

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary



Casa Generalizia Missionari Monfortani
Viale dei Monfortani, 65
00135 – Roma (Italia)
smm-sec@montfort.org

Montfortian Heritage in Africa

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.” (Eph. 1, 3-6)

Dear Friends,

Laity and Religious, who exercise different ministries in the Church, leaders of communities, priests and bishops,

Receive a fraternal greeting from the Montfort Missionaries spread throughout the world. Joy and Peace in him who is the reason for our hope, Jesus Christ our Lord.

On the occasion of the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 2015, Pope Francis offered the following reflection:

“Celebrating this feast entails two things. First: fully welcoming God and his merciful grace into our life. Second: becoming in our turn artisans of mercy by means of an evangelical journey. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception then becomes the feast of all

of us if, with our daily “yes”, we manage to overcome our selfishness and make the life of our brothers ever more glad, to give them hope, by drying a few tears and giving a bit of joy. In imitation of Mary, we are called to become bearers of Christ and witnesses to his love, looking first of all to those who are privileged in the eyes of Jesus. It is they who he himself indicated: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Mt 25:35-36).”

The purpose of this letter is to offer some knowledge, albeit in a summary fashion, of what we find in the spirituality of the Marian Consecration of Saint Louis de Montfort; “*Jesus, our Savior, true God and true man must be the ultimate end of all our other devotions...*” (True Devotion, 61). Our wider desire is that Montfortian spirituality might help us to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ, with His unconditional love for humanity.

We know that some persons, some groups and some Institutes of Consecrated Life who promote the “*Consecration to Jesus through the hands of Mary*”, according to the method of St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, have caused serious pastoral problems for various parishes and dioceses. Some bishops have contacted us seeking clarifications: on the relationship of the Montfortian Congregation with certain specific groups and on the current state of Montfortian spirituality, especially in regard to the practice of the “*True Devotion to Our Lady*” proposed by St. Louis Marie de Montfort.

The early Christian communities also passed through difficulties of this kind and wrote: “*We have heard that some of our number*

without humility is not doing the work of God in a way that Montfort proposes to his followers.

Finally, Father de Montfort is clear that all the consecrated are supposed to put on the virtues of Mary: lively faith, deep humility and unbounded charity as opposed to arrogance and pride. These are the values that make for unity in the Church, the body of Christ. It is for this that accompaniment of different groups like the Friends of the Cross, those consecrated individually or in groups, and the lay associates is an essential component of the Montfort Mission in Africa.

Moreover, the Montfortian Spirituality is very attractive to average Christian so we cannot neglect the care of those who share this wonderful heritage of Father de Montfort with us.

Inspired by this feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, let us help each other to make the practice of true devotion, according to St. Louis Maria de Montfort, a path of holiness, as a path of true commitment to the poor and marginalized.



Fr. Luiz Augusto Stefani, S.M.M.
Superior General

Rome, 8 December 2017

this consecration that leads to division in/of the Church is from the evil one.

The true practice of the consecration is marked by humility as opposed to the pomp of the “Super Apostles.” It is this that Montfort wants his listener to learn that through humility Mary in the last days will vanquish the enemies of God. Her humility is so deep that it cannot be resisted even by the worst of God’s enemies. Father de Montfort believed that it is easy to resist the arrogant but very hard to resist the humble. The consecrated are so powerful a group because they enter into the very life of the most humble of all the servants of God.

The consecration helps us to see the role of Mary in the salvation plan of God. It was through her that God chose to reach us through his Son in humanity, as a great expression of divine humility. Montfort taught that it is also through her that the work of salvation will be accomplished.

God, certainly, could have chosen other means for the salvation of the world but he chose to do his work through Mary, therefore, God will complete his work of salvation through her because even God honours her humility with which she cooperated with him at the beginning of our salvation in Christ. To many people this is a secret not yet revealed and it will be revealed when the universe is about to be consummated in God and Mary will be a big cooperator in this final work.

It is for this that Mary, the missionaries and the Christians who practice the consecration to Jesus Christ through Mary in the Holy Spirit are termed the “Apostle of the later times” who will vanquish the enemies of God not by sword but by humility. Therefore, anyone who fights the enemies of God in our age

without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind” (Acts 15, 24). We do not send this letter to anyone personally, but rather to manifest our communion with all of you.

Despite the fact of being signed by me, this letter was written by various hands and in accordance with the reality of each Continent.

A LARGE FAMILY

The identity of each person is almost always linked with a someone, with a place, a past, in short, with a history. It is no different with the Montfort Missionaries.

It is difficult to introduce ourselves without making reference to someone very special, from whom we have received our name: *St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort*. He is much better known than his missionaries. We are known because of him, his passion for Christ, for Mary, for the poor and the missions.

