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Circular Letter on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

MONTFORTIANS FORMED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND IN MARY

*Dear Religious Brothers,
Dear Brothers All,*

Introduction

On the occasion of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, I once again address to you my greetings, a message, and my nearness. Even though the message may be destined to you in a special way, it wants to touch the heart of all: Montfortians, lay people, religious and priests.

Just as I was finishing this letter, the news arrived of Russia's decision to attack the Ukraine and initiate a war. No war is justifiable ... not little ones, not great ones, not those with bullets and explosives, not those with words, offences or threats.

We were hoping for the "new normal" after the terrible time of the pandemic, and there came war which creates more poor people, more refugees and more dead. We must continue our prayer for peace and believe that is truly possible that peace will prevail over the madness of exalted dictators and the politics of the great powers.

We are also in the time of Lent, the road to Easter. It is the opportune moment to examine the quality of our Christian and religious life, the journey of conversion and encounter with Jesus Christ, Wisdom Eternal, Incarnate, Crucified and Risen. The principal theme of this letter is precisely on this "*journey of conversion and encounter*" with God and among ourselves, brothers and members of the Company of Mary.

1. The Context – Lent

Lent is a most appropriate time to speak of the journey, of conversion and of union. We have begun Lent and the liturgy of Ash Wednesday invited us to allow ourselves to be transformed from within, that is, from our deepest being, from the heart, as the prophet Joel invited us in the first reading: "*Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart*" (Joel 2: 12); inviting us, in the second reading, to enter a path of sincere conversion, a path of reconciliation: "*We implore you, in Christ's name: be reconciled to God!*" (2 Cor 5:20).

When we receive the ashes, the priest gives us a task to be realized during this journey toward Easter: "*Have a change of heart and believe in the Good News*" (Cf. Mc 1:15), and reminds us how fragile we are: "*Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return*" (Cf. Gen 3:19); these two admonitions and the liturgical readings of the day help us to realize that, humanly speaking, we are "almost nothing", at least we are dust...

In the end, there is not lay person, religious, priest, bishop, doctor, teacher or Pope; we all come from the dust and to dust we shall return. This affirmation alone should suffice not to create distances among us, to increase the degree of respect toward the other person, to value dialogue and to work for a world with greater solidarity, more just and more human.

Lent is an opportune time to remember that we are all learners, disciples of Jesus Christ and, as I said to you in last year's Circular, "*in the school of Joseph*", where the child Jesus began to learn the many values that accompanied him his whole life long. My dear brothers, we too, have much to learn in this same school.

With Saint Joseph and Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, we must "rediscover the geographical peripheries of the world" and the "less important missions", without the titles of superiors, of pastors, of bishops or other types of authority". In this sense, the reflection of Pope Francis at the General Audience of 17 November 2021, speaking of Saint Joseph and the option for the peripheries, can help us: *Today Joseph teaches us this: "Do not look so much at the things that the world praises, look into the corners, look in the shadows, look at the peripheries, at what the world does not want". He reminds each of us to give importance to what others discard. In this sense he is truly a master of the essential: he reminds us that what truly matters does not attract our attention, but requires patient discernment to be discovered and appreciated. To discover what matters. Let us ask him to intercede so that the whole Church may recover this insight, this ability to discern, this ability to evaluate what is essential. Let us start again from Bethlehem, let us start again from Nazareth*".

Indeed, Pope Francis says in the same General Audience, "*The Lord continues to manifest himself in the peripheries, both the geographical ones and the existential ones. In particular, Jesus goes in search of sinners; he goes into their homes, speaks with them, calls them to conversion. And he is also rebuked for this: "But look at this Teacher", say the doctors of the law, "Look at this Teacher: he eats with sinners, he gets dirty". He also goes in search of those who have done no evil but have suffered it: the sick, the hungry, the poor, the least. Jesus always goes towards the peripheries*".

Since the reality of poverty and the periphery almost always go together, let us meditate a bit more on "the poor and the Montfortians".

2. With Saint Joseph and Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, let us learn to be poor

Saint Louis Marie de Montfort was an excellent pupil in "the school of Saint Joseph", which is the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth. One of the essential attitudes in order to be a disciple of Jesus is to welcome what truly counts before God: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs*" (Mt 5:3); "*Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours*" (Lk 6:20). These words from the Beatitudes are like an invitation to build a program of life based on the option for poverty and the poor. When this option becomes rooted in our life, we will be able to announce without fear, as Jesus did, the objective of our mission: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...*" (Lk 4:18).

