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RIAM 2023 – An extraordinary experience for the Montfortian Family

SAINT LAURENT-SUR-SÈVRE, France - The RIAM (International Meeting of Montfortian Associates) was a dream forgotten in the drawers of the three central administrations, which had been waiting for a long time to be realised. This decisive step had to be taken to deepen the journey of strengthening the Montfortian charismatic family. The need was now felt to bring together the lay associates of the three Montfortian congregations so that they could get to know each other, forge links and share experiences. In other words, the aim was to encourage greater collaboration and synergy between the three congregations and their respective movements of associates. In short, to make the associates feel part of one big family, the Montfortian family.

The project was ‘pulled out of the drawer’ in March 2022, at the annual meeting of the three central administrations in Rome. The idea was to offer a similar experience to the RISL (Rencontre Internationale Saint Laurent) which had taken place 10 years earlier, but this time on a global scale rather than just a European one. In order to monitor the implementation of this project more directly, the three ADCs delegated the councillors responsible for the partnership dossier: Sr. Pierrette BWAMBA, FDLS, Fr. Arnold SUHARDI, SMM and Bro. Dionigi TAFFARELLO, FSG.

After deciding on the venue, the dates and the criteria for selecting the participants, we had to set up a committee in France to take charge of all the organisational aspects of this meeting. We must all acknowledge that Providence was with us in putting together an extraordinary team, made up of lay associates and religious from the three Montfortian congregations. It is remarkable to note the generosity with which the members of the committee responded to the call to work on this project, and even more extraordinary to see their enthusiasm and dedication in bringing this arduous and complex international meeting to fruition. There was no shortage

of challenges and difficulties. In order to face and overcome them, everyone gave the best of themselves with faith so that this beautiful and important project of the Montfortian family could become a reality.

After months of meetings and preparation, some 170 associates and religious from the three Montfortian congregations, coming from 36 different countries, met at Saint Laurent-sur-Sèvre from 7 to 12 August 2023 to spend a week in formation, getting to know each other and visiting some Montfortian places. Unfortunately, almost 30 other members were unable to attend due to the enormous difficulties encountered when applying for visas. The disappointment of all those, especially from Africa, who were unable to attend despite having done their utmost to obtain visas, was clear to see.

The theme of the meeting was: “Missionary disciples in the Montfortian family”. The first day was devoted in particular to getting to know the programme for the week, giving the participants all the technical and organisational information they needed to make the most of the week, and getting to know each other through the testimonies of some associates from the three congregations. In the afternoon, Brother Jean-Claude LAVIGNE, OP, presented the theme “Synodality in the Montfortian family” and helped the participants to enter into the atmosphere of reflection of the week.

The second day was devoted to discovering the places where Montfort grew up, namely the houses where he was born in Montfort sur Meu and Iffendic, and the hermitage of Saint Lazare. The day ended with a celebration in the church of Cesson and a crossing of the famous bridge that Montfort crossed to go to Paris, while everyone was invited to see what they could give up to be more faithful to the example of Jesus.

The third day began with a talk by Father Marco PASINATO, SMM, on “Montfort and Baptism”, followed by group work. In the afternoon, the participants, divided according to their congregation, met up with their General Assistants for a time of sharing and getting to know each other. Immediately afterwards, guided tours were given of the most important sites in Saint Laurent-sur-Sèvre. The day ended with a very moving and intense moment of prayer. On the second anniversary of the assassination of Father Olivier MAIRE, SMM, everyone gathered in the Basilica of Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort for a prayer vigil during which the many martyrs in the history of the three congregations were remembered. For our congregation, the 49 Spanish brothers killed in 1936, the 7 Belgian brothers massacred at Buta in the DRC in 1965 and Brother Joseph DOUET murdered at Kataco in Guinea Conakry in April 2008 were presented.

On the fourth day, it was time to visit Poitiers, the cradle of the Montfortian family. Brother Maurice HÉRAULT presented the theme “Lay people and Montfort in Poitiers”, highlighting the important role played by many lay people in Montfort’s mission and in the life of the Montfortian congregations.

The fifth day was dedicated to another very important place in the history of Montfort: the Calvary of Pontchâteau. The researcher André MARTIN presented the theme “Montfort and the involvement of lay people in Pontchâteau”, describing the important role played by lay people in the construction of the Calvary and the various renovations that have taken place over the course of its history. In the afternoon, the new evangelisation project led by the three congregations on the site was presented. The aim is to make Pontchâteau a centre for

evangelisation and the spreading of Montfortian spirituality. The visit ended with the celebration of the Way of the Cross, which took place indoors due to the rain.

The sixth and final day was marked by four important moments:

- the presentation of the theme “Saint Louis de Montfort and the Bible” by Sr. Anne Marie DAVID, FDLS;
- the intervention of Maria Jesús RAMOS and Gemma Justo MEDRANO, associates of our Spanish province, who, in presenting the theme “Missionary disciples on the path of synodality”, gave a testimony to the marvellous collaboration between laypeople and brothers in Spain, especially in the school world;
- group work divided by continent to reflect on how to increase collaboration between the associates of the three congregations in the different continents;
- a festive evening, where everyone was able to share the culture and traditions of their own country, in a joyful and fraternal atmosphere.

At the end of the week, everyone gathered in the Basilica of St Louis-Marie Grignon for the send-off celebration presided over by the Bishop of Luçon, Mgr. François JACOLIN. It was an opportunity not only to thank God and our founders for this wonderful experience, but also to express, with great emotion and gratitude, our deepest thanks to all those who worked to make this project a reality:

- the organising committee made up of Mr. Eric JOYEAU (coordinator), Mr. Claude TIGNON, Ms. Marie-Line TIGNON, Ms. Véronique FRINAULT, Ms. Sylvie ABRAHAM, Sr. Marie Laure PAILLET, FDLS, Sr. Dorothee HARUSHIMANA Militant of the Blessed Virgin, Father Eric MANIRAKIZA, SMM, Brothers Claude MARSAUD, Maurice HÉRAULT and Guy BERTRAND, FSG ;
- the interpreters: Daniel BUSNEL, SMM, and Brother Michel MENDY, FSG, Father Marco PASINATO, SMM, Brother Dionigi TAFFARELLO, FSG;
- the many volunteers in Saint Laurent-sur-Sèvre, Poitiers, Montfort-sur-Meu, Cesson and Pontchâteau who offered their invaluable help in welcoming and accompanying the participants;
- the parish community of Saint Laurent-sur-Sèvre and the Collège Saint Gabriel et Saint Michel for their warm welcome and hospitality.

I can say that the objectives of the meeting were fully achieved, thanks also to the active involvement of all the participants, aware of the great opportunity that was offered to them and of the important responsibility of passing on what they had received in their place of mission. It is certain that another great step has been taken on the road to building the Montfortian Charismatic Family.

Bro. Dionigi TAFFARELLO, FSG