Wednesday in the church to pray for vocations. Thanks to these constant prayers, we have various priests from that parish, I being one of them. Thank you, Saint Joseph!

I believe that this letter will not treat on many new items, however, I would like it to be an invitation to meditate on the “building of Montfortian fraternity” in a time of passage from the pandemic to a new time that is being called the “*new normal*”. In the Church, our Catholic Church, this matter appears especially in the latest writings of Pope Francis, in the encyclical “*Fratelli Tutti*” and in the document announcing the “*Year dedicated to the protection of Saint Joseph*”. It was these two documents and a beautiful article by Padre Giovanni Bigoni, Montfort Missionary in Peru: “*Building a Fraternal Community*”, that inspired me to write this message to the entire Company of Mary, but especially to our Montfortian religious Brothers.

***When the reality obliges us to recognized that we are all brothers***

It is impossible to read these two documents of the Holy Father without remembering the *Religious Brothers of the Company of Mary*, since they also have known how to maintain the bond of fraternity with “the taste for the Gospel”, as Saint Francis of Assisi proposed and Pope Francis reminds us (*Fratelli Tutti*, 1), even when they were looked down upon by some clerics. Unhappily, some clerics were incapable of recognizing that in the Company of Mary what keeps us on the same level is that we are all disciples of Jesus Christ under the inspiration of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort. The fact is that, from our origins, though we have different ministries, we are all brothers.

Pope Francis is a man very attentive to reality, sensitive to the attitudes that can be a source of happiness, even though he recognizes that there exists a great danger in the world today: “*The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and*

*anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades." (Evangelii Gaudium, 2).*

The attitudes that are born from the "joy of evangelizing" can be effective in building up fraternity: "For "here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means". Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that "delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ". (Evangelii Gaudium, 10)

Pope Francis is also very aware of the realities that bring about sorrow and sadness between persons; some provoked by human beings themselves, other provoked by unexpected situations like "the Covid-19 pandemic that erupted, exposing our false securities" (Fratelli Tutti, 7). One of the false securities comes not in political power or money, but in pride that can blind us and in the feeling of superiority in relation to other people. Jesus Christ put his disciples on guard to the danger of the desire for power that isolates the person and is the source of conflicts and much unhappiness: "Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish me to do for you?" They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." .... When the other ten heard this they became indignant at James and John. Jesus summoned them and said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10: 35-45)

Thus Pope Francis tells us of his great desire for these difficult moments: "It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Brotherhood between all men and women. "Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together" ... Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all." (Fratelli Tutti, 8)

What do we have to wait for to happen in order to admit that we need one another? Why are extreme situations in life, advanced age, illnesses, pandemics or other types of situations necessary for us to begin to look at our surroundings, to take into account that we are not alone, to allow ourselves to be helped and to help others? When will we dare to take the step to become "brothers"?

### *In the school of Saint Joseph*

I think that it was in the repeated feast days of Saint Joseph in my home parish that for the first time I had the sensation that, YES, brotherhood, fraternity exists. There were so many people united around the same purpose, all assuming specific responsibilities and, at the same time, helping others to accomplish their tasks. In my life, little by little, I connected that experience with other social, ecclesial and congregational realities.

The year dedicated to the protection of Saint Joseph and the solemnity of March 19<sup>th</sup> bring me to remember the religious Brothers because Saint Joseph is their patron. To him I draw near today to ask that he protect our Brothers and that, under his patronage, we might have new candidates to become Religious Brothers in the Company of Mary.

The first school of Jesus of Nazareth was in the home and his first teachers were, surely, Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary. Besides what we already know of the life of our saint, the Saint Joseph of the dreams, the just man, he is invoked as protector of families. *“We know that Joseph was a lowly carpenter (cf. Mt 13:55), betrothed to Mary (cf. Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27). He was a “just man” (Mt 1:19), ever ready to carry out God’s will as revealed to him in the Law (cf. Lk 2:22.27.39) and through four dreams (cf. Mt 1:20; 2:13.19.22). After a long and tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, he beheld the birth of the Messiah in a stable, since “there was no place for them” elsewhere (cf. Lk 2:7). He witnessed the adoration of the shepherds (cf. Lk 2:8-20) and the Magi (cf. Mt 2:1-12), who represented respectively the people of Israel and the pagan peoples.” (Patris Corde, Introduction).*

Very interesting is what was published in the year 1982 in the review *Scripta Theologica* on the figure of Saint Joseph; it can be useful to us:

“In the Oratory of Saint Joseph in Montreal, from 14-21 December 1980 various scholars from divers fields of theological investigation, continuing a project that went back 25 years in a joint program, gathered to elaborate the history of the devotion and theology of Saint Joseph.