Our Holy Founder wanted us to present ourselves thus: *“Liberos... men who are free, men filled with the Holy Spirit, who move like clouds in the sky wherever the Spirit leads them.”* I would also like that we be known as *“friends of the poor”*. Or even more, *“true children of Mary, who, with the rosary and the gospel, will bring the fire of the love of God to every place.”* (Prayer for Missionaries, 12)

We form part of a large family, the MONTFORTIAN FAMILY consists of the Montfort Missionaries, the Daughters of Wisdom and the Brothers of Saint Gabriel. We are at the service of the mission on the five Continents, present in more than 30

countries. Lay persons consecrated to Jesus through Mary share with us the same spirituality and the same mission.

The Montfortian charism and spirituality, however, surpasses the frontiers of the countries where we are; thus, there is an incalculable number of lay people who assume with enthusiasm the promises of baptism through the “Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary”, making the Montfortian Family more numerous still, and present in countries where the Montfortian Congregation as such is not yet present.

THE REQUEST OF A POPE AND THE PRESENT SITUATION OF MONTFORT’S PROPOSAL

June 21, 1997, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the canonization of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, Saint John Paul II made this request of us:

“Dear brothers and sisters of the great Montfortian Family, in this year of prayer and reflection on the precious heritage of St Louis-Marie, I encourage you: make this treasure bear fruit; it must not remain hidden. The teaching of your founder and master coincides with the themes that the whole Church meditates on at the approach of the Great Jubilee; it marks out for us the path of true wisdom that must be laid open to so many young people who search for meaning in their lives and for an art of living.”

He continued, in the same letter, to give us a mission:

“I welcome your initiatives at diffusing Montfortian spirituality in forms that are suitable to different

group there are also some that have followed the formation in Montfortian Spirituality and have made consecration but are not express members of the lay associates.

The goal of all this formation was always to answer to the needs of personal purification of the Christian, and on the other hand, it was meant to emphasise that as Mary cooperated in the work of salvation the consecrated are supposed to be concerned with the salvation of others. Therefore, the consecration is missionary. It is never a commitment only between a Christian and his/her God but more importantly it is a call to do all things through, with, in, and for Mary so that one may do all things perfectly through, with, in, and for Jesus. Jesus’ mission is meant for the salvation of creation.

A good example of the montfortian spirituality assumed as a form of pastoral and social commitment, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and in other African countries we find in the Legion of Mary. In Kisangani (Congo – RDC) the Montfortian missionaries accompany groups of laymen who are preparing for the consecration according to the Montfort method.

Put theologically, Jesus’ mission is that human beings and the entire creation may be completely united to God the Father. Therefore, the consecration is not a formation of a group of “Super Apostles” but the establishment of communion with God, “in Christ” and “with Christ.” Communion “with” Christ means that a Christian, as a person, is united with Christ as his/her primary relationship. Communion “in” Christ means that as a consequence of the basic relationship with Christ, Christians as a cooperate body, are together united to Christ because of their common faith in Christ. Therefore, consecration to Jesus through the hands of Mary should by no means be a source of division but communion “with” Christ and “in” Christ. Any practice of

Christocentric. It is a renunciation of Satan and an adhesion to Christ. Father de Montfort sums this up in the heart of the formula of consecration: “I, an unfaithful sinner, renew and ratify today, through you, Mary, my baptismal promises. I renounce forever Satan, his empty promises, and his evil designs, and I give myself completely to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Wisdom, to carry my cross after him for the rest of my life, and to be more faithful to him than I have been till now” (Love of Eternal Wisdom, 225). Most of these people have read the “True Devotion to Mary” but not the “Love of Eternal Wisdom” which spells out what this devotion to Mary consists in: Love of or adhesion to Jesus Christ, the goal of all devotions.

There is a great wealth in the writings of Father de Montfort that attract different people to particular aspects of Montfortian spirituality. However, particular aspects cannot be taken in isolation from the whole spiritual program Father de Montfort lays out for us. It is a spiritual program within the Church, for the Church and not apart from the Church. Therefore, it will be very necessary to make present to people not only the writings of Montfort but also the biographies that show that Father de Montfort was not only a man within the Church and for the Church but also more importantly a man obedient to the teaching authority of the Church, to the tradition, and to the teaching of the Church.

