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## **A Sabbatical Year in the Montfortian Places**

**PONTCHÂTEAU, France** - *We gratefully share the testimony of Father Amilcar José ALVES TAVARES, SMM, of the Portuguese General Delegation, who recounts his sabbatical year spent in the Montfortian communities of France. It was an experience of ongoing formation, community life, and immersion in the roots of the Montfortian charism, lived as a true time of grace.*

## **A Time of Grace in the Heart of the Montfortian Places**

A sabbatical year is generally devoted to theological and spiritual deepening at a Catholic university or institute. When I officially requested such a year from the General Administration, in accordance with the guidelines of the last General Chapter which called for valuing the ongoing formation of missionaries, it was suggested that I spend it in France, in one of the important places in the life of Saint Louis de Montfort. I accepted this offer, which allowed me to connect with another country and another language by living in a very international and interfaith community, comprised of the Montfortian family: Daughters of Wisdom, Brothers of Saint Gabriel, and Montfort Missionaries, specifically in the town of Pontchâteau (population 11,500) in the Loire-Atlantique department. This community is responsible for the spiritual guidance of the parish of Sainte-Croix-de-Montfort and the Sanctuary of Calvary in Pontchâteau. The rector of the sanctuary is Father Santino BREMBILLA, SMM Superior General Emeritus of the Montfortian Missionaries. I am grateful to him for opening the doors of his community to me.

Living in a community made up of five different nationalities was also a significant challenge. As Pope Francis stated, *"Many religious communities today are veritable laboratories of interculturality."* After ten months, and as a final assessment of this journey, I would like to share some aspects that have made this period of my life a time of grace.

First, I would like to emphasize that this experience has helped me to better internalize Montfortian spirituality, thanks in particular to living in direct contact with some of the most significant places where Montfort stayed and preached. Working on the cleaning and maintenance of Montfortian sites, with the group of volunteers, has allowed me to embody spirituality more fully, to bring it down from the realm of knowledge to the heart, which is always the most difficult thing. The opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist in the churches where Saint Louis de Montfort preached, such as Pontchâteau, Missillac, Crossac, Sainte-Reine-de-Bretagne, Saint-Roch, Besné, Saint-Guillaume, and Sainte-Anne-sur-Brivet—names among many others that resonate deeply with the Montfort Missionaries—also encouraged me to grow in greater communion with our founder.

### **Community life, intercultural exchange, and shared mission**

This time allowed me to participate in the various annual events, already a tradition in France, organized by the Vice-Province, including the Montfort pilgrimage to Lourdes, the Montfort walk, and the Vice-Province's annual retreat. These are unique moments of formation, through a very concrete spiritual experience—the geography inspires the spiritual journey—in direct contact with a lay-led organization that is a leading example in France. These three events helped me discover the richness of the Montfortian charism and spirituality, and to observe how it is shared by so many people. It is inspiring for our Congregation to see how, through music, we can continue to bring the texts of Father de Montfort to life.

My presence in the community allowed me to assist my confreres in the celebration of Mass, the sacrament of reconciliation, and personal dialogues, to participate in the rituals of community life, serving a religious community that requested it, even if only occasionally. It also allowed me to do manual labor in the vegetable garden and the flower garden, which, in my opinion, is also enriching during this time.

An international community challenges us to grow in openness to others and in sharing Montfortian spirituality, even when we belong to different congregations. It is equally important to recognize that the presence of a missionary from abroad, even temporarily, facilitates the replacement of colleagues when they need to be absent, whether for vacation or in case of unforeseen circumstances. I thank God for the wonderful times spent in community and my colleagues for welcoming me so generously and helping me on my journey with them. It was worth it!

I would like to highlight the work done with a group of volunteers, a day by day, for the upkeep of the park surrounding the Calvary of Pontchâteau, I find it very stimulating on my Montfortian path. Lay people are also our teachers, even if they don't always share the same spiritual values.

### **Growing up in the French language, silence, and inner freedom**

An experience of formation and spiritual renewal in a foreign country presents many challenges that help us grow. We can deepen our knowledge of the language—which is not insignificant since Montfort wrote in French—a language I had "abandoned" at the age of 17 and have only recently taken up again; overcome the fear of making mistakes and develop a more open mind to better understand the soul of the people, their human and spiritual sensibilities. Language is not everything, but it helps us to know and appreciate the rich culture and spirituality of a nation. I was able to count on the encouragement and understanding of God's people, my colleagues in the community, and those who corrected my homilies. Even without formal French lessons, one can still learn a great deal in a country that is not one's own, provided one allows one's mind to be engaged by the host country and seizes the opportunity to share the richness that each person possesses. I don't judge the outcome of my presentation—if my French was often "barbarous," I believe the spirit was good; I left enriched by the testimonies of the people I met in France.

Finally, and no less importantly, there is a whole personal work that takes place in the silence of the day: reading, deepening one's understanding of Montfortian spirituality; on this point, the dialogues and reading suggestions of Brother Jean FRIANT, Superior General Emeritus FSG, were of great help, and I am deeply grateful to him. It is also worth highlighting the time devoted to preparing homilies, in addition to personal prayer, always with the aim of making good use of time. As you can see, I didn't travel extensively to discover all that France has to offer the world, on every level. It was, I believe, an inexpensive but nonetheless significant sabbatical year.

To be successful, this experience should, in my opinion, be lived without worrying about future obligations, whether to be assumed or proposed. This inner freedom is essential so that one can immerse oneself in the experience and make the most of it.

I hope that this experience, lived firsthand, will be the first of many for the Montfort Missionaries, especially for those younger than myself, ready to make a sabbatical in France a significant period of formation and passion for Montfortian spirituality. Everyone benefits: those who leave, those who welcome, and ultimately, the mission is fulfilled in the spirit that Saint Louis envisioned. I have one last word, which I borrow from a song that young Catholics love to sing in France: *"How can I not praise you, Lord Jesus... Thank you, Lord!!!"*

*Fr. Amílcar José ALVES TAVARES, SMM*