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My Happiness is the Other!

MONTFORT-SUR-MEU, France - "My happiness is the other!" This was the theme of Mr. Grégoire Ahongbonon's fascinating testimony to the Francophone International Novitiate Community in Montfort-sur-Meu, France, on Saturday, March 30, 2019. It was a moment of sharing regarding the job of Mr. Grégoire in relation to the dedicated work of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort.

Mr. Grégoire comes from Benin where he does an exceptional job of rehabilitating our brothers and sisters who are unfortunately classified by the people as "mentally ill". Aren't they the most abandoned of all? In his country, they usually live in isolation and alienation because according to many, they are 'scary'. Some are chained in their houses, under trees, etc. This practice still exists even though it is hidden.

However, Mr. Grégoire assured us that these "patients" are safe for everyone. It's us who are dangerous for them by the way we judge and treat them. This is why Mr. Grégoire suggests to the many people he frequents to find a more positive word in replacement to the term "mentally ill". To be able to treat them, you need medicine. On the other hand, a much better approach to cure them is to let them feel the love and trust from all of us. These two words: Love and Trust, when put into practice, are the keys to restore their dignity. Grégoire applies this approach to his great work.

He immersed himself in this service through the Association of Saint Camille de Lellis "Oasis of Love" which he founded. This foundation has been recognized by the Beninese Church and has now expanded in several other countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Togo. This foundation works relying solely on Divine Providence. From the beginning, his wife Léontine and their six children supported his initiative.

The novices seemed eager to hear him. During and after his sharing, they asked questions that, among others, were motivated by curiosity. Father Jean-Marie, master of the novices, on his turn,

associated such a work of rehabilitation with the preoccupation and social commitment of Father de Montfort in his time. As we all know, Father de Montfort used to visit the sick. In fact, there may be two social activities of Montfort that are quite similar to the work of Mr. Grégoire: establishment of hospices for the incurables and convalescents (Poitiers and Nantes) and popular kitchen and soups (Dinan, Ile d'Yeu, Fontenay-le-Comte).

It was at this point that Mr. Grégoire revealed that one of his centers in Benin is called "Louis-Marie de Montfort" as the patron saint. He wanted this because he learned that his own concern is related to the missionary concern of Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort during his years of ministry.

At the end of the sharing, Mr. Grégoire asked the novitiate community to pray for his service and also advised the novices to become holy priests.

Fr. Arnold Suhardi, SMM