The Lay Associates and Individual Consecration

There is a small but organized group of the lay associates in Nairobi, Kenya, who have been formed in the Montfortian Spirituality by the Montfort Missionaries. Most of the members have consecrated themselves to Jesus through the hands of Mary. They have been formed not only to share in the Montfortian Spirituality but also in the Montfortian Mission. Under this

cultures, thanks to the collaboration of the members of your three institutes. Be also a support and a point of reference for the movements which take their inspiration from the message of Grignion de Montfort in order to give to Marian devotion an ever-surer authenticity. Renew your presence among the poor, your insertion into the pastoral activity of the Church, your availability for evangelization.” Message of pope John Paul II to the montfortian religious family on the celebrations.” (Letter, June 21, 1997)

December 8, 2003, remembering the 160 years since the first edition of the *True Devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary*, published in 1843, Saint John Paul II wrote a letter to the Montfortian Family which bore the title: “*On the doctrine of your Founder*”.

In this message of Saint John Paul II we find an excellent reflection on Montfortian spirituality. He walks among the texts of Saint Louis de Montfort: the *Treatise on the True Devotion*, the *Secret of Mary*, the *Hymns*, and explains the origin of the motto on his episcopal coat of arms, “*Totus tuus*” (Treatise on the True Devotion, 233).

The first observation made by him, now as Pope, was on the evolution of Marian theology and the necessity to read and interpret it in the light of the Vatican Council II:

“It is a lived teaching of outstanding ascetic and mystical depth, expressed in a lively and passionate style that makes frequent use of images and symbols. However, the considerable development of Marian theology since St Louis Marie’s time is largely due to

the crucial contribution made by the Second Vatican Council. The Montfort teaching, therefore, which has retained its essential validity should be reread and reinterpreted today in the light of the Council.” (Letter, December 8, 2003, Paragraph 1)

Saint John Paul II understood very well the meaning of the “slavery of love”, the expression used by Saint Louis Marie de Montfort to refer to the attitude of the Christian to realize the consecration to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary. It is a devotion that ought to lift us to holiness, since it orients us to charity, to the challenge to make ourselves servants of Jesus Christ in the selfless service of the poor, the needy, and the excluded. Mary was consistent with her “yes” (Lk 1, 38) and went at once to aid her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1, 39). Mary made her own the prayer of the whole people of Israel, recognizing the greatness of God in his love for the poor, the hungry, and those enslaved, through his merciful and liberating deeds (Lk1, 46-55).

This is why Saint John Paul II wrote:

“The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium states: “But while in the Most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5: 27), the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues” (n. 65). Holiness is the perfection of charity, of love of God and neighbour that is the object of Jesus’ greatest Commandment (cf. Mt 22: 38). It is also the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. I Cor 13: 13). Thus, in his Canticles St Louis Marie presents to the faithful in

a tendency to consider oneself as better than others even though the group had received a lot of accompaniment and learned that all suffering is in vain if it is not done for the sake of Jesus and his body, the Church, and its members.

Individual Consecration

It is very surprising that in places that the Montfort Missionaries have not yet reached like Nigeria, Rwanda, Togo and Burundi, although now we are in Burundi, the individuals or groups of people consecrating themselves to Jesus through the hands of Mary preceded us. Most of these people have come across the “True Devotion to Mary” by Father de Montfort but probably what is lacking is the proper interpretation of the writings of Father de Montfort.

The emphasis most often is on the devotion to Our Lady than on goal of the devotion: conformity, union, and consecration to Jesus Christ the eternal and Incarnate Wisdom and that in Jesus one should be consecrated to God alone. Probably the greatest danger is that different non-Montfortian authors compose most of the formularies attributed to Father de Montfort.

The Montfortian consecration found in many widespread commentaries by non-Montfortian authors do not take into account the whole Montfortian spiritual heritage which is a consequence of ones’ adhesion to “God alone.” Instead of this devotion being a way of life that takes seriously the living out of baptismal promises, which unite us with God, has become more or less a Marian cult.

The pivotal part of the consecration spells out clearly what Montfort meant for Christians who take up this devotion: renewal of baptismal commitment, which is essentially

conformed of all creatures to Jesus so anyone conformed to her should in a very easy way be conformed to Jesus (*Treatise on the True Devotion*, 120).

Unfortunately, because of the fear of witchcraft and Satanism the rosary prayer has in some quarters been turned into a weapon against these life-threatening vices. You will see in Malawi that even non-Catholic Christians wear rosaries, hung them at the head of their beds and making sure that every child wears their rosary beads when going to bed as a means of protection.

The daily practice of the Marian devotion is left to the Legion of Mary and the wearing of rosaries to everyone in need of protection although the Legionaries of Mary are spared from this misconception. Unfortunately, what is really essential, that this devotion conforms us to Jesus Christ who has authority in heaven and on earth, has in some quarters been reduced to external wearing of rosaries as medicine for protection.

