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100 Years of Montfortian Mission and Presence in Belgium

BELGIUM - "*Liberos*: men as free as the clouds that sail high above the earth, filled with the dew of heaven, and moving, without let or hindrance, according to the inspiration of the Spirit. They are included among those whom the prophet had in mind when he asked: ...What men are these who move like clouds in the sky, wherever the Spirit leads them?" (*God Alone: Prayer for Missionaries* § 9).

Although Montfort has prayed for *Liberos*, it took almost 200 years for the Montfortians to hear the whisperings of the Spirit of God and thereby to move out from France to other countries. Recognizing the inspiration of the Spirit through the troubled political situation in France, the Montfortians moved to the Netherlands to share the rich spirituality of Montfort that focused on serving the poor with Marian spiritual care. As an answer to Montfort's prayer, they also received an invitation from Cardinal Mercier from Belgium. Though the Montfortians arrived in Belgium only in the year 1920, Montfort was already a known figure through his popular Marian work, *True Devotion to Mary*. In fact, it is the central message of this book that persuaded Cardinal Mercier to invite them to Belgium.

From then on, the Montfortians dedicated themselves in serving the poor through various spiritual endeavors. Many of them became vagabond preachers going from village to village, parish to parish preaching the Gospel and introducing the Montfortian Spirituality centered on "the consecration to Jesus through Mary". Invited by the parish priests, Marian Retreats, Marian Days and Marian Processions were enthusiastically organized by us in the parishes. We have also built a retreat house, parish church and a school to concretize the Montfortian

Spirituality into mission activities. We have also started Marian magazines (*De Standaard van Maria and Maria: Middelaeres en Koningin/Médiatrice et Reine*) and organized pilgrimages to Marian Shrines and Holy Land to make the Montfortian Spirituality available to many more people in Belgium. We have also sent missionaries to Congo and Malawi. The delegation also maintains a good relation and collaboration with our associates. And to commemorate 100 years of Montfortian mission and apostolate in Belgium, on 18 September 2020, we have released a book entitled *Montfort en de Montfortaanse Beweging in België (1920-2020)*.

Our original plan was actually to conduct a colloquium in collaboration with KU Leuven University. But the unexpected situation caused by Covid-19 did not permit us to proceed with our plan. However, we sincerely appreciate the specialists who cooperated with us and were open to the change of plan that we have made more than one instance. With support of the parish priest of the Marian Shrine at Scherpenheuvel, the releasing of the book was solemn and grand. It was telecasted live and was well appreciated by the invitees. It was truly a memorable event for the Montfortians to reflect together on the 100 years of Montfortian mission in Belgium.

Indeed, it was an inspiring moment to recall, evaluate and renew our missionary zeal to work for the kingdom of God accompanied by Mary and guided by the vision of Montfort. The importance of this renewal was emphasized by Pope Francis in one of his recent audiences. He invited all, the followers of Christ to work for the kingdom of God, as trustworthy and faithful tenants. He reminded that in God's kingdom "there is bread for all and more to spare, social organisation is based on contributing, sharing and distributing, not on possessing, excluding and accumulating". He also reiterated that God's kingdom is "a Kingdom of light in the midst of darkness, of justice in the midst of so many outrages, of joy in the midst of so much pain, of healing and salvation in the midst of sickness and death." God's kingdom can become a reality if we can "make love 'go viral'" and "globalise *hope* in the light of *faith*." The company of Mary in Belgium is small, but our spirit is still fervent and vibrant to work for God's kingdom.

Fr. Nepolean James Raj, SMM