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<<Solidarité de Compassion>>  
La dimension théologique de la communauté  
oblate dans le document capitulaire  
<<Témoins en communauté apostolique>>

**Summary:** The article gives a theological view of the Chapter's document *Witnessing as Apostolic Community*. The author studies the solidarity of compassion as a theological dimension of the Oblate community. The work is divided into two parts: the theological dimension of the religious community and of the Oblate community, witness of Christ's compassion. "A dynamic communion is necessary not only inside the Oblate community but also with all the charismatic communities existing in the Church today. To evangelize a world this vast and complex, one saint is not enough, a community of saints is needed".

Je voudrais donner un aperçu théologique sur le document capitulaire *Témoins en Communauté Apostolique* (TCA), en essayant de lire dans le contexte actuel de la théologie de la vie religieuse en général et de la vie fraternelle en particulier<sup>1</sup>.

Les membres du 32<sup>ème</sup> Chapitre (1 Septembre - 1 Octobre 1992) n'avaient pas de grands soucis théologiques. Ils n'avaient pas même l'intention d'élaborer un nouveau document doctrinal. Ils étaient bien conscients de l'importance des deux Chapitres précédents. Les CC et RR élaborées par le Chapitre de 1980 et le document *Missionnaires dans l'aujourd'hui du monde* du Chapitre de 1986 sont des textes fondamentaux de référence. Le chapitre de 1992 voulait plutôt offrir des instruments concrets d'animation pour la vie communautaire. Toutefois, dans son document final, il présente divers éléments pour une meilleure compréhension de la dimension théologique de la communauté et de notre vocation missionnaire<sup>2</sup>.

Durant le Chapitre, la mission est toujours restée le point central de référence, facteur prioritaire qui forme l'être de la Congrégation. Le premier chapitre du TCA << Les besoins de salut aujourd'hui >> en est la claire expression. On a fortement ressenti l'exigence de requalifier l'engagement missionnaire pour aller surtout à la rencontre de nouvelles pauvretés, dans la fidélité à notre charisme.

Toutefois, la question de fond qui a été graduellement mise en évidence concerne le sujet de la mission. Oui, notre vocation est celle d'annoncer l'Évangile aux pauvres. Mais qui accomplit cette action? À qui est confié ce devoir? L'attention des capitulants s'est alors dirigée vers le témoignage et la communauté: c'est la communauté, avec son témoignage de vie, qui est le sujet de la mission. Ainsi, ils ont éprouvé un besoin profond de conversion personnelle et communautaire. Une des paroles clés qui est revenue constamment au Chapitre était <<qualité de vie>>. Pour cela, l'attention s'est centrée sur la valeur de notre vie de communion, facteur essentiel pour l'évangélisation.

Certains membres du Chapitre auraient voulu ne pas traiter de ce que l'on pourrait appeler notre vie *ad intra* et cela par crainte presque de trahir les attentes missionnaires de la Congrégation. Au contraire, il est devenu clair que c'est la mission même qui exige une vie en profondeur.

Nous pouvons avoir l'impression qu'en tant qu'oblats nous avons assez réfléchi sur la communauté apostolique. Mais sont peut-être valables aussi pour nous les paroles de l'apôtre Jean: <<Mes bien-aimés, ce n'est pas un commandement nouveau que je vous écris, mais un commandement ancien, que vous avez depuis le commencement>> (1Jn 2,7); <<Car tel est le message que vous avez entendu dès le commencement: que nous nous aimions les uns les autres>> (1Jn 3,11). Le Chapitre au

fond nous propose à nouveau une des convictions fondamentales de notre Fondateur. Lui aussi ne s'est jamais fatigué de parler de la valeur de la vie fraternelle et de l'unité entre les membres de la communauté.

Parler une fois de plus de la communauté n'est pas un retour sur soi-même. Il s'agit plutôt de revenir à ce qui est le cœur même de l'Évangile: le commandement nouveau. C'est là une contemplation du mystère qui nous habite: Le Christ vivant au milieu de nous. Il s'agit de rattacher le mouvement missionnaire aux sources fécondes de la vie:

Toute la fécondité de la vie religieuse dépend de la qualité de la vie fraternelle en commun. Plus encore, l'actuel renouvellement dans l'Église et dans la vie religieuse est caractérisé par une recherche de communion et de communauté<sup>3</sup>.

Nous rejoignons ainsi le chemin que l'Église entière a parcouru pendant ces années partant de la découverte de la dimension de <<koinonia>> comme trait caractéristique de l'existence chrétienne et du rapport qui lie étroitement communion et mission. La communion est l'un des concepts théologiques qui ont grandement influencé la pensée de la missiologie du post-concile. L'affirmation claire de la *Cristifideles laici* - puis reprise par la *Redemptoris missio* - selon laquelle <<la communion est missionnaire et la mission est pour la communion>> (n.37) est comme le fa"te de tout un chemin de réflexion et de vie qui a caractérisé l'Église ces dernières années<sup>4</sup>.

Il faut donc prendre le temps de rappeler brièvement ses éléments constitutifs qui sont venus à l'évidence dans ces dernières années<sup>5</sup>.

## **I. La dimension théologique de la communauté religieuse**

### **A. Beaucoup de communauté, une unique <<koinonia>>**

Une des données qui caractérise la recherche actuelle sur la communauté religieuse concerne la diversité des communautés religieuses, liée à la diversité des charismes. En effet peut-on parler de communauté religieuse en général? N'y a-t-il pas plutôt beaucoup de formes de communauté? Au lieu de parler de la communauté religieuse en général, nous devrions considérer l'expérience concrète des communautés qu'ont suscitées les fondateurs et les fondatrices. Les communautés ont des visages et des lieux concrets. Elles diffèrent les unes des autres. Ces expériences ne peuvent se décrire en schémas préfabriqués qu'au prix de réductions forcées. Seul l'examen de l'expérience historique permet d'élaborer une théologie de la communauté religieuse, non l'inverse. La vie fraternelle en commun prend donc des visages différents selon la nature et la mission de chaque institut.

En même temps il faut dire que sous des formes variées, la vie fraternelle en commun de chaque institut présente des traits communs, parce qu'elle est une participation et une expression de l'unique <<koinonia>> qui caractérise l'Église et à laquelle chaque chrétien comme tel est appelé. Dans leur diversité, toutes les communautés religieuses tirent leur origine de la <<koinonia>> évangélique commune.

Pour comprendre en profondeur le sens de chaque communauté religieuse, il faut donc la situer dans le contexte plus large de l'Église communion.

### **B. La communauté religieuse dans l'ecclésiologie de communion**

L'ecclésiologie de communion est sans aucun doute un fruit mûr de Vatican II. Pour l'élaborer il faut sans cesse référer au modèle originaire: la Trinité. Il suffira de se rappeler la description de l'Église donné par *Lumen gentium*, là où on dit qu'elle est le peuple <<réuni dans l'unité du Père, du Fils et du Saint Esprit>> (LG 2).

Dans une Église qui redécouvre qu'elle est communion et appelée à vivre en son sein le dynamisme trinitaire, la communauté religieuse a une tâche particulière. Elle se révèle en effet comme une manifestation, une radicalisation en même temps qu'une prophétie de la communion que toute l'Église est appelée à vivre et à laquelle elle tend comme à son but final.

Experts en communion, - lisons-nous dans une heureuse formulation de

*l'Optiones evangelicae* - les religieux sont appelés à être, dans la communauté ecclésiale et dans le monde, témoins et artisans du projet de communion qui est au sommet de l'histoire de l'homme selon Dieu (...). En effet, dans un monde souvent si profondément divisé et face à tous leurs frères dans la foi, ils témoignent de la possibilité de la communion des biens, de l'affection fraternelle, du projet de vie et d'action qui leur vient du fait d'avoir accueilli l'invitation à suivre plus librement et de plus près le Christ Seigneur, envoyé par le Père pour que, premier-né d'une multitude de frères, il institue, par le don de son Esprit, une nouvelle communion fraternelle (N° 24).

Cela vaut pour tous les types de communautés, même pour les instituts qui se fixent des buts éminemment apostoliques et n'ont pas de tradition profonde de vie commune. En effet si l'Esprit conduit aujourd'hui l'Église vers une expérience de communion plus profonde, les religieux et les religieuses, quel que soit l'institut auquel ils appartiennent, par le fait même qu'ils sont des chrétiens d'aujourd'hui, ne peuvent se dispenser d'approfondir eux-mêmes la dimension de communion et de vibrer à l'unisson du souffle charismatique qui anime l'Église d'aujourd'hui. *Mutuae relationes*, à ce propos, nous rappelle que les divers charismes sont non seulement à garder, mais aussi à se développer en harmonie avec le Corps du Christ en croissance perpétuelle (cf. n° 11). C'est précisément à cause de la dimension charismatique de leur vie que les religieux et les religieuses sont les premiers à devoir rester à l'écoute de ce que l'Esprit dit à l'Église. Tous les religieux, comme tous les chrétiens, sont donc appelés à répondre à la nouvelle sensibilité communautaire que l'Esprit a communiqué à son Église aujourd'hui.

Il serait absurde que les consacrés, appelés à être par vocation <<experts en communion>>, faillissent précisément aujourd'hui à leur mission prophétique. Il serait absurde que, précisément aujourd'hui, alors que la demande d'unité se fait plus forte, les religieux et les religieuses ne fassent pas aboutir le projet de <<koinonia>> auquel ils sont appelés, et déçoivent ainsi l'espérance de bien des hommes. Ils ne peuvent renoncer à être des artisans de communion, à vivre et à diffuser la communion. Rendre authentique la <<koikonia>> et bâtir des communautés vivantes, c'est alors une des tâches les plus urgentes de la vie religieuse. Elle ne peut s'y soustraire si elle veut vraiment continuer à jouer le rôle de signe eschatologique que l'Esprit lui a confié.

Il faut, certes, savoir distinguer entre communion et communauté. Nous sommes tous appelés à vivre l'unique communion, mais celle-ci se réalise sous différentes formes de communautés selon la charisme. Il y a donc deux pistes à suivre pour le renouveau: vivre en profondeur la dimension théologique de la communion en allant à la racine à partir de laquelle se sont développées et doivent se nourrir sans cesse les différentes formes de communauté; retrouver les structures charismatiques qui expriment cette communion, et qui adaptent la communauté à la tâche qu'elle se fixe de réaliser.

Sous cette toile de fond de l'ecclésiologie de communion, nous voulons souligner quelques uns de ses axes pour en voir le reflet dans la communauté religieuse et qu'on peut retrouver souvent dans notre document capitulaire.

### **C. La communauté lieu d'expérience de Dieu, de la liberté et de l'autoréalisation**

La communauté religieuse est appelée à devenir le lieu de l'expérience de Dieu. Elle est, en effet, le lieu de la présence du Seigneur ressuscité. Lui continue en elle à donner son Esprit et à faire entrer dans un rapport filial avec le Père. Le document sur la Dimension contemplative de la vie religieuse, rappelle que <<la communauté religieuse est en elle-même une réalité théologique, objet de contemplation: comme <<famille au nom du Seigneur>> (PC 15; cf. Mt 18,20), elle est, par sa nature, le lieu où l'expérience de Dieu doit pouvoir se réaliser dans sa plénitude et se communiquer aux autres. L'accueil fraternel réciproque dans la charité contribue à <<créer un milieu apte à favoriser le progrès spirituel de chacun>> (ET 39, N° 15).

Dans la vie fraternelle vécue dans l'amour réciproque, nous trouvons l'authentique réalisation de nous-mêmes précisément parce que nous trouvons Dieu. <<Si nous nous aimons les uns les autres, Dieu demeure en nous, et son amour atteint en nous sa perfection>> (1 Jn 4,12). La perfection de l'amour, et avec elle notre pleine identité avec nous-mêmes, est le fruit de l'amour réciproque, du don de notre vie pour les autres. La vocation à la liberté et la vocation à la solidarité ne sont plus dichotomiques. Elles s'appellent plutôt l'une l'autre. Les sciences humaines nous apprennent aussi que ce n'est que dans son rapport avec autrui que l'homme devient vraiment une personne, c'est-à-dire qu'il se réalise comme homme, et rejoint sa pleine vocation qui l'appelle à être à l'image et à la

ressemblance d'un Dieu qui par sa nature est relation d'amour.

Dieu étant des Personnes-en-communion, l'homme est une vocation à la personne, à la personne comme communion. Aussi, s'il ne vit pas dans une relation d'amour, l'homme ne sera jamais ce qu'il est appelé à être. Comme image du Dieu trinité, qui est en lui-même pur amour, l'homme est capable d'aimer et ne devient vraiment un homme que lorsqu'il aime.

Le commandement nouveau de Jésus n'est donc pas quelque chose d'extrinsèque à l'humanité, de juxtaposé ou d'imposé d'en haut, mais la mise en acte de ce qui est implicite dans la nature humaine.

Si donc, comme religieux, nous voulons aussi rejoindre la pleine maturité humaine, nous devons apprendre toujours mieux à aimer, à nous donner. C'est une direction qui semble contraire à la tendance instinctive qui nous porte à nous affirmer en nous imposant aux autres, mais qui est la voie évangélique authentique de la liberté et de l'autoréalisation.

#### **D. Moyen et signe d'évangélisation**

Si elle s'entraîne sans cesse au don de soi, la communauté religieuse ne se replie pas sur soi, mais se fait service, diaconie, témoignage, annonce. Comme au sein de la communauté les membres ne vivent pas sur eux-mêmes, ainsi la communauté entière ne vit pas pour elle-même.

Dans la diversité de ses ministères la communauté religieuse se met au service du projet de Dieu sur l'humanité, qui est de rassembler tous les hommes dans la famille des fils de Dieu et de faire d'eux tous un seul peuple. Et cela à un triple niveau: de présence mystique, de signe exemplaire, de ministère charismatique.

##### **1. Présence mystérique**

Avant d'être un moyen d'évangélisation, la communauté comme telle est déjà en elle-même évangélisatrice. Avant de le lire par la parole, elle dit le Christ par sa présence même. Si, comme nous l'avons rappelé, elle est habitée par le mystère, le Christ qui vit en elle irradie sa lumière, touche les coeurs et convertit ceux qui entrent en contact avec la communauté ou avec ses membres qui, même isolément, en sont l'expression toujours et partout. Par la médiation de la communauté, le Christ se rend lui-même à nouveau présent parmi les hommes pour leur communiquer sa propre vie.

##### **2. Signe exemplaire**

Se montrer communauté, avec la dynamique de l'effort pour surmonter les tensions, les divisions, les égoïsmes, c'est montrer de façon prophétique l'homme comme un être en relation, c'est montrer la société humaine et l'Église même. Lorsqu'elle a puisé à la source de l'unité, la communauté religieuse peut indiquer le chemin qui répond aux exigences actuelles sur le sens de la personne et sur le désir de rapports authentiques de communion et d'unité.

##### **3. Ministère charismatique**

La communauté religieuse est appelée à contribuer à la mission de l'Église comme sacrement de l'unité du genre humain, non seulement par son existence mystérique et iconique, mais aussi par la mission typique de l'institut. Quel que soit son genre de ministère, la composante communautaire reste déterminante à ce niveau également. Si les fondateurs ont réuni autour d'eux une communauté de frères, c'est parce qu'ils avaient conscience de ce que tout apostolat a sa force dans l'unité. Quand, à travers l'amour réciproque, le Christ se fait efficacement présent dans sa communauté, celle-ci devient non seulement un lieu où se fait l'expérience de Dieu, mais aussi un artisan d'évangélisation. Le ministère spécifique trouvera une efficacité et une fécondité nouvelles et inattendues, parce que ce sera le Christ lui-même qui déploiera son action à travers la communauté: ce sera lui qui, à travers la communauté, informera, annoncera le Royaume de Dieu, guérira les malades, convertira les pécheurs, accomplira toutes sortes de bien. La vie religieuse se met ainsi à dire Dieu par sa propre vie.

La communauté devient ainsi le lieu de discernement, où se perçoivent les besoins de salut des hommes et, en même temps, le lieu où s'élaborent les réponses adéquates.

#### **E. Modèle trinitaire et christologie**

Ces réflexions convergent vers le fondement ultime de la réalité communautaire: le mystère trinitaire et christologie.

La périchorèse des Personnes de la Trinité, faite de donation et d'accueil réciproques, est l'achétype de notre unité. Elle pourrait sembler un idéal impossible à rejoindre, parce que des personnes humaines ne peuvent pas se compénétrer comme les personnes divines. Mais notre participation à la vie fait que Dieu peut nous pénétrer et nous en faire un en lui.

La participation à sa vie d'«agapè» rend possible la réciprocité de l'amour mutuel qui nous fait être mystérieusement l'un dans l'autre. S'aimer l'un l'autre en Christ, avec la même mesure, c'est vivre l'amour trinitaire sur terre, greffés, chacun et ensemble, dans la vie d'amour de Dieu même.

C'est ici que se greffe la référence au Christ. La théologie contemporaine a vu dans l'événement pascal le lieu privilégié pour comprendre le mystère trinitaire, et la voie de sa pleine participation. Pour revivre en son sein la dynamique trinitaire, la communauté doit pénétrer dans le mystère pascal.

Jésus nous montre donc que le dynamisme vrai de l'amour où l'homme trouve son accomplissement personnel, est essentiellement traversé par un moment de «mort», de «don de soi», de «perte de sa propre vie». Dans son dynamisme profond, le mystère pascal nous révèle que l'amour a un moment de «non-être» qui prélude à une nouvelle plénitude d'«être» qui se transcende.

La kénose est nécessairement une loi de la communauté qui naît de l'événement pascal. Les tensions, les difficultés, les incompréhensions, l'absence d'union que nous remarquons souvent dans nos communautés ne sont pas des symptômes de manque de générosité et d'engagement. Elle font partie du projet chrétien de communion. Elles disent que le chemin vers l'unité passe nécessairement par la participation à la passion et la mort du Christ. Dans la dynamique communautaire, le Christ, dans son mystère pascal, reste le modèle de la façon dont se génère l'unité.

## **II. La communauté oblate témoin de la compassion du Christ**

Avec ce fond théologique nous pouvons lire maintenant le document du Chapitre. Le mot clé nous permet de l'aborder et de comprendre sa vision de la communauté c'est la «compassion». En face de la situation du monde d'aujourd'hui décrite dans la première partie du document, la réponse des Oblats est celle de la «compassion».

Le document du Chapitre général saisit la communauté dans son dynamisme missionnaire immédiat, appelé «solidarité de compassion».

Comme notre Fondateur, nous cherchons à nous rassembler autour de la personne de Jésus Christ de façon à créer une solidarité de compassion, un seul coeur qui soit nourriture pour la vie du monde (n.6).

### **A. La «compassion», source et fruit de la mission**

Ce mot de «compassion», qui veut dire une pénétration dans l'intimité de l'autre jusqu'à avoir les mêmes sentiments que lui, évoque immédiatement le passage de l'évangile que nous lisons à la Messe du Bienheureux Eugène. Dans son action d'évangélisation, Jésus se retrouve au milieu des foules et ressent une «compassion» pour elles, parce qu'elles sont épuisées, comme des brebis sans berger. La réponse de Jésus à ce sentiment intime de pénétration dans les souffrances et dans l'état d'abandon des gens est sa demande que d'autres ouvriers le secondent dans le travail de la moisson (cf. Mt 9:35-38).

La compassion de Jésus, dans cette péripécie de l'évangile, naît d'un contexte de mission et, à son tour, sollicite la mission. Jésus comprend les gens parce qu'il vit au milieu d'eux, tandis qu'il «allait aux alentours par toutes les villes et les villages, enseignant dans leurs synagogues, prêchant la bonne nouvelle du royaume et guérissant toute maladies et toute infirmité». La compassion, à son tour, le pousse à intensifier sa réponse évangélisatrice, tout en l'élargissant quantitativement.

Le mot «compassion» nous rappelle en outre l'attitude du Fondateur qui est arrivé au point d'avoir le regard même du Christ. Lui aussi voit l'Église dans une déplorable situation, dévastée, en proie à la terreur. Il voit les peuples qui croupissent dans l'ignorance crasse. À ses yeux également les

foules apparaissent comme des <<brebis égarées>>, sans berger. Devant cette situation *commota sunt corda!* Pour le bienheureux Eugène comme pour Jésus, cette lecture est le fruit d'une expérience de mission, elle naît du contact avec les gens dans un ministère d'évangélisation. Et à son tour il pousse à nouveau vers la mission. En effet, la réponse qu'il se sent appelé à donner à ce sentiment de compassion est celle même que donna Jésus: chercher des ouvriers pour la moisson, et plus concrètement, <<former des prêtres zélés, désintéressés, solidement vertueux, des hommes apostoliques en un mot>>.

Dans un autre passage de l'évangile de Mathieu nous retrouvons la même <<compassion>> de Jésus: <<En débarquant, il vit une grande foule; il fut pris de pitié (compassion) pour elle>>. Cette fois-ci, la réponse est différente: Jésus demande qu'on leur donne à manger:

Donnez-leur vous mêmes à manger. (...) et ayant donné l'ordre aux foules de s'installer sur l'herbe, il prit les cinq pains et les deux poissons et, levant son regard vers le ciel, il les donna aux disciples, et les disciples aux foules.(Mt 14:14-21)

Jésus, en réponse à la compassion dont il est touché, va à la rencontre de la foule, la nourrit, la rassasie par une multiplication des pains et des poissons, qui préfigure le don extrême qu'il fera de lui-même en offrant sa propre vie sur la croix et en la communiquant dans l'eucharistie.

Notre document est dans cette même ligne: les Oblats eux aussi veulent être <<un seul cœur qui soit nourriture pour la vie du monde>>. Notre vie commune n'existe pas d'abord pour elle-même. Dans un langage symbolique, notre vie communautaire est appelée <<chair pour la vie du monde>>. Pour cette raison <<la communauté que nous formons ensemble autour du Christ>> est vue comme <<la table du banquet auquel nous invitons l'humanité>>(n.8).

Nous sommes en plein symbolisme eucharistique, dans une vision d'ecclésiologie de communion, d'ecclésiologie eucharistique. La communauté est perçue comme don et lieu de participation. Elle est *chair* pour la vie du monde.

Cela suppose une vision fortement christologie de la communauté oblate. Seul Jésus est le pain vivant capable de nourrir l'humanité et de donner la vie. La communauté sera pain de vie seulement dans la mesure où elle est habitée par la présence du Christ et en est le sacrement.

Le document fait également allusion à la façon dont la communauté est appelée à offrir la nourriture: elle est *table* à laquelle l'humanité est invitée. Cela présuppose une ouverture et un accueil des autres de sorte qu'ils puissent participer à la communion et la partager ensemble. C'est un aspect qui demanderait d'être développé davantage. Être chair pour la vie du monde ne signifie pas être un paquet-repas qu'on donne à quelqu'un qui reste devant la porte. La nourriture de la communion doit être consommée dans l'accueil réciproque.

Notre texte semble en outre suggérer que la compassion pour les foules est le fruit de notre <<Être réunis autour de la personne de Jésus>>. En d'autres termes, notre compassion est une participation à la compassion du Christ, à ses sentiments, comme fruit de notre identification avec lui. La Constitution n.4 nous vient immédiatement à l'esprit: Nous voyons le monde à travers le regard du Sauveur crucifié. Identifiés au Christ crucifié, transformés en celui dont nous portons la mort dans notre corps, nous sommes capables de voir le monde avec ses yeux à lui et d'y percevoir la continuation de sa passion, de manière à porter le monde à la résurrection, tout comme nous, avec le Christ, nous sommes passés de la mort à la vie. En paroles pauvres on demande à chacun de nous et à toute la communauté d'être un autre Christ.