This letter wishes to be an invitation to continue further in the "school of Saint Joseph", in the "school of Montfort". As Montfortians today, we can learn much from what Montfort has left us in his writings on poverty:

9. To increase the rich treasure your poverty brings you and remain in possession of the kingdom you have conquered, there are three things you must put into practice:

(i) You must set a great value on this real and effective poverty to which you have committed yourself and have a real love for it. No one becomes rich more easily or knows the best use to make of these riches, says a holy bishop, than the man who is truly poor in spirit. He knows that wealth only serves to reduce to poverty and misery those whose heart is centred on it, whereas those who give up this wealth through a holy and praiseworthy contempt for it become rich and happy in the truest sense of the word. "Riches make a man poor and miserable if he loves them. If he despises them for Christ's sake, they make him rich and happy"

Be careful then and do not look back at the patrimony or benefice you have given up. "No one putting his hand to the plough and looking behind is fit for the kingdom of God (Lk 9:62). Be careful, too, not to glance enviously around you at the thousand and one benefits, ecclesiastical or otherwise, which you could acquire with as much right as anyone else, for "they arouse the fool's concupiscence" (Wis 15:5).

10. (ii) Feel then for yourselves the effects of poverty, for instance, (1) the labour it entails in the pulpit or the confessional by which you earn your bread at the sweat of your brow; (2) the humiliation and disdain which are usually shown to poor clerics; (3) other humiliations which poverty brings with it: lack of suitable clothing, proper food and accommodation, the fatigue and travelling it imposes.

(Letter to the Associates of the Company of Mary, nos. 9 and 10)

There are often so many inconveniences in the missionary life and we do not want to confront them, so much so that, just thinking about them, we find false reasons to say no to an activity or to a mission to which we have been called.

3. Characteristics of a Montfortian who lets himself be formed in the Holy Spirit and in Mary

"Holy Spirit, be ever mindful that it is you who, with Mary as your faithful spouse, are to bring forth and fashion the children of God. In her and with her, you brought forth the Head of the Church and, in the same way, you will bring all his members into being. Within the Trinity, none of the divine persons is begotten by you. Outside the Trinity, you are the begetter of all the children of God. All the saints who have ever existed or will exist until the end of time, will be the outcome of your love working through Mary" (PM, 15).

Someone shared with me a very positive reflection on the characteristics of a Montfortian who allowed himself to be formed in the Holy Spirit and in Mary. He told me that through the Company of Mary the Trinity still continues to love the people, the poor, all those who count on the Montfortian presence in their missions. The new foundations and the new communities are in the image of these Montfortians. The communities where there are brothers who dialogue among themselves and who, together, promote projects that respond to the needs of the people and that bear fruit. Internationality is like a style of missionary life that allows uniting countries and entities for the benefit of formation and common projects. The constant and affective relationship between the Montfortian Congregations which form the Montfortian Family. The Lay people who remain faithful and who are veritable collaborators in sharing the charism and the spirituality. The consecration to Jesus through Mary according to the method of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort continues to be spread and implanted in the parishes and communities of life, and even among other congregations. The fact that Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, more than ever, continues to be studied and loved in the Church and in popular devotion, all that indicates that there are lay Montfortians, Brothers and Priests, who are formed in the Holy Spirit and in Mary.

4. To God the glory, to us the shame

“These followers of the Apostles will preach with great power and effect. So powerful will their impact be that they will stir the minds and hearts of all who hear them. It is to them that you will give your word: the very words of your own mouth and wisdom: and none of their enemies will be able to withstand them (Lk 21:15)” (PM 22).

What Father de Montfort asked the Holy Spirit for in the Prayer for Missionaries, we see reflected in numerous missionaries, brothers and priests, past and present. However, someone remarked to me that we still have much to do so that we might become a battalion of missionaries who preach by our witness. What follows may seem very difficult and even a challenge, but on the road to Easter, it is necessary to recognize that “we are dust”, fragile and sinners.

Despite all the efforts *“to be imitators of the apostles”*, there are limitations still to be overcome. It is painful to know and difficult to admit that moral and sexual abuses exist in our Congregation. It is also unacceptable to assist in the rise of clericalism among Montfortian religious who use the ministry as a career by excluding the laity and the poorest of the poor. It is equally sad to note the lack of forgiveness among the brothers, the lack of dialogue and the absence of listening among our missionaries. It is also inconceivable to see Montfortian communities which, even holding in hand the “four distinctive notes of the Montfortian mission – Evangelization, Mary, Availability and Acting Together”, are incapable of elaborating a plan, who do not gather together to pray, to make retreats together, to plan community outings and who do not even sit down at table to eat together. It is sometimes discouraging to see Montfortians shut up in their rooms who do not visit the sick, who do not bother themselves with animating the Christian communities, the different parish and pastoral projects and live isolated lives, without perspectives for the personal and community level. It is often shameful to encounter Montfortian religious who transfer their responsibilities to lay people without accompanying them in their various activities, without motivating them or nourishing them with the charism and the gospel message of our Lord. Finally, it is regrettable to see Montfortians, brothers and priests, who do not love Montfort, who do not propagate his spirituality, who do not adhere to the charism of the Company of Mary, who do not obey our Constitutions and who do not respect or accept the decisions of the chapters and assemblies approved by their superiors.