But the central part of the Symposium was occupied with the study of the extraordinary phenomenon of the propagation of devotion to Saint Joseph in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. This devotion, as is known, was principally fostered by the two branches of the Carmelites, to whom were joined other religious congregations - Jesuits, Franciscans, Capuchins, Theatines, Cistercians – all over Europe and America. This diffusion undoubtedly influenced popular devotion, with its own manifestations: pious practices (practices of the “crowns”, the “sorrows and joys”, celebration of feast days with truly baroque ostentation), and the founding of many confraternities, with their twofold aspect of diffusion of the cult and charity among the confreres and beyond. But, underneath the popular devotion, what strengthened this cult was a commendable preaching with a notable theological base and the formation of a literature on Josephine themes each time more solidly founded.

It is also worth noting that, as a conclusion of the III International Symposium on Saint Joseph, we read the following desires and propositions, fruit of these scholarly meetings: *to ask the Holy See to restore in the liturgical books the title to Saint Joseph that he already had as Patron of the Universal Church, and that his mention within the Holy Mass not only be reserved to the first anaphora or Roman Canon, but extended to all the anaphoras approved in the New Roman Missal.* It is necessary to continue studying, in the speculative line marked out by Vatican Council II, the figure of Saint Joseph in the cadre of the Mystery of Christ and his Church, in order to seriously base and sustain popular devotion to the Holy Patriarch, without forgetting that, in order to do so, it is necessary to take into account precisely the manifestations of that popular religiosity ( feasts and devotional practices, confraternities, literature, iconography...) (*Revista Scripta Theologica* 14 – 1982)

It is exactly in the context of the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of *Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church* that Pope Francis, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, December 8, 2020, wrote the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*. What happiness in the hearts of the many Christians devoted to Saint Joseph!

The aspects of the life and vocation of Saint Joseph that are touched on by Pope Francis augment our admiration and devotion to this saint. Taking into consideration that the principal matter of this letter is "*Montfortian fraternity*", I share with you some thoughts based on the theme "*An accepting father*", present in the Apostolic Letter.

Like Saint Joseph, a Montfortian religious would be a specialist in the art of fraternal acceptance and welcome. Clearly when we "welcomed" the vocation to Montfortian consecrated life, as a road to achieve holiness, we assumed a community lifestyle as an integral part of our charism and spirituality.

Fraternal community must be a place of meeting, of prayer, of listening and, in the most difficult moments of life, when complicated historical circumstances fall upon us, the community ought to be a home where one can count on a friendly embrace and some words that can lift up our spirit and hope.

The community, with its gestures and words, helps us to remember the life experience of Saint Joseph, living the spirituality of welcome. In regard to this, Pope Francis says:

*"Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history... The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains, but accepts."* (*Patris Corde*, 4)

In the "*school of Joseph*", the Montfortian religious learns to maintain courage and hope in the moments when everything seems impossible.

*"Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. In our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude... Just as God told Joseph: "Son of David, do not be afraid!" (Mt 1:20), so he seems to tell us: "Do not be afraid!" We need to set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and courage. In this way, we become open to a deeper meaning. Our lives can be miraculously reborn if we find the courage to live them in accordance with the Gospel. It does not matter if everything seems to have gone wrong or some things can no longer be fixed. God can make flowers spring up from stony ground. Even if our heart condemns us, "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 Jn 3:20).*

In the "*school of Saint Joseph*", the Montfortian religious learns that no one can be excluded, especially the most vulnerable:

*"Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak (cf. 1 Cor 1:27). He is the "Father of orphans and protector of widows" (Ps 68:6), who commands us to love the stranger in our midst. I like to think that it was from Saint Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father" (cf. Lk 15: 11-32).*

***Fraternal life is only possible if it is the communion of saints and sinners***

It seems so timely to me, the reflection of Padre Giovanni Begoni, that after having consulted him, I share with you almost in its totality.