Et voici que la qualité de la vie devient alors vraiment indispensable pour savoir lire les signes du temps, pour être touchés et mus à la compassion, pour savoir y apporter des réponses adéquates.

## **B. Une compassion *solidaire*. La communauté comme lieu de discernement et sujet de mission**

Le document va plus loin et parle d'une compassion *solidaire*, c'est-à-dire une façon de ressentir qui n'est pas uniquement le fruit de ma seule perception de la réalité, mais d'une lecture faite ensemble, un sentiment qui jaillit d'*un seul cœur*. C'est un *ressentir* commun qui naît du fait de <<nous

réunir autour de la personne de Jésus Christ>>. C'est la dimension communautaire de la compassion: un <<ressentir ensemble>> (n.6).

À ce sujet, il est important de relire le début du document:

(...) Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, nous nous efforçons sans relâche d'être à l'écoute du Christ qui nous appelle à travers les besoins de salut des hommes et surtout des pauvres. Dans ce monde en transition radicale, leur clameur monte, tout à la fois urgente et pressante. Guidés par l'Esprit, quelle réponse lui donnerons-nous? (N°1).

Le début du document capitulaire rappelle le début des CC et RR où l'on dit que l'appel du Christ est perçu <<à travers les exigences de salut des hommes>>.

Dans le document capitulaire ainsi que dans les Constitutions est clairement dit que c'est le Christ qui nous appelle et non les hommes ou les circonstances. L'histoire en soi est opaque, elle se prête à mille interprétations, à mille lectures. Seulement le Christ qui connaît le coeur de l'homme et est Seigneur de l'histoire, peut nous offrir l'authentique clef de lecture. Lui seul nous rend capables de comprendre. Les Oblats donc se mettent à l'écoute du Christ. Mais lui nous appelle à travers la médiation des événements, des personnes, à travers la médiation de l'Église. Ainsi le début du document capitulaire renvoie au début de la Préface: <<L'Église appelle à grands cris...>>.

Mais comment reconnaître la voix du Christ parmi les nombreuses voix donc nous sommes bombardés? Comment la reconnaître dans la voix des personnes et des événements? Le début du document capitulaire évoque à ce propos un autre début, celui qui ouvre chacune de nos journées: le psaume invitatoire (Ps. 95). Les paroles: <<Écouter aujourd'hui sa voix...>> sont une invitation à se nourrir quotidiennement de l'Écriture, à devenir Parole vivante. Seulement si nous sommes Évangile vécu nous saurons reconnaître sa Parole dans la parole des hommes. Le psaume invite ensuite à ne pas endurcir le coeur. Un coeur dur est celui sur lequel Dieu ne peut pas inscrire sa loi. Dieu doit enlever le coeur de pierre et le remplacer par un coeur de chair, qui se laisse facilement modeler, docile à son enseignement, capable d'accueillir son Évangile. C'est la bonne terre sur laquelle tombe la semence de la Parole de manière à ce qu'elle puisse porter du fruit. La *compassion* naît de l'écoute de la Parole de Dieu qui permet d'avoir la <<pensée du Christ>>.

L'Épître aux Hébreux fait une lecture communautaire du psaume 95 qui déjà d'adressait à tout le peuple d'Israël:

Prenez garde, frères, qu'aucun de vous n'ait un coeur mauvais que l'incrédulité détache du Dieu vivant, mais encouragez-vous les uns les autres, jour après jour, tant que dure la proclamation de l'aujourd'hui, afin que chacun d'entre vous ne s'*endurcisse*, trompé par le péché(3, 12-13). Veillons les uns les autres sur les autres, pour nous exciter à la charité et aux bonnes oeuvres. Ne désertons pas nos assemblées, comme certains en ont pris l'habitude, mais encourageons-nous et cela d'autant plus que vous voyez s'approcher le Jour (10, 24-25).

C'est ensemble que nous nous mettons à l'écoute de la Parole. C'est ensemble que s'opère le discernement de l'appel du Christ dans les appels de l'homme.

Le document capitulaire aussi s'adresse à tous les Oblats les invitant à l'écoute et au discernement communautaires. Nous sommes en effet <<un seul corps missionnaire>> (N° 7). Le document interpelle la communauté toute entière. C'est ensemble que nous devons nous aider à ne pas endurcir notre coeur, à être constamment à l'écoute de la voix du Christ. Nous devons les uns les autres nous exciter à la charité et aux bonnes oeuvres, nous devons nous exhorter les uns les autres. Nous devons faire <<tous ensemble l'expérience du Christ>> (N° 15). Nous avons besoin de cette aide réciproque, de <<nous soutenir mutuellement, de partager ensemble, de prendre soin les uns des autres>> (N° 11). La fidélité à l'écoute de cette voix est en effet un travail dur, qui exige persévérance: <<une conversion recommencée chaque jour>> (N° 18).

On comprend alors pourquoi, pour être authentiquement témoins, il est fondamental d'être <<hommes de la présence de Dieu, unis à Lui dans la prière, en communion avec tous leurs frères dans



l'amour dont il est la source>>(N° 17).

La communauté devient le lieu adéquat de discernement, où nous percevons les besoins de salut des hommes. D'où l'urgence de nous communiquer les uns aux autres ce que nous voyons, comment nous ressentons les réalités sociales, culturelles, ecclésiales dans lesquelles nous sommes immergés...

La communauté est en même temps le lieu où s'élabore la réponse.

Nous ne deviendrons des évangélistes efficaces que dans la mesure où notre compassion sera partagée, où nous nous offrirons au monde, non pas comme une coalition de francs-tireurs, mais bien plutôt comme un seul corps missionnaire (n. 7).

Dans cette perspective, il devient essentiel de nous communiquer constamment les uns aux autres les intuitions, les projets, les expériences, de façon à trouver ensemble les réponses et les solutions. Nous sommes appelés à approfondir ensemble le rapport avec le Christ, en tant que communauté, à devenir <<plus transparents les uns aux autres, au point de savoir partager en profondeur nos histoires personnelles, nos projets missionnaires et notre vie de foi>>(N° 12).

Selon le document capitulaire, la valeur de la communauté est liée également au contenu de son annonce. La communauté, à travers sa vie de communion, peut devenir témoin de la nouveauté évangélique. En effet elle fait voir quels sont les fruits, au niveau personnel et social, de la vie chrétienne vécue en plénitude. Elle est en fait une proposition de <<communion, signe d'un monde né de la Résurrection>>(n.9).

Elle conteste de façon prophétique l'individualisme du monde et l'arbitraire du pouvoir, source de malheur de tant de pauvres. En même temps, elle donne à ce monde des raisons d'espérer, dans son effort pour sortir de son émiettement et de sa dispersion... Ainsi, - conclut le document - notre vie communautaire aura-t-elle l'humble autorité d'une proposition qui jamais n'abuse ni ne force (n.8).

### **C. La qualité de la vie**

Pour que la communauté puisse remplir le devoir qui est le sien, il lui faut une profondeur de vie évangélique. Il s'agit de <<rechercher activement la qualité de notre communauté, de notre être>>(n.8).

Et voici alors que notre communauté est considérée comme un lieu d'évangélisation de ses membres: lieu d'évangélisation mutuelle: <<Nous choisissons donc la communauté comme un moyen pour nous laisser évangéliser sans cesse et être témoins de la Bonne Nouvelle dans l'Aujourd'hui du Monde>>(n.7).

L'expérience de la communion avec le Christ, à ce point-ci, devient fondamentale: <<Construire de telles communautés apostoliques ne pourra pas se faire sans nous recentrer sur la personne de Jésus-Christ>>(n.9). <<Comme notre Fondateur, nous cherchons à nous rassembler autour de la personne de Jésus-Christ>>(n.6). <<Cette présence du Seigneur nous unit dans la charité et l'obéissance pour nous faire revivre la communion des Douze>>, qui <<est le modèle de cette vie>>(n.10). Il est clair que la communauté ne sert pas seulement à augmenter l'efficacité missionnaire; <<elle vise à établir une interdépendance, une communion profonde les uns avec les autres>>(N° 10).

Dans ce contexte nous pouvons citer le Supérieur général qui, à propos de la communauté des apôtres avec Jésus en tant que modèle de la communauté oblate, écrit:

Il ne s'agit pas d'un modèle purement extérieur, mais du modèle lui-même, et bien que la réalisation soit analogique, elle est néanmoins réelle. Le Christ nous appelle, il nous réunit (cf. CC. 1,3) et il est présent au milieu de nous. Nous le suivons et devenons ses coopérateurs dans la communauté et par elle, parce que le Christ se fait présent en elle: <<Là où deux ou trois sont réunis en mon nom, là je suis au milieu d'eux>> (Mt 18:20). Sainteté et mission passent par la communauté, non pas parce qu'elle est le moyen de les réaliser, mais parce que le Christ est présent dans la

communauté et par elle. Certes, sa présence n'est pas réalisée par une formule sacramentelle comme dans l'eucharistie. Il est réalisé par la façon dont nous vivons comme chrétiens. La Constitution 37 nous donne la clé théologique et indique la méthode pour réaliser la communauté, pour rendre présent le Christ, pour faire en sorte que la communauté soit missionnaire: <<À mesure que grandit entre eux la communion d'esprit et de cœur, <<les Oblats témoignent aux yeux des hommes que Jésus vit au milieu d'eux et fait leur unité pour les envoyer annoncer son Royaume>><sup>6</sup>.

On comprend alors toute la portée de l'affirmation du document capitulaire lorsqu'il écrit, que <<nous reconnaissons les limites de l'individu seul et la fécondité de la communauté>>(n.7). Mais lorsqu'on parle de fécondité de la communauté, on ne se réfère pas avant tout à l'avantage qu'elle offre en autant qu'elle permet de multiplier les forces et de s'étendre dans le temps, mais plutôt à une réalité théologique. C'est le Christ qui est au milieu de nous qui transpose l'efficacité apostolique sur un autre niveau.

Cette présence - écrivait le P. Zago dans le texte cité ci-dessus - n'est pas seulement d'ordre moral: c'est une réalité ontologique; elle ne se réalise pas par une parole sacramentelle comme dans l'eucharistie, mais par notre manière même de vivre en chrétiens. Dans la réciprocité de l'amour à l'intérieur de la

communauté c'est l'amour même du Christ qui aime. Il est le *je* qui aime et le *tu* qui reçoit l'amour, il y forme le *nous* qui devient présence réelle. Présent dans la communauté à travers la médiation de la communauté, le Christ lui-même se rend à son tour présent parmi les hommes pour leur communiquer sa propre vie.

Plus la communauté sera telle plus la présence en elle du Christ sera vivante: lui-même sera le vrai annonciateur de la bonne nouvelle. N'était-il pas lui, le Seigneur ressuscité, rendu à nouveau présent dans l'Esprit au milieu des siens, qui, comme nous le rappellent les Actes des Apôtres, ajoutait chaque jour de nouveaux membres à la communauté?

Le Christ - écrit encore le P. Marcello Zago - est présent et actif dans sa communauté non seulement pour faire vivre et parvenir à la maturité, mais encore pour en faire un levain et une force entraînant de salut à l'intérieur de la réalité humaine dans laquelle elle se trouve. La communauté est la cause efficiente, elle est sacrement de salut, en proportion de la qualité et de l'intensité de son unité dans le Christ et de son amour trinitaire reçu, vécu et transmis<sup>7</sup>.

Le sujet le plus en mesure d'évangéliser est nécessairement une communauté. <<L'annonce n'est jamais un fait personnel>> (RM 45). Si le Règne de Dieu c'est la réunification des enfants autour de l'unique Père, la constitution du nouveau peuple de Dieu, réalisée dans le sang du Christ et opérée par l'Esprit, seule une communauté peut la proclamer, ou, au moins, quelqu'un qui exprime la communauté. Si l'on doit communiquer ce que l'on a connu et vécu, il faut avoir fait l'expérience concrète de la vie en unité, c'est-à-dire de la *koinonia* trinitaire et de la *koinonia* ecclésiale. <<Nous sommes missionnaires avant tout pour ce que nous sommes en tant qu'Église qui vit en profondeur l'unité dans l'amour>> (RM 23). Madeleine Delbrêl, dans l'écrit au titre significatif: *À propos de la naissance de petites communautés laïques*, a justement fait remarquer; <<Le témoignage d'un seul, qu'il le veuille ou non, porte seulement sa signature. Le témoignage d'une communauté, si celle-ci est fidèle, porte la signature du Christ>><sup>8</sup>.

L'unité parmi ceux qui annoncent est la condition pour que soit le Christ lui-même qui annonce. En outre Jésus ressuscité, présent en ceux qui sont unis en son nom, continue à donner son propre Esprit. À chaque époque, l'Église a trouvé la voie de l'évangélisation et a répondu de manière adéquate aux défis de son temps grâce à la présence active de l'Esprit Saint. C'est lui qui la guide et ouvre de nouvelles voies d'évangélisation. Il donne les charismes, l'audace, la *parresia*, le courage d'entreprendre.

De même, c'est seulement guidées par le même Esprit que nous pouvons nous aussi parvenir à réaliser l'évangélisation qui doit être, par nature, prophétique, dans le sens qu'elle doit être à mesure de lire les signes des temps, d'interpréter les besoins des hommes et donner des réponses pertinentes. Donc à nous aussi il nous faut l'Esprit. Mais pour avoir l'Esprit, aujourd'hui plus que jamais, il

est demandé non pas des personnes seules même si charismatiques, mais une communautés de personnes unies au nom de Jésus, qui garde sa présence par l'amour réciproque. La première expérience de l'Esprit à la Pentecôte, fut l'expérience de toute une communauté. Seulement le Ressuscité au milieu de nous est à mesure de nous communiquer son Esprit.

Plus encore: une communion dynamique est nécessaire non seulement à l'intérieur de la communauté oblate, mais aussi avec toutes les communautés charismatiques présentes aujourd'hui dans l'Église.

Face à un monde vaste et complexe à évangéliser - a écrit récemment le Supérieur générale des Salésiens - il ne suffit pas d'un saint, il faut toute <<la communauté des saints>>. Il ne suffit pas d'un charisme, il faut tous les charismes, avec la force inédite que l'unité et la réciprocité peuvent donner à cette présence charismatique des Fondateurs dans leurs enfants<sup>9</sup>.

P. Fabio Ciardi, o.m.i.

#### Notes :

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<sup>1</sup>Je ne crois pas que l'on ait beaucoup écrit sur ce document capitulaire. L'Administration Générale O.M.I. est en train de préparer une série de *Ressources pour l'animation communautaire* ( quatre subsides entre 1993 et 1994 : cf. *Communiqué OMI* 60,12/1992). En outre, on peut trouver des commentaires sur des aspects particuliers dans M. Zago, « Le Christ source de notre être. Témoins en communauté apostolique», dans *Documentation OMI*, N°193, juin 1993; du même auteur, « La Charité fraternelle » dans *Documentation OMI*, N°197, avril 1994; S. Rebordino, *La Comunidad Apostolica Oblata*, Retiro, Mexico 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Dans cet article nous nous arrêtons sur le deuxième chapitre du document: « Notre réponse: Communauté apostolique et témoignage».

<sup>3</sup>Jean Paul II aux participants à la Session Plénière de la CIVCSVA, dans *L'Osservatore Romano* du 1/11/1992.

<sup>4</sup>Ciardi, F. «La comunione missionaria e la missione per la comunione», dans *Notiziario CISM*, 1994, N° 282, p. 291-321 (traduction française en polycopié).

<sup>5</sup>Ciardi, F. «La comunione nella vita fraterna» dans USG, *Carismi nella Chiesa per il mondo. La vita consacrata oggi*. Ed. S. Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 1994, p. 163-200 (traduction française, espagnole et anglaise); CIVCSVA, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor. La vita fraterna in comunione*, Città del Vaticano, 1994 (traduction dans les langues principales).

<sup>6</sup>*Community*, dans *Vie Oblate Life*, 48(1988), p. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup>*Comunità ed evangelizzazione. Orientamenti dei Sinodi dal 1974 e 1977 e prospettive missionarie*, *Lateranum*; 45(1979), p.122-123.

<sup>8</sup> *Communauté selon l'Évangile*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 1976, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> <<Vie consacrée: défi de l'an deux mille>>, dans *Voce del popolo*, Diocèse de Turin, 31/1/1993.

# Oblates: What kind of priests are we?<sup>1</sup>

**SOMMAIRE-** Se basant sur les recherches historiques récentes l'auteur attire notre attention sur les différences entre les prêtres religieux et les prêtres diocésains. Il nous explique ensuite d'où viennent ces différences. Qu'elle est la place de chacun dans l'église? Finalement, on tente de bien saisir ce que doit être le prêtre oblat, selon le Fondateur et nos saintes règles. "La Congrégation groupe en communautés apostoliques des prêtres et des frères qui se lient à Dieu par les vœux de religion".

As Oblates preparing for the canonization of the Founder, we also find ourselves in a unique historical situation. At the end of the twentieth century a great deal of historical data about Catholic priesthood is available that was not available even twenty years ago. Yet as more of this data is published, a dilemma shows itself that does have a direct bearing on the Oblates.

Before looking at some of the data, it might be useful to pose the question: why should historical data on priesthood be relevant to us? The answer is that every Oblate works from a model of priesthood. This model is partly historical, partly theological, partly what he has seen other priest doing and partly what he imagines himself. At a certain point that model is not modified anymore yet the Oblate continues to use it as a reference point for what counts as ministry, how formation should be done, how one relates to the Church hierarchy, how planning is done at the Provincial or General Council level and so on.

The issue in this article is how priesthood is lived in practice. There is no question about the nature of the Sacrament of Priesthood. It was stated clearly at Vatican II that:

Formally, *the priesthood* is there to bring about Christ's presence in his Church (Lumen Gentium, art. 21)...to share Christ's office of mediator, shepherd and head (Presbyterorum Ordinis, art.1; Lumen gentium,art. 28), with authority "to act in the person of Christ the head"(Presbyterorum Ordinis art. 2)<sup>2</sup>.

For priests, the sacrament is the point of departure. It is in the living out of the sacrament that the tensions develop. Note that it is not being assumed that history somehow replaces theology. The historical data however is inescapable when approaching a historical situation namely the present day role of the religious priest.

## What's new?

Articles by two historians can illustrate the storehouse of history that is being opened to us: "The Ministry of Disciples: Historical Reflections on the Role of Religious Priests" by Brian Daley S.J.<sup>3</sup> and "Priesthood, Ministry and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations" by John O'Malley S.J.<sup>4</sup>. Both of these articles present features of the history of the religious priest. Both are describing the tensions of being who are priests.

Daley presents the situation in the early Church. A citation from the influential John Cassian (5<sup>th</sup> cent) sets the scene (perhaps a little tongue in cheek as Daley observes):

There is an old maxim of the Fathers that is still current... namely that a monk ought by all means to fly from women and bishops. For neither of them will allow a person who has once become bound to them by ties of familiarity to care, any longer, for the quiet of his cell, or to continue with pure eyes in divine contemplation, rapt in his vision of holy things. (Daley's translation)<sup>5</sup>

This citation can serve to show the central issue of the two articles, namely that the relationship of office and personal discipleship is fought with tensions. Then in a densely

footnoted text, Daley traces the relation from the early period through to the Middle Ages. In a lengthy article like this, the principles that he deduces from the historical data are perhaps the most significant.

As Daley himself notes, the history of the relationship between religious and the hierarchy is rarely as clear as the principles would make it seem. However, one can distinguish "the role of the disciple, or committed follower of Jesus, from that the apostle, or authorized witness of gospel"<sup>6</sup>. Raymond Brown expands on this point when he says that the "priesthood represents the combination or distillation of several distinct roles and special ministries"<sup>7</sup>. Then Daley offers four principles of religious life: it is always about becoming a disciple; it is achieved through the evangelical counsels, prayer and entering into union with God. Curiously he does not mention vocation! Religious life is also essentially prophetic. And lastly it is "inherently a lay reality... the qualitative intensification of Christian practice, rather than a structural element in Christian institutions"<sup>8</sup>.

Following on this, Daley offers three principles of priesthood. Ordained ministry is the way "Christian apostleship has been realized"<sup>9</sup>. It is not response to a vocation as much as it is the "reception of an office"<sup>10</sup>. He does not allow the possibility that it can be both vocation and office. Thirdly, office has two major components, preaching and presiding. Once again Raymond Brown adds a useful point. "Ministry" means "minister[ing] to or serv[ing] a congregation without necessarily presiding at the Eucharist"<sup>11</sup>. Thus the term "priest" has more specific meaning than "minister".

Finally Daley offers two general comments, firstly, "ministry" as it is now being understood (at least in the US) is not essentially tied to office. One would have to ask what is his sense of "office". The American culture reduces "office" to purely functional terms. And secondly, he offers the useful conclusion that although religious life and priesthood have been combined since the fourth century,

The chief danger in such a combined pattern of life is that one aspect will so dominate the other as to rob it of its central characteristics: that the ordination of religious, for example, will domesticate their countercultural charism as disciples, or that the membership of ordained ministers in a religious community will so privatize and spiritualize their roles in the church as to rob it of its public value<sup>12</sup>.

Turning to O'Malley's article. His subtitle -some historical and historico-graphical considerations- shows how his article both differs from and complements Daley's article. He states his thesis as follows:

The categories with which we customarily think about religious life are inadequate to the historical reality and that inadequacy is to a large extent responsible for some of the confusion in the Church today<sup>13</sup>.

O'Malley maintains that the lack of clarity reaches back into the past but is also evident in the documents of Vatican II. According to the latter, the difference between religious and diocesan priests seems to be the commitment of the former to the evangelical counsels. But the distinction loses some of its force when diocesan priests are encouraged to practice them in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. Hence "the conclusion that seems to follow is that there is one priesthood, but priests can be animated by different spiritualities"<sup>14</sup>. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* goes further in that it views priestly ministry as largely to the faithful, usually, within a stable faith community and "done by a clergy in hierarchical union with the order of bishops.(PO 7)<sup>15</sup>". O'Malley then shows that this view does not and has not described the ministry of religious priests who often belong to exempt orders anyway.

His detailed historico-graphical study shows the *lacunae* in the historical background that theologians have had work with. Often historical studies are incomplete because they concentrate on the early period and ignore the Middle Ages or the modern period. "Historical" works often shift to presenting ideas about priesthood rather than describing the actual ministries

that people were doing in a certain period. There are also limitations to the way that the religious has been treated. This is fleshed out in a substantial treatment of the early history of the Dominicans and Franciscans with the conclusion that:

By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and for some centuries thereafter, the most dynamic visible and articulate corps of ministers in the Church did not fall under the jurisdiction, for the most part of the supervisors of ministry, the local bishops. The mendicants had their warrant from the bishop of Rome. Within that warrant they had a distinctive "order" of their own<sup>16</sup>.

O'Malley also devoted two whole sections to the Church of "The Sixteenth Century" and "Vatican II". He concludes by calling for clearer frameworks for viewing the history of ministry for example, buy showing both religious and diocesan ministry together. In addition, people's actions need to be studied as much as their words. Documents often do not tell the whole story. Among his closing considerations are the fact that for most orders and congregations, ministry is at the heart of how they understand themselves. Hence "descriptions and definitions of religious life that fail to take full account of this indisputable fact are...misleading<sup>17</sup>."

