
A TRIBUTE TO THE DAUGHTERS OF WISDOM



On the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Daughters of Wisdom I am pleased to share with you what I wrote about them in the Pentecost 2003 pastoral letter.

A “SPECIAL” COMMUNITY

In the imposing 1360-pages *Dictionnaire de spiritualité montfortaine* published by Novalis in 1994, Jean Bulteau offers us one of the most cherished gifts of the Montfort family, the Cross of Wisdom of Poitiers, in France. Towards the end of 1702, while Father Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort was chaplain at the Poitiers General Hospital and was working with every ounce of his strength to give the institution a human face, he also tried to transform the mind of the hospital administrators, but the demanding Gospel requirements were disturbing to some and raised lively opposition. Père Grignion de Montfort then decided to choose a dozen or so boarders at the institution, crippled, otherwise disabled, blind... to start a community which would bring a permanent spiritual presence to the house. To this end a room at the hospital was set aside, which became known as “the Wisdom.” In the middle of the room the chaplain installed a great cross 185 cm. by 135 cm., covered with signs and inscriptions which make up a demanding life programme for the disciples of the Wisdom. Across the arms of the cross one could read: “If you deny the Cross of Jesus Christ, he will deny you before his Father.” The upper part of the vertical piece has the words: “Denying oneself, taking up one’s cross to follow Jesus Christ.” The sentence is framed by two monograms: the upper one has Christ surmounted by a small cross, thus identifying Wisdom with the Cross; the lower one bears the figure of Mary, surmounted also by a small cross, signifying in this way Mary’s place in the mystery of Redemption. The lower part of the upright bears several important messages for the one who has already started on the road of following the Master: “love of crosses and desire for crosses, contempt, pain, insults, indignities, grace, persecution, humiliation, slander, illness, abuse,” “Long live Jesus! Long live his Cross!” Then follow the conditions for carrying his cross: “humility, submission, patience; total, prompt, joyful, blind, persevering obedience.” The last two emblems on the cross are three nails in a crown, representing the instruments of the passion but representing also, for the “Wisdom” community, the religious vows; and the star representing Mary, a final joyful note to the difficult lesson. At Nantes in France, in 1716, the Dauvaise sisters were planning on opening a hospice for incurable illnesses. Father Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, whom they approach, advises them – three weeks before his death – : “The first thing that will need to be done in this house will be to put up a cross so that the institution acquire its name, grace, and glory for ever. This is to be the first piece of furniture.” For some fourteen years, from 1702 to 1716, Fr. de Montfort had been faithful to the maxim that whoever wants to follow Christ and serve him in the poor must have the cross in his or her house, as part of the furniture. Always within sight, the cross is a stimulant to the disciples of a crucified God, to carry one’s own cross.

The two episodes of 1702 and 1716 reveal in a small way the deep motivation of the man who, along with Marie-Louise Trichet, founded the Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom. 1703-2003: it was three hundred years ago that the Daughters of Wisdom saw the light of day in the meeting of two lovers of Wisdom, Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort and Blessed Marie-Louise Trichet. Montfort could foresee in the future a seedbed for the development of the Daughters of Wisdom animated with the desire to contemplate Wisdom so as to present it to the love of the poorest of the poor. Mother Trichet, for her part, implemented the foundation’s project, a mission to which she devoted all of her formidable energy. The two brought dignity to the destitute and fed the hungry of their time with bread and kindness.

AN UNUSUAL SAINT!

Born 31 January 1673 in Brittany, France, Louis Grignion de Montfort lived only to the age of 43. When we realise all he did in so short a time, it is stupendous! He entered Saint Thomas Becket College in Rennes in 1685, and in the fall of 1692 he set out for Paris to study for the priesthood under the Sulpician priests. After his ordination on 5 June 1700, his wish to leave for the Canadian missions is thwarted. He then goes to Nantes to live with and among the poor to whom he had been drawn from the days of his youth. He would in turn be a hospital chaplain and a preacher; his "originality" often caused him trouble. He would be expelled from one diocese and welcomed into another. However, this "originality" could have another name – great holiness or a personal response to the calls of God. At times he would be alone, at other times there would be a few priests with him, and a small community of future priests. He spoke words of fire and was a prolific writer and composer of religious songs. In everything he extolled the love of God for the poor and his trust in the Virgin Mary. The *Treatise of True Devotion to the Virgin* shows us his great love for her. His greatest satisfaction was preaching at parish missions. He had the overwhelming experience of the passionate love of divine Wisdom for humankind, and his desire was to reveal this love to the men and women of his day. He was daily aware of his powerlessness before the countless marginalised people in society whom the Providence confided to his care. To a young lady of the Poitiers middle-class society, Marie-Louise Trichet, he said: "Come to the hospital." Marie-Louise did so, but as a poor person. A mystical journey would unite these two figures in a common destiny, a passionate love for Christ the eternal and incarnate Wisdom. On 2 February 1703, in the humble hospital in Poitiers, Marie-Louise became the first Daughter of Wisdom. Today more than 2200 of them, in twenty-two countries, continue the spiritual adventure of seeking Jesus among the wounded of society. A tricentennial project is the opening of a mission on the island of Flores, Indonesia.

THE ACADÉMIE CONWAY, EDMUNDSTON

Less than two centuries after these humble beginnings, the Daughters of Wisdom began work in Canada, in 1844. In 1905 they came to the parish of the Immaculate Conception in Edmundston. In 1929, the future Académie Conway was turned over to them. In 1945 they took over the school at Saint-François-de-Madawaska, and in 1948 they were asked to staff the domestic arts department at École Cormier; in 1956, they took over the direction of the school in Clair. Today, the sisters are no longer in the schools, but we meet them in pastoral ministry in the Upper Madawaska and Edmundston, and with the residents at Foyer Monfort, Foyer Plein Soleil, and Foyer Marie-Louise. "They shall have the beautiful name of Daughters of Wisdom and shall be dedicated to the Wisdom of the Incarnate Word, in love with the folly of the Gospel" (Primitive Constitutions). "If we risk nothing for God, we do nothing great for him" (Montfort).

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