“The book of Padre Amadeo Cencini – *La Vida Fraternal* – offers us some reflections that can be helpful and it seems to me important to share them. He writes that fraternal life is the first space for the renewal of consecrated life: *The community is the strategic location, pathway and heart of this renewal*. No one saves himself alone; no one becomes holy alone. Just as a person alone, I cannot engender, the renewal of religious life will only be able to bear fruit from a community undertaking.

Consecrated life will be saved only by taking seriously the roots and conditions that make communion possible. Among so many indications to consider, I like the following: A renewed community is one that learns and teaches to share within it faith and prayer. It is a matter of “sharing” as a lifestyle that lifts up the community to always project the light of the gospel and the charism. At the beginning, at the end and at the heart of all fraternal communion is always communion with God. This is our first commitment.

To live with persons that I have not chosen, to accept totally the reality of the other, is not something spontaneous; it can only be the fruit of the experience of being fully and totally accepted by God. It is the personal experience of constant dialogue with God who opens us to communion with the brother. Fraternal life is only possible if it is the communion of saints and sinners, but this can only be born from the communion with the God who is holy and rich in mercy, which signifies a path of conversion that comes from the awareness of one’s own sin and the experience of the tenderness of God.

### ***The power of the charism***

But at the foundation of every common project of consecration there is a call of God identical for all, because it is in reference to a same charism and orients us to the very same way of being, of praying, of living fraternity, of undertaking the apostolate, including even the same identity and same project of holiness.

Religious community is the seat and the natural environment for the growth of all, where each one is responsible for the growth of the other. The charism is a form qualified to make us holy together. It is the itinerary that the Providence of God has traced out for me; it is my way of arriving at holiness.

### ***What does Montfort tell us?***

Montfort wanted a small and poor company, missionaries "*liberos*", true children of Mary. It offers us a spirituality, a particular pathway of holiness that is the heart of our Montfortian life. A charism that offers paths to build together a project of holiness. We are called to deepen, live, share these paths. This is our vocation, our first task, the strength of our mission. Fraternity is the spirit of the company and its origin is the Trinitarian communion.

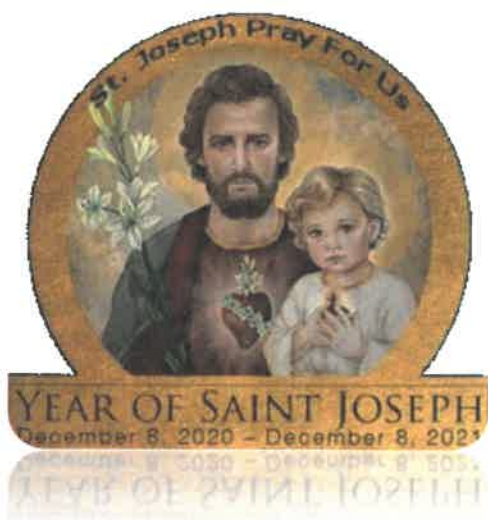
It is beautiful to encounter a saint, but it is even more beautiful to encounter a community of saints, of brothers who live together and try to become holy together, proposing to all a common and imitable model of holiness.

The Eucharist that we celebrate each day forms us into one body in Christ, and strengthens us to become bread broken for our brothers and a hungry world. May the pledge of fraternal communion prepare us each day to celebrate and renew in Christ our handing ourselves over to our brothers with the aid of Mary.”

Many thanks to Padre Giovanni for this timely, necessary and beautiful reflection on the theme of fraternal community.

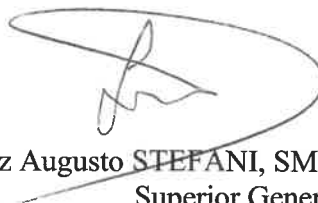
***Prayer of Pope Francis to Saint Joseph at the end of the Apostolic Letter***

Let us go to the protection of Saint Joseph; let us pray to him for all the members of the Montfortian family, especially for the Religious Brothers, and in particular for those who are ill. Let us pray for the young Montfortian priests who are living through some crisis, especially for those who suffer from verifying the scant coherence of life from older religious and, because of that, doubt their Montfortian identity.



*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,  
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.  
To you God entrusted his only Son;  
in you Mary placed her trust;  
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,  
show yourself a father  
and guide us in the path of life.  
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,  
and defend us from every evil.  
Amen.*



Fr. Luiz Augusto STEFANI, SMM  
Superior General