There are two distinctive "traditions of ministry" in the Church. "Both have served people's spiritual (and sometimes material) needs<sup>18</sup>." The diocesan tradition is perhaps even more forceful than ever since it is "being taken as normative and in some cases, indeed, as the tradition that admits no alternative<sup>19</sup>." Religious life really is characterized to a degree by ministry, ministry is "not something one adds to one's vacation as a Franciscan or Jesuit upon ordination to the priesthood<sup>20</sup>."

## Theological Response

The two historians make a number of points that require a theological response. Perhaps the issue can be formulated as follows: Is there a theology of the states of election that demonstrates the relationship between them? An answer to this question should demonstrate the difference between the states of election as well.

Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>21</sup> did a detailed study of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius in a work called *The Christian State of Life*. In an earlier article he wrote:

The flood of literature on the Exercises remains almost entirely stuck in pastoral and ascetical aspects; only few had the idea that Exercises must contain decisive pointers and points of departure for theoretical theology as well<sup>22</sup>.

Ignatius saw the chief action of the Christian lies in "the personal meeting of the believer with Jesus-Christ<sup>23</sup>." And as von Balthasar shows in great detail<sup>24</sup>, this meeting is not simply an encounter but as Ignatius understood it, it was meant to lead to standing *with* Christ. "Christ, as divine person with both a divine and human nature, established for all creation by the unity of his person the true relationship between God and man"(195). It is this true relationship that is the foundation of every Christian's relationship to God.

Hence, Christ's own state of life is the source for priesthood and the life of the counsels: "Where I am, there my servant will be."(Jn 12:26) What von Balthasar is saying here is that Christ is the archetype (another notion that is found in Ignatius!) and so the whole life of Jesus has to be taken seriously. The people that he chose and the things that he did are archetypal too. The Church continues to live out of the archetypal life of Christ and can only understand itself and its mission in this light<sup>25</sup>. von Balthasar does explain how this is so but the argument does not directly enter into the direction of this article. Perhaps a citation from St. Basil the Great can serve as a summary: "Typology points out what is to be expected, indicating through imitation what is to happen before it happens<sup>26</sup>."

Leaving out much the argumentation, Jesus can then be said to have laid the foundation of the state of election by leaving private life (the secular state)<sup>27</sup> and entering into public ministry.

The confrontation between the two [states] occurred when he denied his earthly relationship to his mother and brethren in order to put primary emphasis on his supernatural relationship to those who do the will of the Father. (Mk 3:31-35; Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21)(195)

Once he had died and risen, Jesus was able to sanctify the apostles who to that point had been merely called and chosen. Hence "the state of the counsels existed before the priestly state."(251) Thus it is possible to argue that the ecclesial state of election includes the priesthood as the objective ministry of Christ and the life of the counsels as the subjective imitation of Christ.(266)

In a long section entitled "The States of Election in the New Testament", von Balthasar continues his study of the types generated by Christ's own life. He shows that:

- (i) Mary is the cofoundress of state of the counsels<sup>28</sup>.
- (ii) Peter symbolizes the "married" secular priest.(287)
- (iii) And John "as the virgin apostle...represented the "religious priest"(287)

Drawing on John's Gospel, von Balthasar shows the interplay of the three persons as symbolic of the interplay of love and office (the subjective imitation and objective ministry mentioned above) or in terms of the issue here, of the interplay of diocesan and religious priests.

As a result of this interplay, the following theological statements can be made about the relation between love and office:

1. Both states of election are called to a separation from the world, from the *multitude*. "The promises made to them about themselves, their future work, the continued support of the Lord, and their destiny to be exposed and persecuted, yet victorious even in death " apply to both states.(279) They also work for the one Church.

2. There is an interdependence of the two "kinds" of priesthood symbolized in the Gospels. John was "established" in the office of love "by the Lord himself [and so] it was his role to mediate between the Lord and that [official] ministry" of Peter(283)<sup>29</sup>.

3. Having demonstrated the commonality and the unity of the two "kinds" of priesthood, von Balthasar turned to their distinctiveness. He recovers a "before and after" scenario from the Gospels. Up until the question "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these do?"(Jn 21:15), "the personal and official following of Christ within the unity of the Church has been demonstrated in a reciprocal super- and subordination."(283) But with this question - noting particularly - the phrase "more than these", Peter if he "is to conform to what he is about to receive from the Lord, he must now love the Lord more than John, the beloved disciple does."(283) He must embody the love if he is to represent the whole church. "It is not true that office is only valid for external matters, whereas non-official love governs internal ones."(284) Thus the tension between love and office that could be argued from a more superficial exegesis is resolved because of the necessary unity called for by Christ. In von Balthasar's view love can never do without office "but the church has the authority over God's graces only for the purpose of dispensing them; its authority is a service to those who love so that they may grow in love."(287)

Without doing justice to the five hundred pages of von Balthasar's work, the main points listed do show the fundamental difference the two "kinds" (or better "traditions") of priesthood. Religious priesthood is an expression of a subjective imitation of Christ in love that has an external expression in the priesthood. On the other hand, the diocesan priesthood is an objective office that calls its bearer to deeper love.

Given who Christ is, the subjective imitation of Christ is essentially "inexhaustible"(379) hence it is the role of the religious "to open all closed ideals and pastoral goals to the always limitless demand of Christ."(379) The religious "shares in a special way in Christ's expulsion and abandonment...[he or she is the] stranger who can never be completely at

home there."(379) Compare this von Balthasar's summation that "marriage and priesthood tend to require a manageable roster of duties and rights."(379) Here is a potential source for great deal of tension.

The two historical articles and the theological presentation of von Balthasar, certainly both maintain the distinctiveness and complementary of the two "traditions" of priesthood.

### **Oblate priesthood?**

In the light of history and theology above, what can be said about Oblates who are priests?

Firstly, Oblate priests are for the Church. (See LG 18 above) We do not have a private mission where we know better or different from the Church. Both Protestant and Catholic alike are aware of what being *for the Church* means<sup>30</sup>. In the words of Karl Barth:

The Church is not *of the opinion*, it does not have *views*, convictions, enthusiasms. It believes and confesses, that is it speaks and acts on the basis of the message based on God Himself in Christ<sup>31</sup>.

Rahner expresses this notion as follows, using the idea of totality: "In this life of a dependent official within the church as a total religious system... the priests necessarily no longer has any private life<sup>32</sup>". Rahner is focusing on the "dependence" of the priest to distinguish the state of the priest from that of someone who exercises a profession (see p.100). Hence he can say that all priests enter "a larger system... we have a particular way of life, which exists before we make our decision; we are in this sense dependent officials."(100) In other words, priesthood is not like life in a partially religious structure where the member can negotiate how much of this time etc. is to be committed.

Also since priesthood is participation in a larger whole - "the priest does not pray simply in an outburst of enthusiasm or idealism."(102) He is committed to Eucharist and to the Breviary.

Next Oblate priests are in the *religious tradition* of priesthood (if we follow the terminology set out above). That is to say that Oblate priesthood is distinct from diocesan priesthood. It was the teaching of the Council that "It is for the good of the Church that institutes have their own proper characters and functions."(PC 2b) The Rule is very clear about this distinction in a number of places. For example, "we preach the Gospel among people who have not yet received it... Where the Church is already established, our commitment is to those groups it touched least."(C.5) Oblates essentially serve those who are outside (or marginal within) the diocesan system. There is no surprise here - de Mazenod's own roots were at places like the Madeleine Church in Aix.

The quotation from *Perfectae Caritatis* (above) also indicates that Oblates complement the diocesan system. Similarly in the Rule: Oblates "fulfill our mission in communion with the pastors whom the Lord has given to his people."(C.6) This constitution also means that Oblates are not pastors. It could be argued that this is *softened* by rule two which states that "no ministry... is foreign to us." However constitutions carry more weight than rules! This is evident from the different processes required to change them.

The dynamic of the religious priest's life is complex. According to Rahner, religious have "a witnessing function of living out what is radically Christian."(117)(see c.4) And hence for Rahner (and for von Balthasar above) "religious life can at least seek expression in the apostolic element of the priesthood."(117) Then he argues that the nature of the presbyterium, particularly in early times was sufficiently like the communal nature of religion life to make the following conclusion possible:

the existential and collegial aspect of the priesthood seeks expression in religious life, and on the other hand the ecclesiological function,



which belongs to the religious life... seeks expression in the priesthood.(119)

His distinction of existential, ecclesiological and collegial aspects however, is not being applied to realities of the same order. Both priesthood and religious life are ecclesiological. The only reason for their existence is the building of the Church. The reason for this writer's caution is that priesthood cannot simply turn out to be a job. The realities of religious life and priesthood have to be seen as total (in the sense Rahner uses above). They are not a cafeteria-style collection of features from which the religious priest selects what he wants to do.

It might perhaps be better to consider the religious priest as one who bears the realities of priesthood and religious life into his time and place. Rahner would have it that the religious priest is personally responsible for the "synthesis" of the two aspects.(120) This is true but probably too simple! The two realities (religious life and priesthood) have common features. And they are not undefined prior to someone becoming a religious priest. One has to bear in mind that Rahner's book is a set of retreat talks and not a systematic theology of priesthood!

If we follow von Balthasar, then religious life is living the subjective priesthood of Christ<sup>33</sup>. And this fits beautifully with what is found in the Rule: "if we bear in our body the death of Christ, it is with the hope that the life of Jesus too, may be seen in our body." Here the Rule is simply paraphrasing 2Cor4:10. The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* notes that this text means that:

the life of the Apostle has a twofold aspect just as did Christ's here on earth: one of continual dying through which it contributes to the realization among men of the redeeming death of Christ.

This *continual dying* is the whole subjective side of priesthood. It is Christ's "not my will but yours be done."(Lk 22:42) As Oblates "we give ourselves to the Father in obedience even unto death."(c.2) Then the *Commentary* continues, going on to say that "the other [aspect is that] of spiritual successes that show the efficacy of the redemption<sup>34</sup>." This is what we have been referring to as the *objective* priesthood.

Obviously the *subjective* and the *objective* have the same source. As von Basalthar showed above, Christ is the source of these two states. The aim of the religious priests is to unite the subjective and the objective dimensions into a harmonious unity as they are in Christ. In Jesus Christ there is no disjunction between the subjective and the objective.

In the Preface, the Founder wrote of the wonderful energetic unity of these two dimensions as follows:

Such are the great works of salvation that can crown the efforts of priests whom God has inspired with the desire to form themselves into a Society in order to work more effectively for the salvation of souls and for their own sanctification (*Preface* p.13).

Lastly, it must be noted that the terms *subjective* and *objective* do not have their usual meanings! The *objective* is the endowment of ordination. It is an *office*. It is total and it can draw the endowed subject into deeper holiness with his cooperation. The *subjective* priesthood is the graced cooperation with and appropriation of the grace of Christ enabled through the vows.

Thus far, the link between religious life and priesthood has occupied our attention. Now the notion of a tradition of religious priesthood must be examined. Rahner laments the loss of specific activities connected with specific orders so that "the orders have lost something of their special character and come closer to one another in a general leveling out<sup>35</sup>". The problem with this *leveling* is that it removes the uniqueness of the founding charisms and their ability to complement each other in the Church. Consequently, the service to the Church and the world suffers.

The event of the canonization reminds us that we have a unique founder and a unique mission. Eugene de Mazanod is the main source for our tradition. Certainly other congregations were founded for the poor but the specific way of doing it can be traced back to

Eugene de Mazanod. He was not the "poor simple man" like Francis of Assisi, he was not "man of the desert" like Anthony. He took great care with his training and he was concerned with the validity of his ordination. He knew which church he wanted to be part of and that was the Roman Church. His experiences with the Gallican Church and his encounters with Bonaparte's reforms gave him certain notions about how the Church was to be present in the nation state.

His personal missionary style was the expression of his love. The things that he did came from the heart: the work with the young; the caring for the sick. Such activities did not (in the eyes of Vatican II) contradict office since: "The holders of office, who are invested with sacred power are, in fact, dedicated to promoting the interests of their brethren."(LG 18) However as Vatican II stated so well,

the work of office holders is always ultimately so that all who belongs to the People of God... through their [the office holders] free and well ordered efforts towards a common goal, attain salvation.(LG 18).

Leflon summarizes the Founder's perspective on the priesthood as follows. This can serve as a closing statement since it gathers together so many of the aspects that have been dealt with above. Eugene de Mazenod:

firmly determined to devote himself exclusively "to serving the poor and the children," His apostolic spirit and his desire for total self-renunciation led him to seek the humblest of ministries...He had no intention,...either of taking part in the administration of the diocese or joining the metropolitan chapter, as his uncles had done. Nor did he intend to limit his activities to those of a Concordat parish, since they seemed too restricted and too poorly suited to a life of conquest for God. Instead, he wanted to be free to devote himself to what we call today the works of the ministry. With an astute appreciation of the religious situation, the young priest clearly realized that the Church of this day was not sufficiently answering the actual need of a Post-Revolutionary era; that it was barely reaching practicing Catholics who had remained faithful to the Church and was doing little beyond that<sup>36</sup>."

Bevil Bramwell, O.M.I.

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#### Notes:

1 This is far more extensive working out of the notion of the Oblate Priest than is to be found in a handout that I prepared under the same title. *Bevil Bramwell*.

2 Niermann, Ernst, "Priest" *Encyclopedia of Theology* p. 1282.

3 Daley, Brian, S.J., *Theological Studies* 48(1987).

4 O'Malley, John, S.J., *Theological Studies* 49(1988).

5 Daley, p. 605.

6 *Ibid.* p. 622.

7 Brown, Raymond, *Priest and Bishop*, p.20.

8 Daley, p. 622.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Brown, p. 20.

12 Daley, p. 623.

13 O'Malley, p. 224.

14 *Ibid.* He cites PO 7 and *Christus Dominus* in this regard. There is a problem with using "spirituality" as the defining term since priesthood is not merely the expression of a spirituality.

15 O'Malley, p. 24.

16 *Ibid.* p. 237.

17 *Ibid.* p. 255.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.* p. 256.

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20 *Ibid.*

21 There might be a reaction to my using von Balthasar as the theologian of ministry. He is able to get beyond the reduction of history to mere events and lose the reality of salvation history. His notion of the events of the life of Christ is more extensively dealt with in his work *A Theology of History*. There he says for example:

The richness of reference in each particular (not vague and hazy) christological situation is so great that it can give birth to further situations of extreme diversity, sharply distinct from each other, yet not (as occasionally suggested by the premature conclusions of "situation ethics") established in relativistic autonomy, but finding their norm and governing principle in that particular christ-situation which is their source and their context. And this in turn subordinated within the totality of all Christ-Situations, which form, in their unity, the Incarnation of the Logos and the "Revelation of God." (Jn:18).

22 von Balthasar, Hans Urs. "Exerzitionen und Theologie" *Orientierung*, 12(1948), p. 230.

23 von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Christian State of life*, p. 10. From now on the numbers in brackets refer to pages in that book.

24 *Ibid.* p. 184f.

25 "The community of the apostles with Jesus represents in nuce all the essential ecclesial relationships and structures of the later Church"(von Balthasar *Christian State of Life* p. 290).

26 St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 53.

27 von Balthasar says:"in the first thirty years of his journey through the world, the Lord exemplified the secular state." (*Christian State of Life*, p. 194.)

28 pp. 288, 289. See also "Mary's Statue of Life", p. 201ff.

29 von Balthasar is drawing on Jn 13:23 here.

30 Barth and Rahner differ in their understanding of what *Church* is. Crudely, one could perhaps say that for Barth, Christians gather together to form a church. On the other hand, for Rahner, people become Christians by being baptized into the Church.

31 Barth, Karl, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 87.

32 From this point, numbers in brackets refer to pages in *The Priesthood*.

33 von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Christian State of life*, p. 374.

34 Jerome Biblical Commentary NT Section, p. 280

35 *Ibid.* p. 115.

36 Leflon, Jean. *Eugene de Mazenod Vol I*, p. 428.

## Patrons de la Congrégation

**SUMMARY-** These are commentaries on the litanies of the congregation in which the Founder has grouped together the saint patrons of the congregation, mostly preachers and missionaries. The author gives a short comment on each saint of the litanies. There is no doubt that the invocation of the saints constitutes a value of the origins of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate.

Une prière qui est propre aux Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, <<ce sont les litanies des saints Protecteurs de la Congrégation>>; les saints dont la dévotion est en honneur dans la Congrégation, précise *La Prière Oblate*, et qui sont surtout des prédicateurs et des missionnaires<sup>1</sup>.

<<Ces litanies, de rédaction oblate, furent introduites chez nous dès l'année 1816>>, affirme le P. Cosentino<sup>2</sup>, s'appuyant sur les prières prescrites pour l'examen particulier, en 1816 et en 1818<sup>3</sup>. Déjà le 9 octobre 1815, l'abbé de Mazenod avait écrit à l'abbé Tempier son intention d'adopter une règle dont <<nous puiserons les éléments dans les Statuts de saint Ignace, de saint Charles pour les Oblats, de saint Philippe de Néri, saint Vincent de Paul et du bienheureux Liguori>><sup>4</sup>. Le 17 novembre 1817, tâchant de convaincre son oncle Fortuné d'accepter l'épiscopat de Marseille, il ajoutait: <<Nous prendrons saint Charles, saint François de Sales pour patrons et pour modèles>><sup>5</sup>.

<<Nous ne connaissons pas le texte primitif de nos litanies, puisque le premier que nous connaissons est celui de la première édition du Manuel de prières en 1865>><sup>6</sup>. Pourtant le Fondateur y tenait beaucoup. Mgr de Mazenod écrivait au maître des novices le 18 décembre 1847:

Je vous recommande aussi de tenir à ce que chacun apprenne par cœur et sache bien les prières en usage dans la Société et surtout les litanies et les prières qui suivent, que tous les membres de la Société doivent dire en voyage comme dans nos communautés vers le milieu du jour après l'examen de conscience<sup>7</sup>.

Il revenait à la charge, le 9 juillet 1853, auprès du modérateur des scolastiques:

Il faut que chacun sût par coeur les prières qu'on récite dans la Congrégation, et spécialement celles qui se récitent après l'examen parce que je tiens à ce qu'on ne manque jamais de les faire quelque part où l'on puisse se trouver, en voyage ou autrement. Cette prière, les litanies comprises, sont particulières à notre Société, elles sont distinctives et comme un point d'union entre tous les membres de la famille<sup>8</sup>.

Il en existait un feuillet imprimé, avant le Manuel de prières de 1865, du vivant du Fondateur, qui pouvait le distribuer à ses missionnaires dès 1854: Vous recevrez aussi un petit imprimé que vous placerez dans votre bréviaire pour n'être pas exposé à oublier de réciter chaque jour les litanies et les prières qui suivent, et qui sont spéciales à notre Congrégation. Je tiens beaucoup à ce qu'elles se disent exactement comme cela est prescrit<sup>9</sup>.

Cette insistance de Mgr de Mazenod donne à croire que le <<petit imprimé>> de 1854 produisait déjà une liste authentique des Protecteurs de la Congrégation que l'on invoquait de mémoire depuis le début. Telle quelle elle aura pris place dans le *Manuel de Prières et Cérémonial* que le P. Joseph Fabre, supérieur général, présentait à la Congrégation le 25 mai 1865, en le déclarant:

obligatoire dès aujourd'hui dans nos Maisons et Résidences. On voudra bien se le procurer au plus tôt, s'y conformer strictement et ne rien changer ni aux formules ni aux cérémonies indiquées<sup>10</sup>.

Cette rigueur sera de mise par la suite, dans les cinq autres éditions du *Manuel de Prières et Cérémonial*, qui se succéderont jusqu'en 1932. Jusqu'alors toute tentative d'introduire de nouvelles invocations dans les litanies propres à la Congrégation fut rejetée par les Chapitres généraux. Timidement, le Chapitre général de 1938 ajouta les invocations à la <<Reine de la Congrégation>>, qu'on avait tout d'abord espéré ajouter aux Litanies de Lorette, à titre privé, et à <<Sainte Thérèse de l'enfant Jésus>>, que le vénérable Mgr Ovide Charlebois avait fait déclarer <<Patronne des Missions>><sup>11</sup>. Plus tard, le *Vade mecum* de 1958 ajouta l'invocation de saint Thomas d'Aquin; *La Prière Oblate* de 1986 a retranché les noms de l'archange saint Michel, des saints Fidèle de Sigmaringen et Jean-François Régis; elle a ajouté le bienheureux Eugène de Mazenod, saint Ignace de Loyola et saint Jean Léonardi.

Quelles sont ces Litanies? Tout simplement <<un abrégé des Litanies des Saints>><sup>12</sup>. Sous des titres collectifs, tous les anges et tous les saints y sont invoqués, selon l'esprit du bienheureux Eugène de Mazenod, dont la foi en la Communion des Saints était aussi compréhensive et généreuse que ses ambitions apostoliques<sup>13</sup>.

Il va sans dire qu'il s'adresse en premier lieu à <<Sainte Marie conçue sans péché>>, titre sous lequel la Vierge Mère de Dieu est la Patronne de sa famille religieuse. On a voulu être plus explicite en l'interpellant comme <<Reine de notre Congrégation>>. Saint Joseph a sa place marquée. Le Manuel de prières de 1865 le désignait comme <<principal patron et protecteur spécial de la Congrégation>>; il lui offrait des litanies plus fleuries (p. 54-57) que celles de nos jours.

Viennent ensuite saint Pierre et saint Paul, comme représentants des Apôtres, sur les traces desquels le bienheureux Eugène de Mazenod a voulu entraîner les siens<sup>14</sup>. Mais ce qui démarque davantage les <<Litanies propres à la Congrégation>>, c'est le retour aux saints Fondateurs des Ordres anciens, dont l'abbé de Mazenod voulait renouveler l'existence et la ferveur<sup>15</sup>.

Dans les Litanies, ce souvenir des Ordres anciens ne remonte pas plus haut que saint Dominique (1170-1221), le fondateur de l'Ordre des Frères Prêcheurs, et deux de ses disciples, Thomas d'Aquin (1225-1274) et Vincent Ferrier (1350-1419). Le seul autre représentant des Ordres mendiants est le franciscain Léonard de Port-Maurice qui vécut plus tard (1676-1751).

Au delà des Ordres mendiants, ce sont principalement des fondateurs de Clercs réguliers ou de Congrégations religieuses qui ont retenu l'attention et que nous invoquons. La liste commence par une lignée d'évêques vraiment exceptionnels: Charles Borromée (1528-1584), <<pionnier de la pastorale moderne>><sup>16</sup>; François de Sales (1567-1622), <<la perfection à la portée de tous>>; Alphonse de Liguori (1696-1787), <<vers les pauvres les plus abandonnés>>; Eugène de Mazenod (1782-1861), <<un inconditionnel de l'Église>>.

Puis, avec l'admirable chef de file que fut Ignace de Loyola (1491-1556), et son compagnon François-Xavier (1505-1552), le patron des missions, se succèdent Philippe Néri (1515-1595), <<le saint de la joie>>, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), <<père des

pauvres>>, Joseph Calasanz (1556-1648), <<une totale disponibilité>>, et Jean Léonardi (1541-1609), fondateur des Clercs réguliers de la Mère de Dieu et co-fondateur du séminaire de la Propagation de la Foi de Rome. Suivrait ici normalement notre bienheureux Joseph Gérard (1831-1914), <<père de l'église du Lesotho>>.

La vie contemplative avec saintes Thérèse d'Avila et Thérèse de Lisieux devait être à l'honneur chez les Oblats par suite de leurs origines au Carmel d'Aix-en-Provence et leur association aux missions les plus difficiles.

