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## **Congress of the Association of Catholic Sanctuaries in France**

**SAINT-LAURENT-SUR-SEVRE, France**- The Association of Rectors of Sanctuaries (ARS), recently changed its name to become the Association of Catholic Sanctuaries (ASC). This association held its annual congress from January 29 to 31, 2024 at the sanctuary of Notre Dame de Montligeon, world center of prayer for the Souls of Purgatory. In order to prepare for the Jubilee Year 2025 announced by Pope Francis, around a hundred participants from all over France gathered on the theme “Pilgrims of Hope”. Four priests from the Company of Mary and four lay advisors from our two Montfort sanctuaries (Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre and “Calvaire” of Pontchâteau) and the Marian sanctuary “Notre-Dame de Marillais” participated at the Congress. During these three days, speakers from different backgrounds gave profound lessons on the themes of pilgrimage and hope.

Thus, Bro. Jacques-Benoît RAUSCHER, Dominican, author of “When the Church Collapses”, invited us to look at the figure of Saint Dominic who knew how to remain a fervent Christian and who continued to announce the Gospel despite the deep crises that the Church was already going through! Without turning a blind eye to the revelations and abuses, we must continue to be happy to be Christian “Our generation is placed in a context of collapse, it is up to our generation to respond by continuing to spread the fire of the 'Gospel!”, declared Bro. Jacques-Benoît.

Fr. Jacky-Marie LHERMITTE, President of the National Association of Diocesan Directors of Pilgrimages (ANDDP) continued the reflection by emphasizing the link between sanctuaries and pilgrimages. Our contemporaries are in a strong search. Pilgrimages are experiencing renewed interest, and our sanctuaries are becoming more and more popular. We have a challenge to take up by asking our visitors and pilgrims to put this research into words, by expressing the joy we have in believing in Jesus and being witnesses to him. A few days before the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, Fr. Lhermitte did not fail to show us the figures of Simeon and Anne as pilgrims of hope.

After a presentation of the history of the Notre Dame de Montligeon Sanctuary by its rector Don Paul DENIZOT, Fr. Olivier RUFFRAY, vicar general of the diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux, gave, based on the family correspondence of the MARTIN family, a touching testimony on the beautiful figure of Léonie, sister of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, whose beatification process has been open since 2015. Léonie MARTIN experienced a difficult and chaotic journey, she will enter religion in monastery of the Visitandines of Caen under the name of Sr. Françoise-Thérèse, on the fourth attempt after three unsuccessful attempts. She can be an example for many pilgrims hurt by the life that we welcome in our sanctuaries.

Monsignor Jean-Louis BRUGUES, bishop emeritus of Angers, former archivist and librarian of the Vatican, explored the notion of pilgrimage further by asking this question: “How can we convert the adventure of our life into a pilgrimage?” For him, a pilgrimage to a sanctuary is a visit to a witness to the Gospel who invites us to return to the essential, to find Christ, to “touch and let ourselves be touched”. The pilgrimage is not an “outdated survival, but a perspective for the future.

Fr. Paul PREAU, former rector of Montligeon from 2001 to 2010 and current General Moderator of the Saint-Martin Community, wanted, through his intervention, to “dust off Purgatory and make it a place of eschatological hope” through the following question: “How are sanctuaries places of hope?” His teaching showed us how our sanctuaries must first be “an ear”, a place of welcome and listening which offers beauty, which repairs the relationship with time and which leads to prayer with this conviction: “If no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me”, and all this with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Hope.

In the same line, Monsignor Bruno FEILLET, current bishop of Sées, drew our attention to the fact that Jesus, assuming our humanity, had defeated evil and death without using supernatural powers, simply by using “weapons” that he gave us: prayer, fasting, sharing. This is the hope that we can share in each of our sanctuaries.

Finally, the intervention of Fr. Matthieu, canon of Mondaye Abbey, described through very concrete ideas the problems and points of vigilance for the good management of a sanctuary or monastery shop. Through these times of teaching, we were able to appreciate the essential role of sanctuaries for the pilgrims of our time. Mealtimes and other spaces for conviviality and sharing allowed participants to get to know each other and discuss informally on concrete issues related to the operation of the sanctuaries.

The community of Sisters of the New Alliance, based in the La-Chapelle-Montligeon Village, actively participates in the liturgical animation of the sanctuary. Thus, in addition to daily Mass, we had the opportunity to participate in the lauds service every morning at 7:30 a.m. A time of adoration, followed by vespers, was proposed on the second day.

Each sanctuary must now define, through its pastoral project, the means to allow pilgrims and visitors to better encounter this witness to the Gospel who is Father de Montfort, he who invites us to come to Jesus through Mary, Mother of Hope.

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