Like everyone in the Church, I was deeply struck a few months ago by the presentation of the report of the Independent Commission on sexual abuses in the Church of France. In his reaction, Pope Francis prayed saying: *“To you, Lord, the glory, to us the shame”*.

I share with you some elements from the reflection of Father José Miguel Diaz, Assumptionist, a member of the Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation – JPIC of his Congregation:

Yes, we live the shame of a clerical and disincarnated Church which, through its authorities, has decided, too often and for too long, to protect itself as an institution instead of protecting the victims of our sin. However, there does exist a way to reorganize our path by following Jesus Christ. It is the way that will lead us to glorify God in his creatures and in the merciful love that the Father has revealed to us in the Passover of Jesus the Christ.

The glory of God is the human being fully alive, as Saint Irenaeus said; the task of our secretariat is already an effort in this direction. We are called to:

1. To be present there where our brothers and sisters are endangered. Let us draw near, let us make ourselves close in order to be their neighbors, to listen, to try to understand, to accompany, to live compassion.

2. *To promote, from this experience, every action of conversion and liberation that helps to change the situation of injustice and suffering in which live our brothers and sisters, victims of injustice, violence and the lack of conditions necessary to have a worthy life in peace. Let us commit ourselves to serving them from our situations, trying to integrate ourselves into their own efforts and struggles. Let us accompany them so that they may become protagonists of their process of liberation and development.*

3. *To even give our life. The martyr is not a stranger to our religious Family. Our sisters and brothers have already given all so that the reign of God and its justice might be manifested on our earth.*

The shame will remain ours if we are not faithful to our vocation, if we do not take the road of those who have gone before us, giving their life with and for those in need, the crucified of history, the victims of all the violence, wars, discriminations and injustices.

In the face of all this, my Brothers, once again may the words of the prophet Joel resonate in our hearts: *“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart”* (Joel 2:12). It is the time of conversion; it is the time of salvation; let us return to the Father, let us walk together. It is the time for conversion!

A wise Montfortian made me part of another observation: There are few Montfortians who consecrate themselves to the contemplation of the Blessed Sacrament, to be with the Lord in the chapel... we leave the Lord in peace, we leave him alone. I would say that we leave ourselves alone when we do not consecrate enough time in the day to prayer and contemplation; thus we become much more vulnerable in the face of evil.

Conclusion

I do not know if one can call this last part of the letter a conclusion, because on the road of conversion, until the end of life, there is never an end.

Let us say that we enter into a new stage of life, a new stage in the life of the Company of Mary. The new stage is called the “General Chapter”. I am aware that the reflection I have proposed in this letter has much to do with the theme of the next General Chapter. It is a difficult subject. It is a proposition to challenge ourselves and *“To put out into deeper waters and lower your nets”* (Lk 5:4-5).

As I wrote to the entities in the letter of 31 January of this year: *“Dare to take risks for God and for humanity”, is the theme suggested for the General Chapter of 2023. From this theme, we are all invited to set in motion “our creative fidelity”. The proposed theme is a result of all that we have experienced: starting with the General Chapter 2017 (Pilgrims without Borders), several Zoom meetings during the coronavirus pandemic with all the councils of the Entities, various canonical visitations of the General Council, the Extraordinary General Council (EGC) in May 2021, until the publication of the Vademecum (the pilgrim’s staff) of December 2021, was marked by great risks for God and for humanity, which inspired us to be creative in mission regardless of travel restrictions, uncertainties in planning the mission caused by the COVID-19 health crisis”.*

Someone has already alerted us on the fact that, in this letter, we did not mention anything about the theme of the Synod of Bishops of 2023: *“For a Synodal Church”*; and this is true. He is right, because we did not speak of the theme of synodality, however, thanks to the help of the Steering Team, the entire process of preparation for the General Chapter 2023 desires to be “synodal”. Thus, everyone is invited to send suggestions and to share their missionary activities under different modalities.

Dear Brothers, the invitation, the key word for the journey in this Lent of conversion and of preparatory process for the General Chapter can be this: *“Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals”* (Zeph. 3:16-17).

Is this not the same certitude that Father de Montfort manifested in his message to the Associates of the Company of Mary?: *“(1) Fear not, little flock, because it has pleased your Father to bestow a kingdom on you” (Lk 12:32) (3) “I am your protector and bulwark. I hold you in my hands, little company,” says our Eternal Father (cf. Gen 15:1; Is 49:16). “I have carved you on my heart and on the palms of my hands in order to cherish and defend you, because you have put your trust in me and not in men, in my Providence and not in wealth”.*

Let us pray to Saint Joseph with the prayer of Pope Francis:

*Saint Joseph,
You who always had confidence in God,
And who made your choices guided by Providence,
Teach us not to count too much on our own projects,
But on the design of love.
You who came from the peripheries,
Help us to convert our regard
And to prefer what the world rejects and marginalizes.
Comfort those who feel alone
And support those who work in silence
To defend life and human dignity.
Amen.*

The Mission continues!



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