<<Si on récite les Litanies, recommande La Prière Oblate, on peut y

ajouter les noms des saints contemporains et ceux honorés par l'Église particulière>>(p.24).

Cette recommandation rejoint non seulement le renouveau actuel du calendrier liturgique mais aussi une préoccupation du bienheureux Eugène de Mazenod:

<<Je me tue depuis plusieurs années à demander le nom des saints patrons des lieux où l'on a fait mission>><sup>17</sup>. C'était en vue des litanies spéciales à réciter après le chapelet. Le problème était délicat, car la liste des <<Saints patrons des lieux évangélisés>> s'allongerait indéfiniment avec l'expansion de la Congrégation. Qu'à cela ne tienne, songe le Fondateur, nous les repartirons sur les douze mois de l'année: <<De même, écrit-il au P. Tempier le 6 août 1829, vous n'aurez pas à redouter de réciter jamais le martyrologe>><sup>18</sup>.

On ne saurait douter que l'invocation des Saints constitue une valeur des origines des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée. Aujourd'hui encore, du fait que les <<Litanies propres à la Congrégation>> font partie des prières de l'examen particulier, elles constituent un lieu privilégié non seulement pour <<une connaissance pleine de notre idéal de perfection religieuse et missionnaire>><sup>19</sup>, mais aussi pour exprimer notre attachement à la Congrégation, à son Supérieur général, afin qu'il puisse <<guider la Congrégation selon l'esprit d'Eugène de Mazenod et être un signe d'unité pour les Oblats>><sup>20</sup>.

Herménegilde Charbonneau, o.m.i.  
19 octobre 1989

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Cet article s'appuie sur les diverses éditions du manuel de prières des Oblats dont la première, le *Manuel des prières et Cérémonial à l'usage des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, Paris 1865, 187 pages, et la plus récente, *La Prière Oblate*, Rome 1986, 244 pages; les *Lettres* du Bx Eugène de Mazenod, 13 vols, Rome 1977-1989; les travaux du P. Georges Cosentino, O.M.I., *Exercices de piété de l'Oblat*, Ottawa 1962, 466 pages; <<Litanies propres à la Congrégation>>, dans *Études Oblates*, 22(1963), p. 39-52; <<Le Manuel de Prières de la Congrégation>>, dans *Étude Oblates*, 23(1964), p. 148-157.

<sup>2</sup> Cosentino, G. *Exercices de piété*, p. 137

<sup>3</sup> Cosentino, G. *Litanies*, p.40

<sup>4</sup> *Lettres* 6, p. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Dans Rambert 1, p.241.

<sup>6</sup> Cosentino, G. *Litanies*, p.40.

<sup>7</sup> *Lettres* 10, p.187.

<sup>8</sup> *Lettres* 11, p.146.

<sup>9</sup> *Lettres* 4, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Cosentino, G. *Le Manuel de Prières*, p. 149-150.

<sup>11</sup> Cosentino, G. *Litanies*, p.40-43; Lesage, Germain, o.m.i., <<Monseigneur Charlebois et Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus>>, dans *Études Oblates*, 10(1951), p.6-34.

<sup>12</sup> Cosentino, G. *Exercices de piété*, p.137.

<sup>13</sup> Baffie, Eugène, o.m.i.. <<Dévotion de Mgr de Mazenod envers les Saints>>, dans *Esprit et vertu du Missionnaire des pauvres C.J. Eugène de Mazenod*, Paris-Lyon 1894, p. 214-243.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert, Maurice, o.m.i.. <<Sur les traces des Apôtres>>, dans *Études Oblates*, 16(1957), p. 283-301.

<sup>15</sup> Lamirande, Emilien, o.m.i.. <<Les Oblats et la suppléance des anciens Ordres d'après Mgr de Mazenod>>, dans *Études Oblates*, 19(1960), p. 185-195.

<sup>16</sup> Les qualifications des saints qui suivent sont pour la plupart de l'*Histoire des Saints et de la Sainteté chrétienne*, 11 vols, Paris 1986-1988.



# <sup>1</sup>Father Joseph Montfort, O.M.I. (1827-1895)

## Missionary extraordinary

(continued)

### III. A NEW OBEDIENCE AND A MOMENT OF CRISIS

The pages above have tried to describe the missionary life and activity that Father Joseph Montfort lived while a member of the oblate community at Notre-Dame de l'Osier. One must now ask: how did a dynamic and successful missionary as Father Montfort fit into that Oblate community? Was he also a model of Oblate community living? Was he a problem there to his Superior and to others?

While our available sources may not be as abundant as we would like them to be, they are, fortunately, sufficient to allow us to give an essential answer to these questions.

#### A. Tensions in the Notre-Dame de l'Osier Community

On November 1, 1867, Father Alexander Audruger became the new Superior of the Oblate community at Notre-Dame de l'Osier. Whatever problems and tensions there were in that Oblate community had come into existence and developed before his appointment. This is clear from what we read in the General Council Minutes of November 2, 1867:

In the same letter the Provincial of Midi speaks of the bad dispositions of mind that exist at N.D. de L'Osier and are occasioned by the departure of Father Cumin. He assures us that there are some who are disposed to ask to be transferred. In fact this is what Reverend Father Barret has done in a letter to the Superior General that the latter read out to the Council; the reason that he gives for this request however, do not seem to have any basis at all. The Council has concluded that it should not be granted to him<sup>1</sup>.

That same day Father Alexandre Audruger wrote to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre:

Since yesterday evening I am installed at N.D. de L'Osier. To have all the Saints to protect me is not to much: under their auspices I took up my post on the very day of their feast. Reverend Father Provincial did not present me a more rosy picture of this community than you did: still I think his is a darker one... Reverend Father Cumin did not leave on the 30<sup>th</sup>: I found him at Vinay when I passed through there. Concerned as he was with settling into his transportation accommodations, he did not reply to my overture: he certainly did not recognize me and merely greeted me with a "Monsieur l'Abbé" which made my heart bleed. Father Berne, had accompanied him for the farewell. This Father gave me the general impression. That was foreseen. It seems they did not know who was to be the Superior until the very last moment. Three names were circulating: Lagier, Matignac and mine. They were even speaking of Father Mouchette. The welcome was not as embarrassing as I had feared it would be; All Saints Day went by not too badly, thanks no doubt to the retreat, even no one seems to be delighted about it. Today we are getting to the regular routine. Father Bosc is leaving tomorrow evening. Reverend Father Provincial hopes to return to Le Calvaire on Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup> and he has asked me to tell you this. He will not accompany me to Grenoble. Fathers

Montfort and Vassal were and are still away. I am thunder-struck when I see little work is requested from l'Osier. At this very hour there isn't enough to keep two men busy. At least no one can say that it is I who have brought on this decrease because nothing was known about the changeover. I do not know how the Bishop of Grenoble will see it... I find myself quite new in regard to the situation such as I know it and foresee it to be. May God help me! If I don't have any missions within one month, the time will seem long to me. But let us follow God's will!<sup>2</sup>

The Notre Dame de l'Osier Oblate community is pictured here as an uneasy community, one that somewhat problematic in the eyes of both the Midi Provincial Superior and the Superior General. The new Superior of this community is quite apprehensive as he takes on his responsibilities. The annual retreat (Which traditionally ended with the renewal of vows on November 1) had not been too much appreciated. Requests for mission and retreat preaching are at a serious low.

In regard to Father Montfort, it should be noted that for some reason not specified in Father Audruer's letter he was absent for the annual retreat and for the installation of the new Superior. The apparently hasty changeover of Superiors could explain the fact that he was away for the installation; that he was also during the annual retreat of the community naturally raises a question: are the ministry or other interests a higher priority for him than the annual community retreat?

In his November 7, 1867 letter to the Superior General Father Joseph Fabre, Father Audruer has the following to say about Father Montfort:

As for Father Montfort, he is not supposed to be back before January; and such freedom of initiative he has been allowed to take. They say he is authorized to accept the work requested of him, to establish the time, and this without having to consult the Superior. I find it difficult to believe such excessive confidence or such an enormity and admit that I am strongly inclined to the common rule. But I will proceed only with tact and at the opportune moment, first of all out of general prudence and then because I know that Father Cumin wants to ask you to have him at Autun. Yet everyone says he is necessary here for the building of the church<sup>3</sup>.

This passage speaks for itself. It indicates that Father Audruer has some question-marks about Father Montfort. Later in the same letter, when speaking of the funds being received for the building of the church, Father Audruer says: "That leaves the income from the holy pictures and resources of Father Montfort". He does not say what these "resources" are: they are perhaps the relationship and influence Father Montfort has with benefactors.

Father Audruer wrote to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre on December 1, 1867 and again on December 15, 1867. In both of these letters he mentions in general and by name some members of the l'Osier community who are problematical: he does not mention Father Montfort in any way. In the second of these letters he has this to say about himself:

The worst of all is he who is to give the example to all. On the first occasion that you find a place vacant for a simple worker, I am at your service. How can I succeed in the position of Superior? I do not have the ability required. I know nothing about running things, I am not presentable in the world. These Dauphiné people are too shrewed and above me. I think the Fathers are or will be laughing at my ineptitude. I need to be lovable in order to be accepted or supported and I am not. I perhaps know how to work a bit but I am not known in this region. Add to this that my arrival coincides with lack of work---And then I do not merit God's blessing, that our Fathers from Heaven protect me! I do not belong to the race of those who are called to save Israel<sup>4</sup>.

Thus we have an unhappy Superior plagued with lack of confidence.

On January 28, 1868, Father Audruder writes to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre:

I have nothing to say about those of l'Osier, this is not the time for that. But already today I will take the liberty to address to you the wish that, when the fine weather arrives, we receive from you a Visitor chosen with care and sympathy in regard to the most difficult of our Fathers. I think that Reverend Father Martinet would be acceptable to all. Whoever he may be, however, I consider that Necessary. Only a Visitor can make a return to religious practices possible with our personnel. The directives of Reverend Father Provincial would be a priori discredited and, consequently, would not be effective. Later I will come back on this question: it did seem useful to me to make a first mention of it to you now<sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting to note that, in the February 3, 1868 General Council meeting, the Most Reverend Father General read out a letter addressed to him by Reverend Father Martinet from Marseilles, in which letter he speaks to him of the necessity that he (the Superior General) make a visitation of the Midi Province because of the malaise that is rife within it<sup>6</sup>.

On February 28, 1868, Father Audruger writes a letter to the Superior General to which is attached a long report on the Notre-Dame de l'Osier situation. The report is dated February 29, 1868. The letter opens as follows:

I was hardly back from a mission when I drew up the report attached hereto, the content of which I had prepared at Venterol. It does not say everything and it cannot say everything. It does not express the deep disgust that persons and things raise more and more in me. I have absolutely no one whom I can entrust myself with complete confidence. Not even in Father Montfort, successful as he is, do I feel completely reassured<sup>7</sup>.

Whatever reservations Father Audruger may have had about Father Montfort at this point, this last sentence seems to indicate that he sees Father Montfort to be the best member in his community.

In the attached report, the Superior of l'Osier writes quite frankly about each member in his community, including himself. He writes as follows about Father Montfort:

Father Montfort! He is a great man! THE Missionary! The Saint! It cannot be questioned that he achieves marvels in retreats, on missions, in the confessional, in the recruiting religious vocations. He copiously distributes holy pictures towards the building of the Church and, like Father Michaud, brings in astonishing sums. He is undoubtedly pious. I have seen only little of him but he struck me as being open, very happy, a good lad who is well disposed. I will not hide the fact that parish priests see him to be a man without doctrine, as one who is at times grotesque in conducting mission ceremonies, and as someone very demanding in regard to his personal service needs, food and hygiene; but this does not prevent them from being unable to do without him and to keep asking for him, often to the exclusion of all others. He is referred to as The Saint, Father DE Montfort; he is not unaware of this and he lets people say and believe whatever they wish, even that he is a man who works miracles. He does not himself formally accept either missions or retreats. Perhaps he overly allows himself to be looked upon as the one and only missionary: it is his companions who say this, not I. He acts a bit too much without permission in regard to visiting his sheep between one mission and another, to receiving gifts, v.g. holding stocks of medals, packets of holy pictures, etc. He is an excellent man, a most useful worker. I have my doubts that he really knows what being a religious is. He does love the Congregation, however<sup>8</sup>.

Father Audruger, right at the beginning of this report, mentions that it is meant to convince the Superior General of two things: that an extraordinary visitation had to be held at l'Osier and

that a good number of the men now at l'Osier had to be transferred elsewhere and replaced by carefully chosen ones. In this report he also lists abuses the Visitor must correct and directives that he must lay down. Among these there is no.7 which explicitly mentions Father Montfort:

Take steps so that the work of the pilgrimage does not cause harm to regularity; without making any exceptions for anyone, not even for Father Montfort. For only the one specifically in charge each week has the duty of being always available to everyone and for everything.

This "not even Father Montfort" is a rather revealing phrase. In assessing the above, it is perhaps useful to read what Father Audruer wrote about himself in that report:

After being presented the weakness and foibles of everyone else, it is only just and fair that I also present my own. It is not a beautiful picture. I would need the "suaviter et fortiter" to put into effect indispensable reforms and to have them accepted. I don't have either the one or the other. Soft rather than gentle, with an ardeur that is halting, frail and not stable, I could never lead such an enterprise to a good end. Filled with horror for material affairs, I would faint away if I could pass out whenever I see Father Pont or some contractor approaching. I know nothing about being a representative and the house of l'Osier has relationships with all sorts of personages. People put up with me here because they expected worse, but they see very well that I am not the man to handle the situation, that I am fed up, and not at all the man to raise up l'Osier. As for the religious dimension, it is rather meagre and a residence that would take its form from a head such as I would be a sad one indeed.

The special canonical visitation Father Alexandre Audruer had asked for did in fact take place: Assistant General Father Aimé Martinet conducted it as the Superior General's delegated Visitor Extraordinary during the early days of May 1868 and his act of visitation is on record. Father Audruer's hopes that some Oblates would be transferred from l'Osier, posted elsewhere, and replaced at l'Osier by specially chosen others, were not part of Father Martinet's conclusions. On May 24, 1868, Father Audruer writes to the Superior General:

When I received Reverend Father Martinet and presented to him the state of persons and things, I expressed to him the deep-held conviction that if he did not make some changes immediately --something he in no time judged not to be necessary -- his visit would do more harm than good. I can already give you proof that what I said was true<sup>9</sup>.

He then goes on to illustrate this by describing the disobedient and uncooperative conduct of three Oblate priests at l'Osier. On the same day he sent off another letter to the Superior General in which he repeats some new things to say:

As I had honor of telling you, the Visit would do more harm than good if one does not decide to make as soon as possible some changes that all consider absolutely necessary. This has now been more than abundantly proven these last ten days. In the refectory they continue talking out loud as before, they take recreation whenever they want, it is lengthened according to one's wish, the room for common exercises is abandoned at will, and the choir (for Office and prayer) is as empty as in the past<sup>10</sup>.

In none of these complaints is there any mention of Father Montfort. His name does occur in another context in Father Audruer's July 3, 1868 letter to the Superior General:

I am going to ask Father Montfort to request the Murinais family he is visiting tomorrow to intervene with the Sub-Prefect of St-Marcellin in order to dispose him favorably towards the lottery of l'Osier. He has already prepared the way with the retired General De Baldec Nabstant of St. Marcellin, a convert of these latter days and in the full ardor of a first conversion. I don't know if all these extras will effectively counterbalance the legislative assembly

that is against lotteries. The Sub-Prefect, though Corsican, is said to be quite well disposed towards the clergy. I would not want that an intervention on our part with a power should fail<sup>11</sup>.

We have here an example of the influential contacts Father Montfort was capable of making and also how much his Oblate Superiors counted on him to make them.

Father Audruer next mentions Father Montfort in his August 11, 1868 letter to the Superior General. During the course of that letter he asks: "Father Montfort told me that he has received from you a dispensation from saying with the community matins or even the whole breviary. Is that meant to last for a long time?"<sup>12</sup>. We do not know if the Superior General answered this question.

In his October 18, 1868 letter to the Superior General, Father Audruer includes this little bit of information: " For the rest, some 20 little retreats, 8 of whom were preached by Fathers Montfort and Audruer."<sup>13</sup>.

On January 5, 1869, Father Audruer writes a letter filled with complaints and questions to the Superior General. The 5<sup>th</sup> of his eight questions concerns Father Montfort. He writes:

For nearly one year now Father Montfort after a mission promulgates a plenary indulgence to those who had attended the instructions twice. This is a favour received from Rome. During Lent and Advent he is even less demanding. He is the only one to enjoy this privilege. The exterior, public practice of this privilege which is reserved to him alone, is this not something that is disagreeable to the others? Already in so many things he is in a context of exception that I am not without anxiety in regard to different points of view. On the other hand his great services - and a touch of sensitivity of which he has not completely rid himself -- do not these things argue that we should not stop him from doing what he does?<sup>14</sup>

The picture of Father Montfort that is repeatedly emerging from Father Audruer's letters is that of an Oblate who is truly exceptional: as a missionary for the quantity of work and for effectiveness; as an Oblate with many connections and relationships; as a promoter of the shrine of Notre-Dame de l'Osier who brings in revenue and many donations; as an Oblate who has special privileges and dispensations. It is also clear that he is also learn that Father Montfort is quite sensitive, a defect he is apparently struggling with but he has yet managed to overcome.

In a letter of April 10, 1869, speaking of donations for Notre-Dame de l'Osier, Father Audruer says: "After Father Montfort there is only Father Vassal who distinguishes himself on this point."<sup>15</sup>

On May 6, 1870, Father Audruer lists the preaching work done by the l'Osier Fathers and says: "Fathers Montfort, Châtel and Pays have achieved marvels."<sup>16</sup>.

In his October 19, 1870 letter to the Superior General, Father Montfort is mentioned in two contexts. First, he is listed as one of three Fathers "who do things that are materially against the vow of poverty". And Father Audruer specifies:

Father Montfort receives, keeps, distributes in great quantities objects of piety for missions, v.g. rosaries, medals, books, etc. Pretty well all of the time he acts as he sees fit, without consulting his Superiors and even not informing him when something has been done. He says he is authorized by yourself. But I have never seen his authorization. (I fear that the vow in his case the vow is broken in more personal things, but I am not speaking of that)<sup>17</sup>.

Father Audruer seems to be suggesting here that Father Montfort used his influence and funds for some personal reasons also. He does say this is a suspicion of his -- it is perhaps regrettable that he insinuates a lack in observing the vow of poverty when he does not have enough evidence in hand to pursue what amounts to a willy-nilly accusation.

Later on in the same letter Father Audruer says:" I have quite enough trouble to keep at

his post Father Montfort who would like to run off beyond the Channel to Jersey." It is not clear in the letter whether this was a visit, for apostolic purposes, or somehow connected with the Franco-Prussian War that was in progress.

In a postscriptum to his February 2, 1871 letter to the Superior General, Father Audruer says:

For half of Lent we will have nothing to do. Father Montfort has managed to keep himself more or less busy thanks to Drome. The Grenoble Administration has advised the parish priests of Isere against the work of missions.<sup>18</sup>

In a letter of July 12, 1871 to the Superior General, Father Audruer says:

Father Montfort informs me that you are thinking of coming to l'Osier. God be praised! I strongly hope that no new obstacles arise to prevent this trip. It is now more than three years since you last came to be with us.<sup>19</sup>

We have additional evidence here that Father Montfort was in contact with the Superior General on a regular basis.

Audruer's letter of July 18, 1871 to the Superior General is worth quoting at length because in it he gives his best assessment of Father Montfort and it also gives us a glimpse of something that will develop in the future. Father Audruer writes:

I was the victim at Marseilles of a resolution that I ought to inform you about. I had not been unaware of the measure but I was far from foreseeing the sacrifice that would be asked of l'Osier. Thus I was deploring the misfortunes of the House of La Blachère which for a long time now has been treated like a house of rejects. It seemed to me what this place, though somewhat remote, was and is nevertheless important to the Congregation because it is close to several dioceses rich in faith and that enjoy an abundance of vocations, etc., and also because it provides great material resources. The Fathers were of the opinion that we must not stop at sterile lamentation. Two chosen men were needed to restore this community; whatever the cost, these two men must be found. Things were fine up to this point. But then they landed up in saying that only Father Montfort could raise up Bon-Secours, that he had to be appointed Superior there, that this title would more enable him to do good there than simply being a member of the community. To compensate l'Osier they would give me Father Gigaud etc. Such in fact are the conclusions that have been adapted. Certainly, Most Reverend Father, Father Montfort, no more than any other, should not be established at l'Osier as though it were his own fiefdom. He is living an exceptional life there which has its inconveniences; the jealousy of several finds ground for condemnation in certain details of his conduct. On the other hand, however, besides the fact that he has religious qualities which one ought to find in the same degree among those who are jealous of him, he is, as everyone knows, the great worker at l'Osier. It is he who cares most about the house; and in regard to resources for the church, it is though his intermediary that we must await them in the present unhappy state of money affairs that the Revolution has brought us. I advanced these arguments in order to keep him. It was thought good to disregard them. I inform you of all this so that in your wisdom you may see what you ought to do. If they want to make Father Montfort a Superior, would it not be better to give him the title at l'Osier, for my position in regard to Reverend Father Provincial seems to make things impossible for me. Let them send me off to La Blachère, not as Superior, but let them put a missionary Superior there and then one would have, together with me -- for I am not as yet completely impotent-- two labourers who can work. To be sure, Bon-Secours would profit less thereby than if it were given Father Montfort; but it would gain nevertheless and l'Osier would lose nothing in the bargain. Do not think that it is out of preference that I say they should send me to La Blachère; but what is preference or reluctance when the general good is concerned. My preference would be to return to the

Houses of the North where there is work. These are the things, Most Reverend Father, that I thought I should acquaint you with and submit to you<sup>20</sup>.

This is a most revealing passage. When faced with the serious possibility of losing Father Montfort, Father Audruer tells the Superior General what he really thinks about Father Montfort. Gone are the reservations and question-marks about Father Montfort that he expressed in his February 29, 1868 report to the Superior General. No longer does Father Audruer have any doubts as to whether or not Father Montfort "really knows what being a religious is"; instead, he now sees in Father Montfort qualities as a religious that do not exist in the same degree in those who out of jealousy criticize him and condemn some of his behavior. No longer could Father Audruer say, as he did in his February 28, 1868 letter: "Not even in Father Montfort, successful as he is, do I feel completely reassured". One can say that Father Audruer, while remaining aware that Father Montfort has faults like other Oblates do, has come to see these shortcomings in a better perspective and to assess Father Montfort in a positive way. This witness on the part of a Superior who was always unhappy and insecure in his post, who began with a negative questioning attitude in regard to Father Montfort, is significant.

A bombshell was to hit the community of Notre-Dame de l'Osier a couple of days later. The July 18, 1871 letter to the Superior General concluded as follows:

I left Marseilles a bit like a fugitive in order to flee the danger of certain disagreeable proceedings because of the tense relationships between Father Bellon and myself. I am all the more allergic to him because, rightly or wrongly, he is blamed for Father Provincial's manner of acting in my regard.