Friends of the Cross

The other group very prevalent in Malawi is the “Friends of the Cross.” This group is anchored on the teaching of Father de Montfort on the “cross” as another way of acquiring Divine Wisdom. Their meetings revolve around the “Letter to the Friends of the Cross.” The goals of this group consist in striving for Christian perfection, which Father de Montfort taught that the whole work entails resolving to become holy (if anyone wants to be a follower of mine), self-denial (let him renounce himself), suffering (let him take up his cross) and acting (let him follow me), [*Letter to the Friends of the Cross* 13].

As a result of the divisions that had arisen as the group began to see Christian perfection as consisting of an austere life, there was

this order the excellence of charity (Canticle 5), the light of faith (Canticle 6) and the firmness of hope (Canticle 7).

*In Montfort spirituality, the dynamism of charity is expressed in particular by the symbol of the slavery of love to Jesus, after the example and with the motherly help of Mary. It is a matter of full communion in the kenosis of Christ, communion lived with Mary, intimately present in the mysteries of the life of her Son. "There is nothing among Christians which makes us more absolutely belong to Jesus Christ and his holy Mother than the slavery of the will, according to the example of Jesus Christ himself, who took on the status of a servant for love of us" - formam servi accipiens - "and also according to the example of the holy Virgin who called herself the servant and handmaid of the Lord (Lk 1: 38). The Apostle refers to himself as "the slave of Christ' (servus Christi) as though the title were an honour. Christians are often so called in the Holy Scriptures" (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 72). Indeed, the Son of God, who came into the world out of obedience to the Father in the Incarnation (cf. Heb 10: 7), subsequently humbled himself by making himself obedient unto death, and death on the Cross (cf. Phil 2: 7-8)." (Letter, December 8, 2003, Paragraph 6)*

At present there exist some Catholic groups with a strong tendency to part from reality and not assume responsibility for one's neighbor. They abandon the reading of the documents that refer to the Social Doctrine of the Church, do not interest themselves in the path of the Church post Vatican Council II and,

in many cases, they join together to recuperate pre-conciliar devotional practices, and they even use texts from some writings of Saint Louis de Montfort and practice the Montfortian consecration to justify their options.

The Montfortian Family does not find itself among these groups, and the Montfortian consecration ought to be what it is: the perfect renewal of the baptismal promises, which includes the solemn proclamation that *“I believe, as the Church believes and with the Church”*. We are in perfect communion with the Church. If those who practice this devotion do not accept the Pope as the visible sign of catholicity, they lose their bearings; they end up defending an ideology and they journey toward religious fundamentalism.

To those who dedicate themselves to spreading Montfortian consecration as a preparation for the “imminent end of the world”, we share with them these words of Saint John Paul II:

“This eschatological dimension is contemplated by St Louis Marie especially when he speaks of the “apostles of the latter times” formed by the Blessed Virgin to bring to the Church Christ’s victory over the forces of evil (cf. Treatise on True Devotion, nn. 49-59). This is in no way a form of “millenarianism”, but a deep sense of the eschatological character of the Church linked to the oneness and saving universality of Jesus Christ. The Church awaits the glorious coming of Jesus at the end of time. Like Mary and with Mary, the saints are in the Church and for the Church to make her holiness shine out and to extend to the very ends of the earth and the end of time the work of Christ, the one Savior.”
(Letter, December 8, 2003, Paragraph 8)

HERITAGE IN AFRICA

In 116 years of mission in the footsteps of the poor apostles and under the patronage of Mary in Malawi and other parts of Africa, we the Montfort Missionaries, have shared with the faithful and particular groups, the foundations of Montfortian Spirituality. The manifestation of this sharing is evident in the faithful and in the groups like the “Friends of the Cross,” the “Legion of Mary,” those who have, on their own, consecrated themselves to Jesus through the hands of Mary, and the “Lay Associates.”

Montfortian Marian Devotion

When the first three Montfort Missionaries landed on the soil of Malawi they hid a medal of Mary in a baobab tree in Nsanje. From that day, the Shire Montfortian mission was dedicated to the care of “Mary Queen of all Hearts.” Montfortian devotion to Mary, the mother of God, remains perhaps, the deepest source of spirituality for many Malawian Catholics today.

The Marian devotion speaks to people at deep psychological and religious levels. The devotion to Mary expressed through the prayer of the rosary has become not only powerful as a devotion and prayer in itself but a source of security to the people of Malawi at this time when they are confronted with issues of Witchcraft and Satanism. People have used the prayer of the rosary and the protection of Mary as weapons against Witchcraft and Satanism.

However, there is a challenge when it comes to the understanding of the essentials of Louis-Marie de Montfort’s Marian devotion: that through the devotion to Mary a Christian must be conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The essence is that since Mary is the most