On July 20, 1871, Father Audruer writes to the Superior General:

Today's mail brought me a letter from Reverend Father Provincial who is taking a most serious measure in my regard. In the name of holy obedience, he says, in agreement with the consultors present at Marseilles, he declares that I am suspended from my duties until you will have deigned to take a final decision on my fate. The reasons which motivate this measure are the way I have just behaved, the contempt that I have for authority. My departure was a scandal for the Fathers at Le Calvaire and it will be for all those who will know of it. "The authority that has been entrusted to me," Reverend Father Provincial says, "is a trust and I cannot allow it to be insulted by someone's whim and fancy." Most Reverend Father, I must have been quite unfortunate and quite blameworthy to have such a measure and merited such severe words as Reverend Father Provincial uses. I admit that I am stunned by this decision and at the unanimous vote of the consultors who are said to agree with it. I thought I had lacked in form and politeness by leaving without saying farewell, but from that to an act of scandal seems a long way to me. As to disobedience to authority, to contempt of authority: if there was any disobedience, I was not aware of it for I know of no command and I could not have contempt for a prohibition that did not exist.

And then Father Audruer states what he thinks was the immediate occasion for the Provincial's action:

Here, I am certain, is what led to such a serious interpretation that is so damaging to me. To my great regret I had been named secretary of the meeting of the 11 members present from the civil society "La Communauté". I therefore had to draw up the minutes of the session. I had made a summary draft in pencil, I submitted it to Father Bellon so that he would give me his observations on it before I would proceed to draw up the final text. What I gained therefrom is that this Father ridiculed my work and panned it as though it was a poorly composed piece, etc. A complaint was lodged against me: that I should be forced like a schoolboy to correct my homework under dictation; and it was added that work of this kind should be done by Father Bellon and not by someone else, for he has the proper style and the materials at hand. It seemed

to me that the Assistants and the Provincial himself accepted this assessment. Father Bellon did not mention my notes to me any more. After the hassle of Midi [i.e. the tense Provincial Council meeting mentioned in the July 18<sup>th</sup> letter], I refrained from going to get them from him. I feared that it was still true that this Father would insist with the Provincial that I would at least now make the final text before leaving, and that is why I left without making my farewells. And I thought I was acting prudently, as I was in dread because of my relationship with the Provincial and with Father Bellon, because of regrettable words on the part of one and of the other. Be sure that not for an instant did I see this fact as having the gravity being attributed to it and that I would have to reproach myself with disobedience properly so called, and even more with contempt of authority and scandal. And I am inclined to presume that the Fathers of Marseilles would not have formed such a severe judgment if Reverend Fathers Bermond and Bellon had not made my conduct so blameworthy so that it would be pitilessly condemned.

And Father Audruer concludes:

Having said all this, and even though I find hard the way things were done against me, I am at least happy of being freed from a situation which the conduct of the Reverend Father Provincial towards me especially during his visit last May made truly intolerable. I await your orders, Most Reverend Father. I am heart-broken at the new chagrin this incident brings you. If I have failed in my duty and the Congregation in the respect due to authority, you are my judge and from you I expect an impartial and loyal judgment. I will accept your sentence as coming from God, hoping that mercy will temper justice and that you will not make my heart the accomplice for the fault of my head. I had wanted to go to Sion to await my lot; after reflecting, however, I think it suffices to be a way one week at the Grand Chartreuse. Do me the kindness of sending your decision there. I will then have my things taken from l'Osier without putting in an appearance there<sup>21</sup>.

One can well imagine how all this affected the Oblates at l'Osier. Father Audruer in his August 7, 1871 letter to the Superior General gives us an echo of their reaction:

I carried in my heart the gratuitously irritating proceedings of the Provincial visit in the month of May and the violence and hasty judgment "ab irato" recently hurled against me, without any concern for a brother's reputation, nor the least recollection of the good he at least had tried to do, even without having taken the trouble of hearing the accused before passing sentence. The cordial sympathy of the Fathers and Brothers at l'Osier had, though not healed, softened the wound, but I cannot say reduced its pain<sup>22</sup>.

There are any indications that Father François Bermond had not been exactly revered as Provincial at Notre-Dame de l'Osier; this astounding action against their Superior, whatever they may have thought of the latter, would also have helped to close ranks in solidarity with Father Audruer.

On October 2, 1874, Father August Lavillardiere became Superior at Notre-Dame de l'Osier. We have already mentioned what he wrote about Father Montfort in his report on the activities of his community published in the 1877 MISSIONS... He was still the Superior when Father Célestin Augier, Provincial of France-Midi, made a visitation of Notre-Dame de l'Osier, October 24-28, 1876. In his act of visitation, Father Joseph Montfort is mentioned as 2<sup>nd</sup> Assessor in the local Council at l'Osier, a position he is listed as holding since 1872 onwards in the Oblate personnel lists for Notre-Dame de l'Osier<sup>23</sup>. Father Audruer is lavish in his praise of the l'Osier community:

This House of N.D. de l'Osier, so important because of its external works, its beautiful shrine and the novitiate of the Province, is rich in a treasure that surpasses all these things: the religious life there is abundant and vigorous and our most ardent hope is that this good spirit which we have been happy to



note in your midst will be maintained always and will continue to grow unceasingly<sup>24</sup>.

It would seem, therefore, that the unhappy state in which the community languished at the time that Father Audruget became Superior in 1867 had now been surpassed.

## **B. A new obedience**

Father Edmond Thieriet makes the following reflection in regard to Father Montfort:

Since entry into religion until this period in his apostolic life, this Oblate of Mary Immaculate has during the course of his journey been gathering only the flowers and fruit of an active and consoling ministry. His preaching activities are an uninterrupted series of success that put a crown of laurels on his head and fill his soul with sentiments of deep-felt joy. He can see himself as the spoiled child of Providence who is watching with delicate care over his privileged one to spare him the bitterness of tribulation... The hour of trial was about to strike, however<sup>25</sup>.

In Father Thieriet's view, the peak of Father Montfort's consolations was reached when he was able to go to Rome with the crown for the statue of our Lady of l'Osier to be blessed by the Pope and thereby meet Pope Pius IX. Father Thieriet repeats almost verbatim the description of this occasion that has been given above in a quotation from MISSIONS... He adds only the following:

The apostle has not left us a written account of his trip to Rome; but he always spoke with such enthusiasm of his visit to the Holy Father that we are allowed to suppose that these memories remained till the end engraved on his heart<sup>26</sup>.

According to Father Thieriet, the first major trial he encountered was the death of his mother: "The first thorn that made his heart bleed was the sudden news of his mother's death"<sup>27</sup>

And Father Thieriet continues:

In this regard, it is good to re-read the simple reflections he wrote into his personal notebook during the retreat of 1875<sup>28</sup>, some time after this demise: "one thought especially struck me: that from now on more than ever I must live a life of sacrifice in order to gain souls for Jesus Christ. Souls, and nothing but souls!... I felt in this retreat that the good Lord was compensating me for the sacrifice that I generously made for the sake of souls not to go and see my mother on her deathbed... I now feel that I have nothing left here on this earth -- only souls that I ought to save. My whole life, therefore, will be for Jesus and for souls."<sup>29</sup>

The retreat during which Father Montfort penned those lines coincided with the canonical visitation of l'Osier by the Provincial, Father Célestin Augier, mentioned above. Already on the previous August 28, 1876, the General Council had decided on a new obedience for Father Montfort, though the latter may not have known about this until the end of the retreat.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, on November 1, 1876, Father Joseph Montfort received his obedience for the shrine and house of Notre Dame de Bon-Secours near La Blachère (Ardèche).

How did he react to this obedience?

Father Thieriet quotes the following from Father Montfort's notebook:

I am leaving l'Osier...Only the good Lord can appreciate my sacrifice. I offer it to him with all my heart for the benefit of the souls that I am to evangelize in my new mission, at Notre-Dame de Bon Secours (Ardèche)<sup>31</sup>.

Father Jean-Baptiste Berne<sup>32</sup>, who became Superior at l'Osier at this time, writes:

The beginnings of my administration were saddened by two departures which left a considerable void in the house of l'Osier. Reverend Father Avignon and Reverend Father Montfort left vacant the post of pastor of Notre-Dame de l'Osier, in which for seven years he deployed limitless zeal and devotedness. Father Montfort left behind him the memory of sixteen marvelously fruitful years. The good he has accomplished in the dioceses of Grenoble and Valance is incalculable, and I don't know if there was ever another missionary in those areas who was more popular or enjoyed more influence and prestige with the masses of those people. I do not speak of what he has done for the new shrine of Notre-Dame de l'Osier. Previous reports have underlined the decisive role that he played in such a difficult undertaking; I shall not repeat what has been said; I shall only say that the House of l'Osier will remain deeply grateful to him for that. Need I dwell on the deep regret I felt when I saw him leave just at the moment when I was put in charge of a House that owes him so much? As for him, his heart bled painfully at having to leave our Lady of l'Osier, under whose auspices he had been born into the religious life, who had always kept him in her protective shadow and whose name in linked to all the joys and happy events of his career as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate. Yes, this good Father's heart was cruelly hurt when he had to sever such beloved bonds. His generosity, however, was greater than the sacrifice which had been laid on him, and he surrendered himself to the will of his Superiors without reserve, without hesitation<sup>33</sup>.

These texts are quite eloquent and need no further comment.

Right after November 1, 1876, Father Montfort did a short mission with Father Georges Pichon -- a mission that had been accepted prior to his new obedience -- and then he left for his new posting at Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours<sup>34</sup>.

Later in the same report, Father Berne mentions a fact and makes an intriguing reflection. He writes:

As for the ministry at the shrine of Notre-Dame de l'Osier, it has been what it has normally been. The retreat of the month of May, though having to cope with very bad weather, was followed with the customary fervour. The retreat in the month of September, preached by Reverend Father Bartet of the house of Le Calvaire, was perhaps the finest we have seen in twenty years... That so many people flocked here happened so soon to the main pivot of the pilgrimages, proves that the one who attracts people to the shrine is She who has deigned to make it one of the privileged channels of her mercies, and not this or that servant of hers<sup>35</sup>.

What was Father Berne really trying to say here? His records can be understood both as an additional praise of Father Montfort and also as a subtle downgrading of the same.

### **C. A crisis**

Father Thiriet introduces this problematic phase of Father Montfort's life as follows:

These trials<sup>36</sup> are but the prelude to other more painful sufferings that will assail the apostle of Mary, without, managing to shake his virtue... God, who no doubt wanted to test his faithful servant more and sanctify his labours through the merits of suffering, deigned to subject him to the fire of adversity. What could have been the causes for the sadness that ensued? It is not important to know that. The fact is that Father Montfort did not put a long stay in his new residence of Bon Secours. Some time after his arrival in this house, we find him the month of April 1877 in the solitude of Bosserville. He must have had requested his Superiors to be authorized to make a retreat at the Chartreuse there, with the thought of finishing his career in the silence of the cloister and the rigors of a penitential life. To what can we attribute this turn of events?<sup>37</sup>.

It is perhaps best to read all the sources that we have on this strange episode.

We have already quoted above Father Audruer's July 18, 1871 letter to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre. The contents of that letter are re-echoed in the minutes of the July 15, 1871 Provincial Council Minutes: it is to this meeting that Father Audruer refers in his letter. The relevant passage reads:

Since the house of Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours is not in a state to achieve all the good work it could do, it was considered proper to apply a prompt and effective remedy to such a situation. Accordingly it was resolved that, in the event that Notre-Dame de l'Osier would cede Reverend Father Montfort, he would become the Superior of Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours and replace Reverend Father Bonnet in this post; to the latter would be offered the position of Director of the Fréjus major seminary. To Reverend Father Montfort the Provincial would add another Father capable of helping him in his work of missions and retreats<sup>38</sup>.

This plan was not carried out, however. We do not know whether Father Montfort got to know about it or not. Basing ourselves on the tenor of the sources about to be quoted, it is likely that he did.

In the minutes of the July 31, 1877 General Council meeting we read:

Father Montfort, without our knowing why and with nothing to indicate that a thing would happen, wrote to the Reverend Father Provincial that has decided to become a member of the Chartreuse. He left Bon Secours to preach in some place. He is supposed to preach the retreat of Royaumont<sup>39</sup> and he has not withdrawn his word on this point. We therefore count on seeing him in Paris and probably we will make him see the light. We have reason to believe that the motive for his decision is that he expected to be named Superior of Bon Secours and that the disappointment was too painful for him when he saw Father Avignon had been preferred to him. In spite of this little misery, this Father is a good man and does lots of good. We have decided to enlighten him on the levity with which he has taken such a grave decision and to encourage him to persevere in his [Oblate] way of life which is obviously where God wants him to be<sup>40</sup>.

The General Council meeting of August 6, 1877 further treated of this matter:

Father Avignon has been appointed Superior of Bon Secours according to what had been decided in this regard. Father Montfort, who has left Bon Secours, has not yet appeared in Paris. Father Provincial has informed us that Father Montfort had announced everywhere that he would be the Superior. This confirms the opinion that the Council had arrived at when it learned about Father Montfort's intention to enter the Chartreuse<sup>41</sup>.

The General Council in its meeting of August 13, 1877 took a certain stand on this question:

Father Montfort has written from the Chartreuse at Bosserville that to his great regret and in spite of the esteem and affection that he retains for the Congregation, he has felt obliged, for the peace of his mind and the guarantee of his salvation, to enter the Chartreuse. The Council holds the view that he has acted with levity and against his commitments. He cannot be freed from his vow and oath of perseverance and from his contract with the Congregation except by means of a dispensation from the Holy Father. The Superior General plans to write to him to return to one of our Houses. Only then will he (i.e. the Superior General) examine the reasons he (i.e. Father Montfort) may have for changing his vocation. If, after proper study, these reasons are valid in his (i.e. the Superior General's) eyes, he will ask the Holy Father for his dispensation and we will give our own counsel on that matter<sup>42</sup>.

Superior General Father Joseph Fabre did write the letter to Father Montfort at Bosserville but it has not come down to us. What happened next is stated in the minutes of the October 5, 1877 General Council minutes:

Long before the date indicated above, the affair of Father Montfort was unraveled. In the August 13 meeting it had been decided that the Superior General would write to him and, at the same time, to the Prior of Bosserville, to protest against a flight that is so little motivated and that was so hastily made. The very next day Father Montfort arrived fully repentant and more than ever resolved to persevere until death in the holy Institute and Society of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He had had the time to make a retreat and, when the retreat was over, he was actually engaged in writing to the Superior General to ask for forgiveness and to announce his return when he received the letter mentioned above. Without waiting any longer, he came to throw himself at his (i.e. the Superior General's) feet. Since the Superior General was at Royaumont, Father Montfort was welcomed by the Assistants General present in Paris, and he then went to the Superior General at Royaumont itself, where, according to the arrangements previously made, he was to preach the retreat. He preached this retreat with more edification than ever. After the retreat he was sent to Pontmain as a member of that House<sup>43</sup>.

On the basis of the above, one can reconstruct the whole sequence of events as follows.

After preaching the short mission with Father Pichon, Father Montfort left for his new posting at Notre-Dame de Bons-Secours. This would have been in November 1876. Father Avignon had arrived at Bon-Secours before him.

While stationed at Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours, we know that Father Montfort, still in 1876, preached a retreat to the boarding school at Notre-Dame de Bons-Secours; and that in 1877 he and Father Louis Deltour preached a mission at Saint-Laurent-en-Royans (Drome); and that in the same year he preached two Easter preparation retreats, one at St-Genest (Ardeche) and the other at Joyeuse (Ardèche)<sup>44</sup>. From this one can conclude that Father Montfort functioned out of Notre-Dame de Bon Secours at least until Easter (April) 1877.

Father Thiriet says that Father Montfort is at the Chartreuse in Bosserville already in April 1877 and he presumes that Father Montfort had gone there after having been authorized by his Superiors to make a retreat there. The General Council, on the other hand, deals with the Montfort affair only from July 31 onwards and it is clear that Father Montfort's sudden absence was a surprise to both the General Council and the Provincial of France-Midi. Furthermore, the General Council speaks of Father Montfort's presence at Bosserville as a "flight".

The absence of Father Montfort was not communicated to the Provincial of France-Midi by the Superior of Notre-Dame de Bon Secours who presumably had noticed it; rather it was communicated to the Provincial by Father Montfort himself. Further, it is not at all likely that either the Provincial or the General Council would have delayed in dealing with such a matter.

Another point to be considered is that Father Pierre Avignon was officially appointed Superior at Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours in the General Council meeting of July 21, 1877<sup>45</sup>. It is quite possible that before this date it was not commonly known who would be the Superior at Bon-Secours: Father Montfort would thus have a good eight months to entertain the idea that he would be the next Superior of this community and to acquaint others with his expectations.

In view of this, his flight to Bosserville would have to be placed in June, perhaps even as late as July, 1877. It is in July 1877, that he writes his letter to the Provincial that he has decided to enter the Chartreuse. It is not clear whether Montfort's letter referred to in the General Council meeting of August 13<sup>th</sup> is a new letter addressed to the Superior General or a renewed reference to the July letter he had written to his Provincial. In any case, in August he begins his special retreat wherein he came to the firm decision to remain faithful to his Oblate vocation. He immediately begins writing to the Superior General to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation when after August 13, 1877, the Superior General's letter reached him. The very next day he is in Paris where he is well received by the Assistants General; and from there he goes to Royaumont

where he is well received by the Superior General. He preached the annual retreat at Royaumont in September and also receives his obedience for Notre-Dame de Pontmain. He arrived at this shrine and house on September 22, 1877. The next day he addressed the following letter to the Superior General Father Joseph Fabre:

L.J.C. et M.I.

Pontmain. Septembre 23, 1977.

My Reverend and dearly Beloved Father,

It is only right that my first lines written at Pontmain are for you: may they be a consolation for your heart that is so fraternal and tender towards your children. My good Father, ever since I have the honor of being an Oblate, you have given me more than one proof of your great charity and goodness in my regard: how many times, in fact, the reminder of your good words have sustained me when I experienced the unjust reproaches of some of my brothers about the shrine of l'Osier or about the zeal that I always applied to preparing people for the Holy Family. The good Lord alone knows what I have suffered and yet never a single moment did I have in mind to abandon any of these works, thanks to the gentle and strong support that I found in your Father's heart.

Such is the good that you have done for me during this time – but what can I say, my dearly beloved Father, about the one you have just done for me? Since more than a month I am under the impulse of a sentiment of gratitude and of affection (for you) that is so deep that it is quite impossible for me to express it. Thank you, good Father, for your heartfelt words, for all your kindnesses to me at Royaumont. Thank you especially for having sent me to Pontmain where I am installed. I sense that the good Lord has arranged everything through you -- and thus I shall do everything that I am able to do to console your Father's heart, be it in ministries, be in the work that will be entrusted to me. Furthermore I offer you, from the heart, a special intention in my poor prayers, and especially at the feet of Our Lady of Pontmain -- Yes, believe it well, your name will always be the first to be mentioned: That is what I have already done since yesterday when I came here. Ah, my good Father, how good it is in this blessed place! One senses that the Blessed Virgin reigns here in a special way -- Deo gratias!

A thought has come to me more than once since yesterday—the climate here would suit you very much. It is less cold and humid than that at Royaumont. How happy we would be if we could have you with us from time to time. Consider that, good Father.

It is not necessary, Reverend and dearly Beloved Father, to tell you that all the Fathers present in the House of Pontmain have given me the most heartfelt welcome. Allow me in closing to wish that your trip into the South will be as beneficial to your health as it will be for your souls of the children you are going to see.

Please accept, my Reverend and dearly Beloved Father, the expressions of my most respectful sentiments and greatest submission.

Montfort, o.m.i.<sup>46</sup>

What is one to make of this incident?

It is clear that the Provincial and the General Council were totally surprised: Father Montfort's "flight" to Bosserville was for them a completely unexpected escapade. The only motivation they could see is that, given Father Montfort's sensitive nature, his feelings were so hurt at not being made Superior at Notre-Dame de Bon Secours --as he expected to be and as he

had proclaimed to others that he would be-- that he lost his usual good judgement for a while: certain subtle deeply-hidden forms of pride can lead to all kinds of nonsense. The General Council could only see hurt feelings and "levity" in Father Montfort's claim that he must enter the Chartreuse. The fact that Father Montfort himself came to his senses relatively quickly and that he immediately displayed the true wisdom of repentance and sought reconciliation would seem to indicate that the General Council had assessed the whole matter correctly.

Father Thiriet, for his part, is at total loss for an explanation. He speculates a good deal and every avenue he enters turns out to be a dead-end. He finally concludes:

What I do know is that there are in the life of every man, even if e were a saint, dark hours during which the soul, like a frail bark that has been torn loose, becomes the toy of conflicting winds and is at the edge of the deep abyss. Then, prayer alone suffices to dissipate the clouds and bring back tranquility<sup>47</sup>.

This describes well what had happened to Father Montfort and how, after a moment of nonsense, he found the true solution in prayer. This crisis was the supreme test to which he was subjected. By God's grace he emerged therefrom a more humble and wiser man, more determined than ever to be an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and God's missionary sent to save souls.

#### **IV. MISSIONARY AT NOTRE-DAME DE PONTMAIN**

From September 22, 1877 until his death on June 9, 1895, Father Joseph Montfort will be a member of the Oblate community at Notre-Dame de Pontmain<sup>48</sup>.

At the time of his arrival at Pontmain, Superior of the Oblate community there was none other than Father Alexandre Audruer! In time, Father Montfort was given responsibilities in the structure of the local community: from 1882 until 1891 his name appears on the personnel list as first Assessor and Admonitor to the Superior; in the 1895 personnel he appears as second Assessor --his place as first Assessor and Admonitor to the Superior was filled by Father Edmond Thiriet who had arrived at Pontmain in 1891.

During these last eighteen years of his life, he will be even more busy in the preaching ministry than he had been during his eighteen years at Notre-Dame de l'Osier; at the same time, he will also be most active in promoting the shrine of Notre-Dame de Pontmain, both in terms of bringing pilgrims there and in terms of finding funds for the building of the shrine's church and the Oblate residence.

The Oblates were officially installed at Notre-Dame de Pontmain within less than one year and nine months after our Lady had appeared there. Thus, the pastoral care of the pilgrimage and building up the shrine was, so to speak, their work from the ground up. When Father Montfort arrived at Pontmain, the Oblates had been there for just under five years.

Because of the proximity of the apparition of January 17, 1871, because the Oblates were so directly involved in the growing movement of prayer that originated therefrom, and because the construction and development of the shrine establishment was then in progress, Father Montfort will be more directly affected at Pontmain than he had been at l'Osier by our Lady's apparition and by the development of this new pilgrimage and shrine.

##### **A. The apparition at Pontmain of January 17, 1871**

This event occurred at what for France was probably the worst period of the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War. France had declared war against Prussia on July 18, 1870. Practically from the very outset, the French suffered heavy losses and found their territory occupied by the Prussians. Paris was besieged and the Prussian forces began to move westward into the area of Maine, Brittany and Normandy. Le Mans fell to the Germans on January 12, 1871 and by January 17 they were ready to attack Laval. There was every reason to believe that this city too would fall. The whole area was filled with fear, demoralized troops, and wounded men. The

winter weather was every bit as severe and discouraging as the military and social situation.

Pontmain was a hamlet of some 15 houses with less than a population of 100 located 50 kilometres north of Laval. It was there that an extraordinary event occurred in the late evening of Tuesday, January 17, 1871.<sup>49</sup>

At five-thirty o'clock in the evening, when it was already getting dark, César Barbedette and his two sons, Eugène (12 years old) and Joseph (10 years old) were in their barn cutting and grinding furze which was used as fodder for the horses.

Such is the setting. It would be much too long to detail the entire event in its complex development and so only a paraphrase summary based on the February 2, 1872 pastoral letter of Bishop Casimir-Alexis-Joseph Wicart of Laval is given here<sup>50</sup>.

It is as follows:

At first one boy [i.e. Eugene] came out of the barn where he had been working with his father, "simply to see what the weather was like" as he said; thereafter his younger brother [i.e. Joseph, the future Oblate] came out too; and a little later two little girls [i.e. Jeanne-Marie Lebossé and Françoise Richer] were brought there without having been told beforehand what was happening there: both were boarders at the Sisters school. Like two young boys, they were twelve and ten years of age. All four claimed to see, in the air above the house located directly opposite to the barn, a great and beautiful lady wearing a long blue robe that featured golden stars; on her head she wore a crown also of gold. People came together from everywhere in response to the children's cries of joy and enthusiasm and soon more than a third of the little village's people, with their venerable pastor at their head, were gathered at the spot where this marvelous occurrence was being described. Opinions were divided among this deeply affected and interested crowd. While there were some who believed, the majority doubted or refused to give credence to the children's repeated and constant statements. Suddenly, while the "Magnificat", that sublime hymn of Mary's humility and faith was being sung, a large scroll was unrolled at Mary's feet and an invisible hand wrote in large letters of gold: MAIS PRIEZ MES ENFANTS [i.e. So do pray, my children]. Other hymns are sung and before the fascinated eyes of the children new letters appear which they spell out and repeat many times; these letters added themselves to those that had already appeared and completed the sentence that had been begun: DIEU VOUS EXAUCERA EN PEU DE TEMPS [i.e. God will listen to you soon]. A period of exceptional brightness ended this line. It seemed that was to be all. But no: new cries of delight were raised by the children. The invisible hand had resumed its mysterious work: the inscription continued in a second line and ended with these moving words: MON FILS SE LAISSE TOUCHER [i.e. My Son allows Himself to be moved]. The crowd deeply affected prayed in silence. Then someone started signing the hymn "Mère de l'Espérance" and the beautiful Lady, whom the people had by now hailed as the sublime Mother of God, raised her hands to shoulder height --till then they had lowered and slightly extended-- and, moving her fingers, she looked at the children with a smile of indescribable kindness.

But a little later an unexpected contrast occurred. When another hymn asking for forgiveness had been started, a cloud of sadness came over the features of the beautiful Lady. In her hands she now held out in front of her a red cross on which there was Christ also in red and above which was a white title on which appeared in red letters the name JESUS CHRIST. At the same time her lips were moving as though she were praying. This was the last great development of the event. And while night prayers were being said at the pastor's request, a sort of white screen moved slowly upwards from the Lady's feet and gradually veiled her completely from sight. Only the crown remained a little longer and then that too disappeared. The apparition was over: it had lasted nearly three hours. Such is the fact and its essential details: the fact was narrated by the four privileged children of Pontmain; and as concluded to by

juridical verification that we have ordered and conducted with all the care and concern that such an important matter merited<sup>51</sup>.

After a lengthy and meticulous description of the juridical inquiries and investigations that had been made, Bishop Wicart declares his official conclusions and sentence:

1. Our judgment is that the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of god, truly appeared in the hamlet of Pontmain on January 17, 1871, to Eugene Bardebette, Joseph Bardebette, Françoise Richer and Jeanne-Marie Lebossé.

In all humility and obedience We submit this judgment to the supreme judgment of the Holy Apostolic See, the center of unity and the infallible mouthpiece of truth in the whole Church.

2. We authorize in our diocese the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of Hope of Pontmain [Notre-Dame d'Espérance de Pontmain].

3. We explicitly reserve to Ourselves the approval of every prayer formula, every hymn, every book of piety related to the apparition, and We forbid the publication of any written item of this kind without Our prior approval given in writing.

4. In response to the wishes that have expressed to us from all sides, we have adopted a plan of building a shrine in honour of Mary on the very spot above which she was deigned to appear.

We are sure that the faithful of our religious Diocese will contribute, as much as they are able, to building this monument which intends to perpetuate both the special protection that the great Mother of God has extended to our region and the unceasing and limitless gratitude we have vowed to her in our hearts<sup>52</sup>.

During the night of January 17-18, 1871, the children who had seen the apparition and the entire village slept peacefully and well. The Germans did not advance against Laval but to everyone's surprise withdrew on January 22. On January 28, 1871, France and Germany signed an armistice. All 38 soldiers who had been mobilized from Pontmain returned home safely and unharmed.

It is quite natural that the first interpretation given to this apparition strongly reflected the immediate situation: the Blessed Virgin had appeared to give hope and consolation to the people of this area who were so severely threatened by war with a foreign power. But such an understanding of the January 17, event, whatever its validity, did not and could not last. It is important to note this apparition marks the beginning of a great movement of pilgrimage and prayer that has grown and has maintained itself until today, and this fact cannot be linked to the disasters of the Franco-Prussian War<sup>53</sup>.

## **B. The Oblates in charge at Pontmain**

Already within the first year after the apparition, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate are seriously planning and negotiating their coming to Pontmain<sup>54</sup>.

The General Council treated of this matter in its meetings of February 17, 1872, March 1, 1872, March 4, 1872, March 6, 1872, March 21, 1872, April 10, 1872, April 19, 1872, and May 20, 1872<sup>55</sup>.

News of the acceptance of this new work was communicated in two forms in MISSIONS... of 1873. The first was a news about the new establishment:

Bishop Wicart of Laval has deigned to manifest a new mark of his kindness to our Congregation, with which he is already long acquainted<sup>56</sup>, by entrusting to us the care of the parish and pilgrimage of Pontmain. On October 1, 1872, Reverend Father Audruger, Superior, Reverend Father Marais in the quality of parish priest, and Reverend Father Pays, together with Brother Louis, took possession of the church of Pontmain and of the priest's house temporarily transformed into the community's house...<sup>57</sup>

This information then gives a summary of the January 17, 1871 apparitions and the



February 2, 1872 formal judgment and approval by Bishop Wicart of Laval. Thereafter it continues:

Thus the pilgrimage was founded; it still had to be organized. As early as the following March the Bishop of Laval deigned to ask us for a colony of missionaries to take on the work of the parish, the pilgrimage and of the missions. It was agreed that our Fathers would not come on the scene until after the demise of the venerable M. Guérin, who was then seriously ill. It was not long before this holy parish-priest surrendered his soul to God and everything was made ready for our installation which the Bishop himself wanted to preside on October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Since the apparition, the coming of pilgrims has been considerable and without interruption... This new center of marvels takes its place beside Lourdes and La Salette... Every few days our Fathers receive good pilgrims who tell them: "I am coming in my name, or in that of my people, to thank the Blessed Virgin for a healing, a return to God, peace restored in a family, success in an important matter, etc." Besides, there is so much prayer continuously offered at Pontmain...<sup>58</sup>.

The second is an account given by Father Marc de l'Hermitte, Provincial of France-Nord, to the 1873 General Chapter:

Pontmain. This latest foundation is still in its cradle. It dates from October 1, 1872 and we owe it entirely to the kindness of the Bishop of Laval, a kindness for which we ought to be all the more grateful to him because he resisted the requests of several institutes and addressed himself to us who were neither asking for nor promising anything. We presented two projects of a contract to the venerable Prelate's request. We do not hide the fact that we preferred the first one for it provided for greater independence on our part. The Bishop chose the second one, however even though it was more onerous to the Diocese. By the latter project, signed by both contracting parties, the Congregation is committed to maintain at Pontmain at least six missionaries who are to serve the pilgrimage, the parish and the work of missions. The Fathers are free to preach missions wherever they may wish. For his part, the Bishop of Laval is committed: 1) to provide a salary of 500 francs to each Father...; 2) to build as soon as possible a house for the community. This second point is being implemented. Even though the new shrine church, that is being built according to a well-thought-out on the spot of the apparition, is barely emerging from the ground<sup>59</sup>, the Bishop of Laval has already begun to speak about this building project and to consult us about the premises we would like.

Our Fathers are giving successful missions in the Diocese of Laval. In time, when their numbers have increased, we can hope that their ministry will extend into Brittany and lower Normandy. The pilgrimage, which is never more popular, also keeps them very busy and the one who is the parish priest clearly has too much work and is overly in demand... We can readily grasp how such a place, located in the most Christian area of France, and work of this nature can attract us. Held back by our attitudes of reserve and the small numbers of personnel, we would never have dared to ask for this responsibility. But this post was spontaneously offered to us and we considered that we would fail gravely before Providence and towards our Immaculate Mother if we were to reject such fine and honorable offers. The sentiment of our poverty could only be a powerful motive for us to accept. We know the large number of members from these regions who have come to us. A Congregation, then, has every interest to establish itself there, even at the cost of the greatest sacrifices...<sup>60</sup>

The finished portions of the shrine church i.e. the sanctuary and the transepts were solemnly blessed on June 27, 1877<sup>61</sup>.

At the time these happy events were taking place Father Montfort was suffering his crisis of soul at the Chartreuse in Bosserville. After it was resolved, he arrived at Pontmain on September 22, 1877, that is, some two and a half months later. We have already seen above the letter that he wrote on the next day to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre.

In December 1877, Father Victor Bourde, the Superior at Notre-Dame de Pontmain, reported that the shrine had acquired some five to six hectares of land behind the shrine church which included fields, valleys, a stream, prairie and woods. This enhanced the pilgrimage locale greatly. He also revealed that they were considering a house for retreatants and to establish an Oblate juniorate at Pontmain. Small though these numbers at Pontmain were at that time, they had managed through the year to preach 2 missions, 2 Lenten series, a good number of adoration and first communion sermons, and 13 retreats in colleges, minor seminaries and religious houses<sup>62</sup>.

On September 1, 1878, the altar to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, located in the right transept, was solemnly consecrated in the presence also of Cardinal Frédéric de Falloux du Coudray, a son of that region and described as "representing" the newly elected Pope Leo XIII for this occasion<sup>63</sup>. It is most likely that Father Montfort was present at this consecration.

In reporting to the 1879 General Chapter, Father Achille Rey, Provincial of France-Nord, reported that the Oblates owned over 8 hectares of property at Pontmain; that the debt there had been reduced from 44,000 to 12,000 francs; that the building of the Father's Residence - Retreat House - Juniorate complex has not been started because of the uncertain situation created by the French Government in regard to legally unrecognized religious institutes<sup>64</sup>.

### **C. Father Joseph Montfort at Pontmain**

At Pontmain, as at l'Osier, Father Montfort was assigned more to the preaching ministry than of the shrine and the parish. Again, as at l'Osier, he took an interest and also contributed to the other work that needed to be done at Pontmain.

Father Jean-Philippe Fayette, Superior at Notre-Dame de Pontmain, in his October 15, 1882 report on activities at Pontmain, mentions the establishment there of the "work of retreats" which was patterned on the one that had already existed for years at Notre-Dame de l'Osier. He credits his predecessor, Father Léon Delpuech with the creation of this new ministry and does not mention Father Montfort in regard to it. This work had barely been started at the time he wrote his report<sup>65</sup>.

Father Edmond Thiriet, on the other hand, directly credits Father Montfort with the work of retreats begun at Pontmain. He writes:

There is a work (at the basilica of Pontmain) of which Father Montfort can be considered to be the founder. I want to speak of the retreats. The objectives he strove for in his missions were not limited only to the conversion of sinners; above all he aimed for the glory of his divine Master. To further that as much as possible in his area of activity he strove to free from the world's grasp the chosen souls that he was directing in the ways of perfection. I am not exaggerating when I say that he sent hundreds of young girls to join the religious life. How many Congregations owe excellent members to him! How many spouses of Jesus Christ attribute the grace of their vocation to him! Those who, for one reason or other, did not seem to him to be called to his holy state, were not deprived of his light and advice. As soon as he perceived aptitudes for holiness in a given soul, he lavished special care upon it, prescribed a line of conduct to it, laid down for it the foundations for a new life, cultivated with extreme care in it the flower of every virtue and required it to put forth ceaseless efforts towards good. Consequently, he recommended strongly to these persons -- whether they had just been converted or had been already for a long time devoted to the interests of religion -- to adopt the practice of making annual retreats. He felt that what was being done in this line at l'Osier could be done at Pontmain and that all the more easily because here everything

avored recollection and piety. The very physiognomy of the pilgrimage reflects hope and invites people to prayer...<sup>66</sup>

Father Thiriet notes that this new undertaking was "modest in its beginnings" but that it "is called to grow bit by bit and to produce excellent results for the good souls." At the time of Father Thiriet's writing, this retreat work was located in "a spacious house, directed by the Sisters of Charity of Evron."<sup>67</sup> And Father Fayette, who is writing some 14 years earlier, tells us that the first retreat was given during the first week of May and the second one during the last week of September<sup>68</sup>.

There is no contradiction between what Fathers Fayette and Thiriet say in this regard. Pontmain was at its beginnings. The idea and inspiration could certainly have come from Father Montfort and the retreatants too were persons with whom he had come into special contact. He can, therefore, be justly seen as "the founder" of this retreat work at Pontmain. On the other hand, the decision and organization to proceed with this work was taken by Father Léon Delpuech when he was Superior at Pontmain.

In the same report, Father Fayette says that, in perusing the Codex Historicus for the last four years, he finds that 160 different preaching engagements had been fulfilled by the community at Pontmain: 28 missions, 90 retreats, 7 or 8 Lenten series, and the remainder triduums of adoration, Forty Hours, first communion retreats<sup>69</sup>. He mentions that sometimes Pontmain received help from Oblates elsewhere and then lists what Father Delpuech has done during the 18 months he had spent at Pontmain. Next he speaks about Father Joseph Montfort:

Reverend Father Montfort has a larger list to his credit. This good Father is truly infatigable. To rest is something unknown to him. And thus, always on the front line, he does battle with a zeal and courage that are truly apostolic. He must have souls, and he knows where to find them in every center, in every area, always leaving in his wake great quantities of fruit in conversions and calling forth enthusiastic manifestations of faith and piety. I list now the main parishes he has evangelized in different parts of Maine, Brittany and Normandy. They are: Notre-Dame de Mayenne, Saint-Jean de Château-Gonthier, Ernée, Evron, Bais, Sainte Suzanne, Port Brillet, Saint-Samson, Montigné, Niort, Gennes, Longuefuye, Nuillé-sur-Vicoin, and many other places in Mayenne; Landéan, La Bazouge-du-Désert, Saint-Brice en Cogles, Louvigné-du-Désert, Bruz, etc., in Ille-et-Vilaine; Merdrignac, Laurenans, le Loscouët, Pordic in the Cotes-du-Nord; Avranches, Decey, Granville, Luzerne, Chanteloup in Manche. I stop the list of names here. It suffices to give an idea of the work that this missionary has had to do, all the more so when I must point out that he returned more than once to several of these parishes<sup>70</sup>.

Later in that same report Father Fayette mentions that Father Paul Baugé had been Father Montfort's companion on some of these preaching ministries, especially at Saint-Samson and Luzerne; that Father Jean-Baptiste Lemius had also helped at Saint-Samson<sup>71</sup>. Later we learn from that same report that the first mission which the Pontmain Oblates had preached after the period of the expulsions, namely, that of Saint-Brice-en-Cogles (Ille-et-Vilaine) had been given to Fathers Joseph Montfort, Jules Royer and Charles Moisan<sup>72</sup>.

The next report published in MISSIONS... is that by Father Louis-Marie Berthelon and is dated October 1, 1885. He tells us that the preaching team at N.D. de Pontmain had carried out 61 preaching assignments in 1883 and 74 in 1884; and that for 1885 they were booked for 3 Lenten series, 10 missions, 45 parish retreats, and several adoration and other occasional sermons: and that by September 1, 1885, 55 of these commitments had already been fulfilled<sup>73</sup>.

A major part in his report is given to the preaching activities of Father Montfort:

Reverend Father Montfort, always an indefatigable worker, ardently sows God's Word in Maine, Normandy, and Brittany and always returns to Our Lady of Pontmain laden with rich spiritual harvest yields which he joyfully places at her feet... Since January 1, 1883, his preaching activities include 2 Lenten

series, one at Saint-Denis de Gastines and the other at Notre-Dame de Laval<sup>74</sup>, 1 month of Mary at Passais, 6 missions or return missions, 46 parish retreats<sup>75</sup>.

The month of Mary preached during May 1884 at Passais was described as follows in the June 1884 issue of the "Revue catholique", a publication of the Séez Diocese:

The oratory of the Blessed Virgin at Passais has just had the exercises of the month of Mary for the twenty-first time. This year these exercises were preached by Reverend Montfort of the Oblates of Mary. From the first days the ardent and apostolic word of the missionary brought to the feet of the Blessed Virgin an audience that continually increased until the end of the month. In the last two weeks the crowd was so large that the preaching had to take place in the open air twice and even three times a day. And yet this audience was not drawn there by curiosity or any other banal motive: for Father Montfort does not engage in floral rhetoric and does not flatter his hearers. His sermons are very simple instructions wherein he is not afraid to say quite bluntly the truth and all that may be demanding in it. The missionaries zeal bore fruit: his confessional was constantly surrounded and over 3000 persons of the area received absolution from his hand.

Father Berthelon adds that Father Montfort then returned to Pontmain: he had preached 70 sermons in one month<sup>76</sup>.

The same report then goes on to tell us that in November 1884 Father Montfort had preached a 2-week mission at Longueville, a small parish in the diocese of Coutances. The parish priest had the following to say about this mission:

The majority of the men in my parish, infected as they are by today's ideas, had fallen into a state of great religious indifference. And so, fearing the missionary would experience a setback, I at first spoke to the Father only about giving a small parish retreat: he announced it to the faithful at the high Mass, before he began his first sermon. But this opening sermon was so moving that I saw many a tear being shed by those who were present: Father Montfort had obviously conquered the situation. In fact, we had hardly returned to the priest's house when the mayor and his assistant came to ask the missionary to stay for two weeks and to preach them a real mission. We had to give in to this welcome violence; and the respectful request of the good magistrates resulted in full success. The mission succeeded marvellously. God be praised for that!

Father Berthelon adds that he himself preached there some weeks later and he could confirm the parish-priest's assessment<sup>77</sup>

Father Berthelon continues his report, which had been addressed originally to the Superior General:

Most Reverend and beloved Father, what else can I say to edify you by telling you about the zeal and success of this excellent missionary whom you have appreciated for such a long time? Here is what a diocesan Catholic paper, the "Antiradical" wrote about the Lenten series given in 1885 in the church of Notre-Dame at Laval: "The Lenten stations were this year preached at Notre-Dame des Cordeliers by Father Montfort, a chaplain at Pontmain of the Oblates of Mary. The vibrant apostolic word of the missionary managed, from the very first days, to gather a fine audience around his pulpit". The large number of Easter communions certainly consoled his zeal. If we had the custom of distributing a prize to missionaries, I would ask you, Most Reverend Father, to declare that Father Montfort would not be allowed to compete...<sup>78</sup>

On January 16, 1885, Father Montfort preached on the vigil of the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady at Pontmain. In Father Fayette's words:

Even those from farthest away had arrived for the vigil and when six o'clock in the evening the bells announced the opening of the solemnities that were going to be observed in honour of the Immaculate Virgin, Protectress and Guardian of the Church and of France, a considerable crowd was already praying in the shrine, surrounding the throne of green plants and lights on which the venerable statue had been placed. There, in recollection, they were waiting for someone to come and speak to them of Mary's mercy and love. Reverend Father Montfort expressed everyone's sentiments. In that tone which is characteristic of him and with the living faith that shines forth in all his preaching as a missionary consecrated to Mary, he developed this moving thought that was so capable of preparing souls for the wonderful celebrations of the next day, namely, that Mary, destined by God to be the Mother of men, possessed the great treasure that every mother's heart possesses and that Mary's heart possessed even more copiously and rendered more precious, that is, love for all her children, regardless of whether they were righteous or sinners, ungrateful or generous, rebels or faithful<sup>79</sup>.

In December 1885, Father Montfort and Father Joseph-Marie Thévenon, preached a mission at Bais from the second Sunday of Advent to December 27, 1885. The "Semaine religieuse" of Laval in its January 9, 1886 issue reported the following about this mission:

The mission... opened under the auspices of the Blessed Virgin, for the first ceremony consisted of setting up in the church a statue of Our Lady of Pontmain. This statue, two metres high, is placed in a setting of artistically arranged clouds which form a majestic throne for it... The exercises were enthusiastically followed and many returned to God. More than 1 200 communions were counted. The general communion for women took place at the Christmas midnight Mass and that of the men the Sunday following, the day of the missions' closing... In the evening ceremony, a magnificent crucifix was carried by the parish's young men on a richly decorated stretcher up to the church where it was put up as a reminder of the mission... more than three thousand people from Bais and environs formed its escort...<sup>80</sup>

The next major report we have is by Father Louis Berthelon in MISSIONS..., and is dated December 3, 1887. He tells us that:

from the month of October 1885, the Fathers of the Pontmain House have preached in the dioceses of Laval, Coutances, Séez, Rennes, Saint-Brieuc and Quimper: 96 retreats, 33 missions, 4 Lenten series, 2 months of Mary, 18 retreats to religious.

He also mentions that in 1886 they had to refuse 9 missions and 10 retreats<sup>81</sup>.

The following preaching activities in the 1886 are attributed to Father Montfort:

- In last 3 weeks of Lent 1886 a mission at Landivy preached with Fathers Joseph-Marie Thévenon and Ferdinand Bénédic<sup>82</sup>.

- October 1886: a Jubilee at Montoursin the diocese of Rennes.

Father Berthelon writes:

Preceded by his reputation, the valiant missionary was master of the situation from the very first day onwards. The most convincing proof of his success is that, on the day after the closing, he brought to Pontmain one thousand pilgrims, most of whom received holy communion. He had taken the good method of promoting this pilgrimage by taking the lead in it: to incite the Bretons to come and greet Notre-Dame de Pontmain in her shrine, one has to go and bring them where they live<sup>83</sup>.

- Advent 1866: a mission at Saint-Ellier preached with Father Jean-Baptiste Colombot<sup>84</sup>.

The reported 1887 preaching activities of Father Montfort include:

- August 1887: the Sisters of the Cross near Saint-Brieuc<sup>85</sup>.
- Mission at Briqueville-sur-mer with Father Paul Baugé: 1887<sup>86</sup>.

- Mission at Beauchamp (Coutances): Advent 1887. This parish had only some 500 people and one missionary seemed sufficient. The renown of the missionary, however, induced the parish-priests of neighboring parishes to send groups of their people to Beauchamp so that it became a truly regional mission, so that the Bishop of Coutances himself came to preside the closing of the mission<sup>87</sup>.

In his October 1, 1889 report published in MISSIONS..., Father Louis Berthelon says that "since the month of December 1887, we count 98 retreats, 12 missions, 4 Lenten series, 1 month of Mary, 10 retreats to religious; and also 154 pilgrimages."

Among the names of those Oblates who accomplished all this work, that of Father Montfort is also mentioned<sup>88</sup>. This same report lists the following specific regarding Father Montfort's missionary activity in 1888:

- Preaching in the parishes of Saint-Cyr, Javron, La Baconnière, Eancé, Saint-Germain, Martigné-Ferchaud, Landronay<sup>89</sup>.

- Lenten series at St-Clement's in Cherbourg. This parish was quite lax in the practice of religion and Father Montfort used a method of special ceremonies to attract the people: Consecration of the parish to the Blessed Virgin, reparation to the Blessed Sacrament<sup>90</sup>.

- Beginning Easter Monday 1888, he preached a return mission at Briqueville-sur-Mer. He had preached a mission there in 1887 with Father Baugé<sup>91</sup>.

- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Gesvres<sup>92</sup>.
- Adoration retreat at Bais (the 4<sup>th</sup> time he was called to this locality since 1886)<sup>93</sup>.
- May 3, 1888, he began a Confirmation retreat at Landivy<sup>94</sup>.
- Immediately thereafter, he preached an 8-days pilgrims retreat at Pontmain<sup>95</sup>.
- Then:
  - retreat to children at Selle-Craonnaise (Laval diocese)
  - retreat to children at Louvigné (Laval Diocese)
  - parish retreat at Illifaut (Saint-Brieuc Diocese)
  - parish retreat at Bourseul (Saint-Brieuc Diocese)<sup>96</sup>

Father Berthelon notes that at the end of May 1888, Father Montfort asked for a well-earned rest<sup>97</sup>. Then, in the last part of 1888, he gave a return mission at Gesvres<sup>98</sup>.

As for his preaching activities in 1889, the following are listed:

- Adoration retreat at Saint-Aubin des Préaux<sup>99</sup>.
- Return mission at Senonnes<sup>100</sup>.
- Mission at Poilley, with Father Jules Pays. The day after the closing, some 500 people from this mission came to Pontmain and again received holy communion there<sup>101</sup>.
- Right after this pilgrimage, mission at Loscou't<sup>102</sup>.
- Mission at Montaudin, with Father Rousseau. Here he organized a choir of 80 young men and another of 30 young girls. On Easter Monday, between seven and eight hundred people made a pilgrimage to Pontmain<sup>103</sup>.
- After Lent till May and June 1889:
  - mission at Trémeur (Saint-Brieuc Diocese)
  - children's retreat at Loscou't

- children's retreat at Montsurs
- children's retreat at Ruillé-Froidfond
- children's retreat at Saint-Léonard des Bois
- mission at Longueville
- mission at Le Loroux (Rennes Diocese)<sup>104</sup>
- With Father Gustave Perinet, retreat to Sisters of Evron<sup>105</sup>.
- 2 retreats to the Sisters at Saint-Frainbault<sup>106</sup>.
- September 8-15, at invitation of Father Jean Garnier, he gave the pilgrims' retreat at Notre-Dame de l'Osier. This was the first time he returned to this shrine since he has left it in November 1876<sup>107</sup>.
- Advent 1889: mission at Saint Thomas on Jersey, preached with Fathers Louis-Marie Berthelon and Pierre Coubrun<sup>108</sup>.

At the end of 1889, Father Montfort was preaching at Saint-Brieux-de-Iffs (Ille-et-Vilaine) and there he wrote the following letter to Superior General Father Joseph Fabre:

L.J.C. et M.I.

St. Brieuc des Iffs.

December 30, 1889

I am truly happy to take the occasion of the New Year to unite my voice to those of all your children and to tell you from the bottom of my heart: A Good and Happy New Year. May the good Lord grant you, through Our Lady of Pontmain, his most abundant and finest blessings --ad multos annos-- for the welfare and consolation of our family which venerates you as its Father.

During the month of September last I had the immense consolation of seeing you for some minutes only, to receive your blessing and to inform you about the inheritance in Dauphine -- and you had the goodness to authorize me to negotiate this matter in favour of the Congregation. I do believe, Father, that in summer I ought to make a trip into this area. You know that the secret is kept until the present time: the kind old lady who is making the legacy is seen by the public as being the heiress. I will therefore take every precaution so that nothing becomes externally known.

An idea came to me on this point: I communicate it to you in all simplicity. It is that you would mandate me to preach the two retreats to the religious women at l'Osier and at Charavines. This latter community is only three leagues distant from the parish of the good old lady. She could there come "incognita" to the convent and confer about this matter to me.

If you do not see any difficulty, Most Reverend Father, I think that would be the simplest and easiest way to keep everything secret. But it goes without saying that I await with deep submission your decision on this as well as any other matter. Father Provincial has commissioned me to preach the Novena at N.-D. de Sion next September. I would leave from there to Dauphiné, if you in your goodness approve what I have just told you.

Humbly waiting your final word on this question, I beg you, Most Reverend and Beloved Father, to accept the expression of my respectful submission and of my deep veneration.

I am your obedient son, Montfort, O.M.I.<sup>109</sup>

We do not have the Superior General's reply, but we do know that Father Montfort, did in fact preach the two retreats to the Sisters at l'Osier and at Charavines as he proposed to do in the above letter<sup>110</sup>. This would indicate that the Superior General did accept Father Montfort's suggestion. This is further confirmed by another letter of his quoted below.

Father Montfort's preaching activities for 1890 are reported in MISSIONS..., 1894. A first cluster is as follows:

- January 17: at Pontmain, with all the other Oblates<sup>111</sup>.
- Early 1890: parish retreat at Poilley (Ille-et-Vilaine)<sup>112</sup>.
- February 23 - March 23, 1890: mission with Pierre Coubrun at Saint-Léonard des Bois (Le Mans Diocese). The parish-priest died one week before the closure of this mission<sup>113</sup>.
- March 26, 1890: 4 weeks long mission with Father Gustave Perinet at Sougé-le-Ganelon (Le Mans Diocese)<sup>114</sup>.

During this mission at Sougé-le-Ganelon, father Montfort wrote the following letter to the Superior General Father Joseph Fabre, which letter also refers to the business matter mentioned in the letter quoted above:

L.J.C. et M.I.

Sougé le Ganelon.

April 9, 1890.

Most Reverend and Beloved Father,

Around the time of the New Year you deigned to write to me that you were assigning me to do the two retreats for the religious women at l'Osier and Charavines on account of the affair that you are acquainted with. But you asked me to remind you of this promise around Easter time -- and that is what I am now doing, and at the same time I ask you to give me your best blessing for these works and for the business matter I am to treat of during my stay in Dauphiné. I would also ask you, Most Reverend and Beloved Father, to please bless the mission that Father Perinet and I are preaching here -- the people here are flighty and have little faith. Our Lady of Pontmain has visibly protected us and our audiences is magnificent and our mission feasts are splendid as well -- but it is more difficult to bring them to the confessional. Our mission ends on Good Sheperd Sunday with the raising of a very fine Calvary. Please pray for the final success of this mission, and deign to bless him who declares himself to be your most respectful and obedient son.

Montfort, O.M.I.<sup>115</sup>

When we continue looking at the rest of the 1890 list of Father Montfort's preaching commitments we find the following:

- June 1890: Jersey for first communion retreat at Saint-Mathieu and another at Saint-Thomas as well as a return mission at the same place. Many Protestants were deeply affected by the mission and its ceremonies<sup>116</sup>.
- Children's retreat at La Haye-Pesnel (La Manche)<sup>117</sup>.
- 40 hours at Pleine-Fougères<sup>118</sup>.
- August 1890: in a large religious house of Saint-Frainbault-de-Lessay: it was the 8<sup>th</sup> time Father Montfort preached in this locality<sup>119</sup>.
- Octave Novena of the birth of Our Lady, at Notre-Dame de Sion, September 4-15, 1890. A newspaper of Nancy wrote:



Reverend Father Montfort, a chaplain of Notre-Dame de Pontmain, is a veteran missionary of the south and west of France. There are no softening cushions in his word by which he preaches how God is to be loved, and this with so vivid a faith and so penetrating an unction that, after first being amazed, one is moved and won over.

Father Achille Rey, author of the MISSIONS... report continues:

Many times we saw pilgrims wiping away tears and, what is worth much more, after each instruction the confessionals were surrounded by many penitents. The Bishop of Nancy himself came to hear the missionary preach<sup>120</sup>.

- Retreat to Sisters of the Holy Family at Charavines. Once again he was able to visit Notre-Dame de l'Osier and also gave the retreat to the Holy Family Sisters there. This is the trip to Dauphiné that the topic of the two letters quoted above<sup>121</sup>.
- October 20 -November 1, 1890: return mission to Saint-Brieuc-des Iffs<sup>122</sup>.
- December 1-6, 1890: retreat to sailors at Saint-Cast (Côtes-du-Nord)<sup>123</sup>.
- Mission at Saint Nicolas with Father Gustave Perinet<sup>124</sup>.

#### **D. A sudden illness**

One has the impression that Father Montfort had always enjoyed good health and that since he began his Oblate missionary career in 1861, he had never been hindered in his preaching activity by illness. The robust constitution he had inherited from his youth on his father's farm seems to have served him well in his missionary work. This is about to change, however.

The 1891 season began for Father Montfort with the January 2-25, 1891, mission that he preached at Saint-Jean de Liversay (Diocese of La Rochelle)<sup>125</sup>. Both MISSIONS... and Father Edmond Thiriet speak of a sudden illness that struck Father Montfort after his mission.

In his July 22, 1894 report published in MISSIONS..., Father Achille Rey, Superior at Notre-Dame de Pontmain, writes:

After this mission [i.e. Saint-Jean de Liversay], the tireless apostle was off joyfully and eagerly to other work without taking time to rest. The good Lord put him to the test and brought him to a complete halt. Let us borrow from the letter of the assistant priest at Loscou't, dated February 7, the details of the accident which hindered Father Montfort from continuing his work until the month of June: "According to the doctor, cold weather is the first cause of his illness. So as not to pass through Loscou't on his way to Trémoré, Father Montfort last Saturday had himself taken at Saint-Méen by the clergy of that parish. During dinner in the parish-house at Saint-Méen, the Father was in a good mood in spite of the fact that since morning he was unusually indisposed. After the dinner I went up with him to his room and he told me that his left arm and leg seemed stiff and heavy. He nevertheless left for Trémoré in an open vehicle. When they had arrived there, without having felt anything but the cold, he could not now arise and come down from the vehicle. His left side was paralyzed. This was a misfortune for everyone: for the good Father so thirsty for souls, for the parish-priest..., for the people who were stunned when the parish-priest announced that, according to the doctor, the ardent and holy missionary needed several weeks of rest. During the whole week until yesterday the good Father was at the priests' house at Trémoré where he received the greatest care from the parish-priest, his assistant priest and the dedicated Sisters. It was the doctor who first advised the Father to leave Trémoré and go to Loscou't to his family who could see him and give him the care his situation requires. Miss LePrete, his relative, received him into her house, the second priest-house in Loscou't. The doctor has forbidden him to do any work for two months and to make any trip before three weeks. The good

Father asks you all the permissions required by his condition<sup>126</sup>.

Thiriet gives a description of the mission at Saint-Jean-de-Liversay which closed on January 25, 1891<sup>127</sup> and then continues:

In spite of the fatigue experienced during the course of this mission, Father Montfort left immediately to give the same exercises in another parish of the Diocese of Saint-Brieuc. The weather was bad, the winter harsh, the cold intense. Another person would certainly have stopped over in his home town: he, however, felt in doing that he would fail in observance of the Rule and give in to the demands of human nature. Instead of passing through Loscou't, our missionary had himself driven directly to Trémoré, where he was to exercise his zeal, in a carriage that was open to all the winds. When they came to the door of the priest's house, he tried to get down from the carriage and found that his limbs would not obey him. His left side was paralyzed. What a painful disappointment for the parish-priest who was already rejoicing that he had such an apostle! The people were stunned when they were told that the doctor had prescribed several weeks of complete rest for the ardent missionary. With admirable resignation the missionary accepted the cruel trial by which he was being tested. In that moment he generously offered his life as a sacrifice, mindful of the fact that the Oblate is a victim dedicated to voluntary immolation. Since his first religious profession, he had so often renewed the offering of himself for the salvation of souls that he could now hope that his offer was being accepted. Satisfied with the good will and perfect resignation of his servant, the divine Master was content to let him share in a portion of his sufferings and was pleased to hear the prayers of all the sick man's friends who were asking for and obtained his cure. After some weeks of convalescence, Father Montfort was able to continue his apostolic work as before<sup>128</sup>.

We do not know how long Father Montfort stayed at Loscou't and when he returned to the Oblate community at Pontmain. All we have is Father Rey's statement that "in the month of June the dean of the Pontmain missionaries, whose ripe old age had regained the youth of an eagle, resumed his work" and did the following ministry:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Saint-Pierre-des-Landes.
- Adoration triduum at Saint-Marie des Bois.
- Return mission to Saint Nicolas near Granville.
- Retreat at Longueville (Manche).
- Retreat to holiday people at Saint-Cast.
- 2 retreats to Sisters of Evron<sup>129</sup>.

According to Father Rey,:

the tireless Father Montfort opened the winter (preaching) season in November 1891. He was at Saint-Brice-en-Cogles (Ille-et-Vilaine) where he had done good work on other occasions. He preached a retreat to members of youth societies. But for this chaplain of Notre-Dame de Pontmain, a retreat can end properly only with a pilgrimage to Our Lady of the stars.

All the retreatants came to entrust their holy resolutions to this good Mother<sup>130</sup>.

From December 3 until after Christmas, 1891, Father Montfort, along with Fathers Edmond Thiriet, Pierre Coubrun and Pierre Brullard, preached a difficult but highly successful mission at Pacé (near Rennes)<sup>131</sup>.

According to Father Rey's report, the list of Father Montfort's preaching activities for 1892 is as follows:

- January 31 - February 21, 1892: with Father Pierre Brullard, a mission at Chemazé (Mayenne)<sup>132</sup>.

- Thereafter:

- adoration retreat at Mesnil.
- mission at Saint-Colen (Côtes-du-Nord).
- 40 hours at Loscou't.
- Lenten series at Bois.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Saint-Solen.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Mesnil.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at La Dorée.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Vautortes.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Pontmain.
- retreat at boarding school of Benedictines at Caen.
- adoration at Larchamp.
- confessions during two general retreats at Evron.
- retreat to youth society of the Holy Family at Laval.
- retreat to the Little Sisters of the Poor at Dinan.
- Advent mission at La Tannière<sup>133</sup>.

When he introduces Father Montfort's preaching ministry for 1893, Father Rey writes: "Here is the list of the tireless Father Montfort who is always the model of our missionaries."

- January: triduum of adoration at Saint-Ellier.
- Triduum of adoration at Loscou't.
- Return mission at Trémoré.
- During Lent April 2: missionat Sacé.
- April 9: with Father Pierre Coubrun, mission at Précey.
- End of April: 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Larclas.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Saint-Mars-sur-la-Futaie.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Saint-Ellier.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Ernée.
- June: Mission at Prenessaye.
- Return mission at Saint-Solen.
- Retreat to the Ladies of the Holy Family at Laval.
- Retreat to boarders of the Saint-Fraimbault de Lessay community.
- Adoration and confessions during the pastoral retreat at Laval and the second retreat at Evron.
- September 16-19: retreat to society and faithful of Notre-Dame de La Salette, at Rennes.
- During October: at Evron -- confessions daily, preached 3 times during the week, on Sundays 4 times<sup>134</sup>.

At the end of this list, Father Achille Rey comments:

An awesome amount of work... and thus the forces of this dear missionary were much reduced when obedience assigned him to the retreat of the religious and juniorists of Mont-Saint-Michel. The Father was so tired that he had to limit his instructions to a simple quite short chat. His zeal and dedication, however, gave the greatest effectiveness to his words. The missionary had to take a complete rest until Advent. In Advent 1893, along with Fathers Edmond Thiriet and Pierre Brullard, he preached a mission at Saint-Germain en Cogle<sup>135</sup>.

On file in the Oblate General Archives in Rome are two letters that Father Montfort wrote in 1893 to the new Superior General, Father Louis Soullier, who had been elected the previous May 11<sup>th</sup>. Both of these letters are worth quoting in full because they manifest Father Montfort's practice of maintaining regular and direct communication with the Superior General and give us an insight into his work, concern, missionary attitudes and style of living while on mission.

The first of these letters was written at Loscou't on September 23, 1893 and is as follows:

L.J.C. et M.I.

Le Loscou't.

23 sept. 1893

Reverend and Beloved Father,

Your blessing was a source of happiness for me -- My work at Renne consoled me. Deo gratias!

Here I am near Madame [name difficult to decipher!]. Her condition is not reassuring, but without fear even though the end is imminent. My visit pleased her very much and is going to help her. She asks me to thank you for having allowed me to bring her this great consolation.

On Friday I am leaving for Evron. I have just found a precious opportunity here of getting there. Dear Brother, bless this important work again.

I trust, Reverend Father, that your work at Angers did not weary you to much. Every day I gladly pray that the good Lord keep your health good: it is so precious for us and for souls.

I sent some hymns to Pontmain -- as for the money, Mr. Oberthon did not want to take any now because work is not yet completed and so the accounts are not tallied up -- I hope he will give us yet another little discount on the price settled upon previously -- for he showed himself to be rather kind when we treated of this question.

My presence is providential here. It is the back-to-school period -- the first since the laicization. The lay teaching lady is making extraordinary propaganda but my presence here largely paralyses her zeal...

She has only 5 children -- and the Sisters have over forty -- and those who have not as yet come in because of work in the country will be coming to the Sisters. How dreadful this laicization is for peace in our parishes! I hope the good Lord will soon put an end to it.

Please accept, good Father, the expression of my most respectful and devoted sentiments. Your submissive son,

Montfort, O.M.I.

Please greet the Sisters that I know at Nantes.

The other letter was written at Evron on October 17, 1893 and is as follows:

L.J.C. et M.I.

Evron, 17 oct. 1893.

Reverend and Beloved Father,

I am so uneasy and upset by your silence -- here it is more than over a month that I have not had any news of you -- No doubt it is your many concerns that have hindered you from answering the letter I addressed to you at Nantes during my stay at Loscou't; for I do not want to think about some indisposition due to fatigue.

Here I am now two weeks at Evron --what work there is to do here! From October 2<sup>nd</sup> till today I have not had a minute of rest -- but the work is consoling because it is serious. The people deserve merit for coming to the church: three obstacles stood in the way: 1<sup>o</sup>- the pleasures to be left untasted; 2<sup>o</sup>- the men; 3<sup>o</sup>- [I cannot decipher!] All these obstacles they have overcome. Deo gratias!

I have organized my work in such a way that I have time to pray, to fulfill regularly my exercicss of piety. I am happy in every respect. The priest-house I find comfortable -- the people are very sympathetic to me--- Nevertheless, we still have some big fish that our nets have to catch. Pray and have others pray for the missionary and for these souls.

I will end my work here on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Thursday, with the ceremony for the Deceased --- If you haven't promised me to anyone yet for the first 8 days of November, I am going to ask for permission to accept to give two major sermons at St. Briec des Iffs (Sunday, Nov. 5), where I preached a good mission 4 years ago; and, if this is possible, the good pastor there would have the 40 Hours follow on Monday and Tuesday --Then, because of this, I would not be able to return to the house before Nov. 8 or 9. I know that that work would do a lot of good to those people for it will recall the days of the mission to them. The parish of St. Briec des Iffs is only five leagues from here, but it is in the diocese of Rennes. I wait your decision -- The good Dean here is talking of a coming pilgrimage to Pontmain, to Notre-Dame de Pontmain: She it is who is at work here in Evron. I close by asking your blessing for me and for the important work I am engaged in.

Please accept, Reverend and Beloved Father, the expression of respectful and filial affection, as well as my entire submission. Your happy son,

Montfort, O.M.I.

This letter raises some questions about the way preaching commitments were accepted and by whom: did the Superior General himself assign certain missionaries to certain preaching duties? Did the Provincial? Or was this up to the local Superior? We certainly have one more case there where Father Montfort is making his arrangements through the Superior General.

In his report Father Rey also gives the following list of Father Montfort's preaching ministry for the year 1894:

- January 5-10, 1894: retreat to boarding school Saint-Joseph de Fougères.

- February 4-13: adoration retreat at Saint-Germain d'Anxure.
- All of Lent: at Saint-Etienne-en-Cogles.
- April: mission at Trémeur.
- May 7: 1<sup>st</sup> Communion retreat at Montreuil-des-Landes.
- May 13: short mission at Tiersand.
- 1<sup>st</sup> days of July: triduum at Saint-Solen.
- August 1-12: confessions during first retreat at Evron.
- August 13-15: triduum of preparation for the Assumption in the parish of Saint-Jean de Liversay.
- August 18-26: retreat to Sisters "de l'Espérance" at La Rochelle
- Then retreat to the Sisters de Niort.
- Retreat to youth society, closing on September 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Some occasional sermons at Bordeaux, Saintes, etc.
- Novena in honour of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows at Taugon-la-Ronde.
- Three days giving a private retreat to sick Bishop of Laval.
- October: mission at Saint-Hervé.
- November 17-20: retreat in preparation for renewal of vows for the Augustinian Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu de Fougères.
- December 2-9: Retreat for men's society of Notre-Dame de Vitré.
- December 9-16: mission retreat at Bourgon.
- December 18-25: return mission to La Tannière.
- Visit to Bishop of Laval.
- Return to Pontmain for a rest<sup>136</sup>.

During these same years a number of achievements are on record for Notre-Dame de Pontmain itself. On May 10, 1888, the main nave of new church was finished; work remained to be done on the front steps and facade. The cornerstone of the Oblate house was laid on the same day and this house itself was finished by autumn of 1889. On January 17, 1891, the first stones of the church-towers were blessed. Also in 1891, Sisters of Evron came to take care of the retreat work at Pontmain. On October 27, 1891, the Oblates also opened a juniorate on the second floor of the Oblate house...there were 18 juniorists from 1892 onwards and, as their numbers began to grow, some were for a few years sent on to Notre-Dame de Sion. In May 1894 it was decided to put up a new building that would be large enough for the juniorate. On May 17, 1892 appeared the first issue of the "Annales de Notre-Dame de Pontmain". Finally, the second church-tower was completed in October 1894.

We now come to 1895, the year when so much happened and during which Father Montfort is called away by the Lord. A chronology of events relating to Father Montfort in that year is as follows:

A barn that had been built earlier on the Pontmain property was now converted into a special chapel for the juniorate and was solemnly blessed on January 16, 1895, and then the good Father Montfort had the consolation of being the first to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass (in this new chapel) on the next day, January 17, in the presence of several members of the

benefacting family who had transferred to us their property title to this locale...<sup>137</sup>

The Oblates at Pontmain made their annual retreat from January 18 to January 25, 1895, a retreat which Father Montfort also followed<sup>138</sup>.

The following February 2, he opened the retreat to the boarding school of Saint-Joseph de Fougère, where he had preached the year before<sup>139</sup>.

Then came the great fire at Pontmain on the morning of February 22, 1895. It began with a fire in the one and only chimney of the wing where Father Montfort had his room<sup>140</sup>.

Fathers Montfort and Collin received hospitality with the Sisters of Rillé, and there Father Montfort fell ill<sup>141</sup>. Father Achille Rey writes:

The fire afflicted him profoundly. He had to stay in bed after some rather violent coughing up of blood. The care of the good Sisters of Rillé, who gave him the most fraternal hospitality, soon brought his strength back<sup>142</sup>.

As early as March 3, 1895, Father Montfort was away preaching a mission of 15 days at Saint-Paul (Séez Diocese) with Father Pierre Brullard<sup>143</sup>.

Again with Father Pierre Brullard, he preached a mission at Nancy from March 24 to April 15, 1895. This was Father Montfort's last mission<sup>144</sup>, but not yet the end of his preaching ministry.

During May 15-19, 1895, he preached a first communion retreat at Saint-Mars-sur-la-Futaye, at the end of which he led the entire parish on pilgrimage to Pontmain<sup>145</sup>.

During May 22-26, 1895, he preached another first communion retreat at Levaré<sup>146</sup> and thereafter one last one at Trémeur, May 26 - June 5, 1895<sup>147</sup>.

## **E. Father Montfort's last days and death**

After having described his 1890 illness, Father Edmond Thiriet writes:

After some weeks of convalescence, Father Montfort was able to resume as before his apostolic work. We then saw him as alert and active as he was during the days of his youth, attentive only to the inspirations of his zeal, ardently taking on the most difficult missions and resting from his completed labours only by preparing for new conquests. When we told him to temper the thrust of his noble aspirations and suggested that he take a few days of rest, he replied, smiling: "In Heaven! In Heaven!..."

I must use well the time God grants me to gain some merit". His strength visibly declined, however. He was the only one not to notice it and he eagerly accepted all the requests that came in uninterruptedly. He was never happier than when he had before him a long series of preaching engagements...

One of the saddest things for his heart was the fire of February 22, 1895. The sight of the flames devouring his dear community in a few hours, the spectacle of the ruins caused by the disaster, the memory of the dispersed youngsters: all these sad things struck him a blow that he felt right until he died. On the very day of the disaster we found him exhausted and reduced to helplessness after some violent bleeding. He nevertheless continued his ministry into the month of May. At this time I saw him for the last time at the head of a parish that he was leading in pilgrimage to Notre-Dame de Pontmain. He was pale, his face haggard. As he was getting ready to leave that very evening to give other retreats, I felt obliged to make a fraternal remark to him on

behalf of the Superior who was absent. He replied: "Soon I shall be forced to rest, for the Superior has forgotten to assign work to me; that will be the first time in 35 years that I shall find myself without work". He had tears in his voice when he spoke those words: in my ear they sounded like a funeral bell<sup>148</sup>.

When he was still at Trémur he received a letter dated May 31, 1895, from the parish priest of La Dorée who happily informed him that he had just received notification from the Oblate Superiors that Father Montfort could come and preach at his place immediately after he had finished at Trémur. Father Rey describes what happened at La Dorée:

First Communion took on Sunday June 9<sup>th</sup>. Father Montfort gave the preparatory instruction with his usual alertness, unction and forcefulness, nothing indicated the imminent catastrophe. He had hardly taken up his place in the sanctuary when he felt indisposed and thought he could remedy this by going into the sacristy. He supported himself on the credence table; feeling as though he would vomit he was inclined to bend forward. The assistant priest came in to take a burse in order to take up the collection. He came close to the Father who suddenly put his hand on his own forehead and said: "Oh how my head must hurt!" and then fell into the assistant priests arms: the latter was trying to hold him, but since the weight was too much, he let the body onto the floor and ran to get two men. They carried away the missionary who was still breathing but quite unconscious... (The parish priest had to take the second instruction himself and) soon hastened to the sick man, pronounced the words of absolution and hurriedly administered to him the sacrament of the dying...

The Father was laid out on a bed; it was felt they could not undress and put him to bed. There was still the hope that the crisis would pass and he would regain consciousness. Time passed, however, with no sign of improvement. But towards one o'clock in the afternoon, color came into his face, breathing became stronger. The parish priest renewed the absolution and completed the administration of extreme unction... the sick man seemed asleep... An hour later the person watching over Father Montfort noticed that breathing became weaker and slower, that colour had gone: she ran to inform the parish priest who came to the Father and received his final breath<sup>149</sup>.

Father Montfort had died ca. 1.30 p.m. on June 9, 1895, feast of the Blessed Trinity, in the priest's house at La Dorée.

The funeral was set for Tuesday, June 11<sup>th</sup>, feast of the apostle St-Barnabas. Many priests and parishioners accompanied the body from La Dorée to Pontmain. Father Achille Rey presided at the Office of the Dead, the Mass and the burial<sup>150</sup>.

The event of Father Monfort's death occasioned the following entry for June 9, 1895 in the "Codex Historicus" of the Oblate House at Pontmain:

At the moment the procession was to start out, a missive from La Dorée brought us the shocking news that Reverend Father Monfort had just breathed his last. This excellent Father, model of the missionaries, was preaching a first communion retreat in this parish. The morning was passing as usual. As it was pious custom when on mission, Reverend Father Montfort probably got up at 4 o'clock in the morning in order to pray. At breakfast he was in a more jovial mood than usual. At the high Mass he gave the allocution which preceded the sermon and he spoke with great depth and unction: many persons were in tears. Towards the end he felt somewhat indisposed and leaned on the altar for support. He then went to his seat and, feeling ill, he went to the sacristy. The assistant-priest came in shortly after and found him in a state of collapse. "Oh!", he said, "what terrible indigestion! Oh! how my head hurts!" He then fell. The parish-priest, surprised to see that the Preacher was not appearing, sent for information and thus learned the truth. Two men transported in a chair the Father who had lost consciousness. As they were



going up the stairs, the parish-priest gave him the absolution and then gave him a general anointing.

There was an apparent improvement. Hope soon diminished. The ceremonies of extreme unction were completed. Dinner was served. The parish-priest went up, came down, went up again, came down again. A parishioner who had gone up came down in a rush and told the parish-priest that the Father was dying. The parish-priest came quickly but the Father seemed better. The maid came and said the same thing. Again the parish-priest came to the dying man and reassured everyone. Two minutes later Reverend Father Montfort made his entry into eternity.

Reverend Father Montfort was born at Loscouët, (Cotes-du-Nord) in 1827. He was ordained in 1858 and after two years as assistant-priest he entered the Congregation at the noviciate of l'Osier where he made his oblation in 1861. I have been told that he afterwards tried to become a trappist but in vain. He was one of our most famous missionaries in Dauphiné where his reputation was great and his very many works always crowned with success. He was designed by our Most Reverend Father General to present to Pius IX the crown made for Our Lady of L'Osier. After he had been assigned to the House of Pontmain in 18--, Reverend Father Montfort deployed the same zeal and obtained the same success. Struck by a first attack in 1890, he recovered and resumed the ceaseless course of his preaching activities. His voice had weakened but not his courage. The valiant missionary died on the field of battle with his weapons in his hands. What a loss for our House and for the Congregation!

Our dear Departed was noted for his great charity and for a great love for the Blessed Virgin. On mission he was seen always with his rosary in his hand. He had a particular gift of reaching into pious souls, of a good memory, of an excellent judgment and a wisdom that was always certain of being on target, that knew the spirit of a people after one or two days and that took no decision without prior knowledge and after sufficient reflection. If serious reasons caused him to hesitate, for example, whether a special conference for men would harm a mission by lessening the number of those who would come or, on the contrary, would favour greater attendance, the Father would not be able to sleep. He would be looking for the solution. And on this point he would be infallible. If he found a parish divided, he excelled in taking one of the two parties so as to isolate its leader by pitting the whole population against them through vigorous words, or through skillful dealing to lead them to reconciliation, if he saw that as possible. And the method chosen was always the successful one.

Having but one objective, the salvation of souls, he knew how to wield every weapon, both those of firmness and those of kindness; and if he decided to use the former, he acted with consummate prudence, first sounding out the terrain and advance getting rid of the obstacles in the way. How prophetic was his word and how interesting his preaching! How many persons, even though forewarned, could not help but shed tears when they heard him: as for instance at Sion Bishop Turinaz of Nancy. Many are the religious women of the Holy Family who owe him their vocation and will pray to him so that he may protect them from Heaven, after their supplication and suffrages united to ours will have shortened the time of expiation... Our Lady of Pontmain has granted to her Oblate the grace he so desired, namely, that he be able to win hearts to her until his last breath.

According to the same "Codex Historicus", on June 11, 1895, the remains of Father Montfort were solemnly transferred from La Dorée and the funeral rites held in the Pontmain basilica; this was followed by burial in the Pontmain cemetery. Father Montfort rests with Father Gillet and Colombot in the vault that the community had granted in the perpetuity to the community of chaplains of Notre-Dame de la Sainte-Espérance<sup>151</sup>. On the ground level is an iron

cross which bears the words: R.P. Joseph Montfort<sup>152</sup>.

## **V. PORTRAIT OF AN EXCEPTIONAL MISSIONARY**

The previous pages have tried to present a panoramic outline of Father Montfort's life and intense career as an Oblate missionary. The information found in the surviving primary sources, in the edited reports published in the volumes of MISSIONS..., and the necrological sketch written by Father Edmond Thiriet presents Father Montfort as an Oblate missionary who is truly exceptional in many ways: in the reputation he enjoyed among the people and the clergy, in apostolic zeal, in the sheer quantity of missionary work he accepted and did, in missionary successes he always seemed to achieve, even in situations that seemed doomed to failure, in his ability to discern correctly local and personal situations and choose effective means to meet the same, in his influence with benefactors, in his interest for recruiting vocations to the religious life, in his closeness to the people, in his personal life-style and manner.

This multiform exceptionality was rooted in gifts of nature and grace with which he was endowed (sound health, imposing appearance, good strong voice for speaking and singing that was capable of expressing the widest range of feelings and sentiment, strong character, lively imagination, down-to-earth common sense and good judgment, frank and candid communications, a happy disposition) as well as in acquired attitudes and habits: his celebration of Mass and his piety towards the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin Mary, fidelity to meditation, to the rosary, his zeal for God's glory and the salvation of souls, his attitude as a confessor, his need to explore reality and reflect on appropriate ways and means, his single-mindedness and persevering commitment.

This multiform exceptionality also caused tensions and raised questions, especially among fellow Oblates who were not as blessed in endowments and achievements as he. There is no doubt that his abilities, successes and influence set him on a certain pedestal that grated on the sensitivities of some of his Oblate confreres. His personal life-style and manner of doing things gave some the impression that he was remiss in certain elements of community living and prayer, in acceptable relationships with people outside, in the practice of poverty. Hence he was often the object of a certain ridicule and carping criticism from some of his fellow Oblate priests.

Because of this as well as for other reasons, he made it a point to remain constant touch with his Superior General and in sufficient contact with his provincial and local Superiors. But even to them he never complained about his critics; nor did he bother to respond to their criticisms nor allow the same to cramp his work and style. Externally he seemed to carry on as though he was completely unaffected and unconcerned; sensitive as he was, however, he silently suffered a great deal from this lack of comprehension. Nevertheless, he always remained convinced that critics were not enemies but rather colleagues who in fact appreciated him and what he did.

The preceding pages have already copiously illustrated this multiform exceptionality. In his regard, it is good here to recall what has been said about his manner of celebrating the Eucharist, of reciting the divine Office, of his personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin and the place he gave her in his preaching and pilgrimage work, of what he noted regarding his way of ministering in the confessional, about the qualities he feels an authentic zeal for souls must have.

### **Father Edmund Thiriet's assessment**

There are still some pages in Father Edmund Thiriet's necrological sketch that further illustrate Father Montfort's exceptionality as a missionary and analyze it more deeply. It is these texts that follow below: in regarding them, we need to remember that they are written by an Oblate who knew Father Montfort well and who had access to Father Montfort's personal papers.

A first text of Father Thiriet that describes Father Montfort the missionary is as follows:

Let us follow the apostle of Mary across this vast battlefield whereon  
for thirty-five years he fought more valiantly than any other, whereon he battled

might and main the enemies of salvation, scored outstanding victories against Satan and everywhere worked miracle of conversion, even in the most indifferent parishes. It seemed as though he had only to appear in a given place and the legions of the adversary would flee, so that where others had failed his efforts were crowned with success. God's power followed his footsteps and reduced even the most hostile to religion.

If we are to assess properly Father Montfort's achievement, we must have practical knowledge of what a mission is. Those who have never gone into that arena can hardly be aware of the difficulties inherent in that kind of work. One wrongly imagines that the apostle has only to appear among the people and souls will be impressed, that a clarion blast generally suffices to wake up those who are asleep, that the sounding of the final trumpet shakes up sinners and produces marvelous results. There is no doubt that God's envoy, equipped as he is with supernatural weapons given to him by the One whom he represents, wields a certain prestige on those around him. He has graces of state that powerfully second him and Our Lord can make use of the weakest of instruments to work marvels.

Nevertheless, as a general rule, the final result largely depends on the missionary's skill, knowledge and holiness. If he lacks the qualities and virtues that make a man an apostle and a saint, he will have at best a success that is mediocre, passing and pretty well nil.

The first obstacle -- and there are obstacles everywhere -- will paralyze his effort; a few failures will bring on discouragement; the vain prestige of his human eloquence will convert no one; he will quit after two or three fruitless attempts.

Father Montfort never experienced such defeat. On the natural talents that God had granted him in so generous a measure was grafted a magnificent flowering tree of virtues: zeal, charity, humility, kindness, living faith, boundless confidence.

His very appearance was impressive. He was tall, very straight, upright but not aloof, as dignified in the street as in church, in conversation or in the pulpit his face was one of character, open and attractive, one that portrayed all the emotions of his soul with a constant fine expression of goodness and kindness. His penetrating look reflected the radiant beauty of his interior and the pure conscience. His voice especially harmonized with the different sentiments that animated him: supple, sonorous, velvety, vibrant, it could reproduce all the sounds and notes of the most perfect keyboard. To persuade people, it could take on the symphonies of the breeze that sings or sobs midst the trees, to strike the impious it could assume the roar of thunder, to lash those who mocked it could take on the whistling of a whip. Was it a matter of softening the heart of stone or harden sinners and rebels? That's when the missionaries tongue found accents that rent the soul. The sobs of the crowd echoed those of the apostle: everyone shed hot tears. The very people who boasted a hopeless skepticism, those who came to his instructions to amuse

themselves at the preacher's expense, those least susceptible to being moved, those blasé with life and others, the simple women from the countryside, all were in spite of themselves affected by this popular eloquence. He held his audience in his grip to the point of giving goose-pimples, so to speak, to all of them. An involuntary and inexplicable shudder would pass through the assembly. His confreres who were quite used to hearing him, priests who swore in advance they were not going to be moved, the least sympathetic who in advance said it was all old hat, none could manage not to weep along with the others...

He had his own unique style. His tactic varied according to the different milieux. Before going into action he was not content to pray a great deal and to have religious communities pray also, but he carefully studied the terrain. Without giving impression of doing so, he could observe, discretely inquire, inform himself little by little about a situation, never venture forth on the basis of a first inspiration so as not to expose himself to miscalculation. And so, when it was a matter of striking a telling blow, he always hit the target and that at the best moment.

If I had to analyze in detail his manner of proceeding, I would have to present him at work in a multiplicity of circumstances wherein he would seem to be in contradiction with himself. However, he was always a man with one single idea and one sole aim: the salvation of souls, the transformation or renewal of the parish entrusted to him. Still, how many means he employed, how many different ways he used to achieve this aim!

In the end, it was the spirit of faith that guided him, and this judgment and memory rendered him priceless service. No more than St. Paul did he ever put his glory into giving sublime discourses. The esteem or criticism of the clergy did not matter to him at all. As long as good was one, as long as souls were saved, as long as God was served: that is what he wanted above all.

Does this mean all was perfect in Father Montfort? It would be folly to claim that. One could have all the reasons in the world not to believe me were I to affirm such a thing. Are there not shadows on every portrait? Does perfection exist here below? Every man, be he a genius or a saint, by the fact that he is a human being is beset with infirmities, miseries and imperfections<sup>153</sup>.

Another text from Father Thiriet tells us the following:

Father Montfort has written down only some notes, outlines, disparate thoughts found here and there in his reading materials, but never a complete, studied and polished sermon. His preaching was rather the fruit of his meditation at the foot of the crucifix. When on mission, he was always up by four o'clock in the morning and prayed and meditated until five. Before entering the pulpit he consulted no other book except his cross, or else he fingered his rosary and gave himself to improvising thereafter. Such improvising strongly manifested the lack of preparation, just as it also had the advantage of being within the range of the faithful's understanding, or being related to the parish's needs, and of being particularly adaptable to the class of people present. Generally speaking, the priests would have liked to see more order, more connection between the various ideas, a more regular development in the presentation of the topic, a sermon divided into parts and the interplay of proof. Some claimed, rightly or wrongly, that most of the missionaries' sermons lacked substance, but they were always forced to admit that these sermons achieved the finest results with their people. A parish-priest of a large parish said on this point: "I don't like Father Montfort's style too much; but, in conscience, I ask for him personally because I am convinced that only he is able to make an impact on people."

In the worst of areas as well as where the faith was still held in honor, Father Montfort never missed the target, always made a clean sweep. When the usual resources of his zeal proved to be powerless, he had recourse to the Blessed Virgin's intervention. How many facts there are which are simply marvelous in character! He jotted down a good number in a notebook I have in hand. Beside the name of the parish where these miracles of grace occurred, he sums it all up in three words. That was enough to remind him, but now the reader is not able to decipher the mystery<sup>154</sup>.

Father Thiriet then describes a number of extraordinary conversion incidents that occurred when Father Montfort was giving a mission at Crémieu (Isère)<sup>155</sup>, Saillans (Drôme)<sup>156</sup>

and Mercuriol (Drôme)<sup>157</sup>. The two which happened at Crémieu are as follows:

At Crémieu... he learned that three men persisted in their resolution to ridicule the missionaries right to the end. Far from giving in to grace, they were the advocates of the Devil. Since they were locally influential, they could have compromised God's work. Father Montfort considered various means capturing them in his net. He would not tackle them head-on for fear of failing; he hoped to bring them over through kindness and patience. He prayed to the good Mother to help him in this project. He asked the little children to join their prayer to his. All in vain! The mission was drawing to a close; the day of giving absolution to men had arrived. He then contacted someone who had been converted the day before and gave him as a penance to go and bring in his three friends.

It was the decisive moment of triumph. Shaken by the experience of the mission, the three sinners ceded to the improvised urging of the missionary and kneel repentant at his feet... In this same parish he obtained the conversion of a poor mother of a family who had not been practicing for twenty years. "Go and kneel before the statue of the Blessed Virgin," he told her son, a little ten-year-old boy, "and daily ask her to obtain for your mother the grace of gaining the mission indulgence". Faithful to the missionary's recommendation, the lad went each evening to kneel before Mary's altar. The mother wanted to know why he was coming home late, went into the church where she saw her son praying. At the sight she hesitated between getting angry or blessing Providence. Father Montfort was watching this from the confessional and hastened to explain the puzzle to her. The poor woman, moved to tears, prayed on her knees beside her child and went to confession before leaving the church.

Father Thiriet narrates yet other striking incidents, some of which are the following:

He was an old man of 82 who refused to respond to the invitation of grace. Father Montfort met him on the threshold of his house and gently reproved him for this indifference. "You have then taken the decision to damn yourself! That is not good! You are a good man. It is you, hear me well, it is for you that I have come -- I will see you tomorrow!" These simple words made such an impression on the man who was apparently so blasé that, not being able to stand himself any longer, he came next day to find the missionary in the sacristy... In tears he made his confession... On such occasions Father Montfort himself would weep with the penitent he was absolving<sup>158</sup>.

One day a poor worker stopped Father Montfort and said to him, "Do you know what converted me? It was not your sermons. I didn't set foot in church since the beginning of the mission, for, alas!, I detested the parish-priest too much. But you see, when the other evening you gave me such a warm handshake in the street a strange feeling shook me from head to foot. I said to myself: "By golly! What a fellow! I feel he is a friend of the poor! I have to go and see him. Your words then did the rest..."<sup>159</sup>

Father Thiriet also adds the following important bits of information about Father Montfort, the missionary:

To stimulate his zeal and augment his strength he also had available the encouragement that came from the Tabernacle. One had to see him, in the evening, during the half-hour of oraison that he did regularly at the end of each day on mission, kneeling at the foot of the altar. His eyes shone, his face was radiant as he savored in silence the pure joys of the apostolate... as he offered to Our Lord the soul of a poor sinner who had been converted<sup>160</sup>.

His happiness was at a peak as if he was assigned to a place that

was considered impossible, where serious obstacles had to be overcome and inveterate vices vigorously attacked -- Here is a people immune to the touch of grace; there you will find a clan of opposition organized against the missionaries in order to make their efforts fail; you will need lots of skill and patience to dodge the ruses of these enraged enemies of religion.

"God be praised!" he would exclaim with a meaning smile. From that moment on one could be certain of success, for the apostle had put all his trust in God... Far from allowing himself to be frightened by the thought of failure, the Oblate of Mary did not hide the joy he experienced in getting down to work... Thus Father Montfort brought to a good ending the most difficult missions. It was impossible to escape the influence of his words: a word that one felt always came from the heart, a heart that was pure, loving, passionate, afire for the salvation of souls. To save a soul he was ready for the most painful sacrifices. He even used to cry out the pulpit: "Oh my God, do you require the very last drop of my blood as a ransom for my brothers? My life is in your hands: let me die! Let me die right here for the salvation of these souls!"<sup>161</sup>

When the power of eloquence had no effect, he used other weapons to overcome the most stubborn resistance. Singing hymns helped him greatly to bring the faithful to the instructions. He put his soul into that. Gifted with a good voice, he used it very well to make a salutary impact. It was impossible to hear him sing our popular hymns and not be moved...<sup>162</sup>

Later on, Father Thiriet adds certain elements which relate to the period that Father Montfort spent as a missionary based at Pontmain. Among other things, Father Thiriet writes:

A son of Brittany, he found himself in a milieu that corresponded better to his kind of eloquence. He knew better the spirit of the people and discerned their needs, sufferings and miseries. He placed himself at their level, shared their sorrows, tasted their joys, informed himself about what concerned them: all that with an air of charming bonhomie.

In the pulpit he preached the Gospel with conviction, simplicity of faith and the authority that virtue, the holiness of one's ministry, the halo of maturity and the experience of old age to the word.

Far from imitating those preachers who go everywhere with the same baggage of sermons they have learned by heart, he held in horror long stereotype phrases and inflections calculated to make the same emphasis with every kind of audience. He took his inspiration from concrete circumstances, local customs, the weakness or qualities proper to the given place he was evangelizing -- and he was always new, even if he had already appeared for the 10<sup>th</sup> time in the same parish or community. His manner pleased city people no less than it did the simple people of the countryside. He felt more at home with the latter, however... Many parish priests appreciated him because of his apostolic simplicity... Others, as we have mentioned, undoubtedly would have preferred a more elegant form in his discourses, a more solid doctrinal base, a more closely-knit argumentation, a deeper erudition...

Father Montfort did not experience the sweet leisure that methodical and deep studies require. All this time was spent in the confessional or in the pulpit. His mind was constantly absorbed by the preoccupations of a ministry did not allow him a minute of respite... In his case, as soon as he ended a mission he opened another. Nevertheless, I can affirm that he possessed to a high degree knowledge of good and the science of souls. He drew the first from its true source, an assiduous reading of the holy Books. He nourished himself from that source daily... he savoured these inspired pages either in the recitation of the breviary or in his meditations at the foot of the Tabernacle. One never saw him, as one does so many others, avidly seeking news about

contemporary politics or paging through modern printed items; he never found the time to open a newspaper, but he was never separated from his Bible which he consulted when he was resting, nor from his book of moral theology which followed him everywhere. He knew very well that the minister of the divine word who does not meditate is a voice without a word, music without a theme, a ship without a compass, a body without a soul. He entered the pulpit after he had at length rested on the heart of Jesus and contemplated the secrets of his mercy. I can add that he possessed the science of souls. Thanks to his keen observation, he did not have to make a minute examination to know the moral temperament of a given postulation, its degree of intelligence, its character, its qualities and weaknesses, its temptations and aspirations, its desires and distastes, its strength and frailties, its openness and obstacles for good or for evil...<sup>163</sup>

Father Thiriet continues:

A tireless missionary, he enthusiastically sowed God's Word in the provinces of the West where religion had not as yet lost its rights or privileges; he always returned to Notre-Dame de Pontmain laden an abundant spiritual harvest which he joyfully placed at her feet. For him it was a sweet satisfaction to bring to the shrine, as a pilgrimage of thanksgiving, the parishes he had just evangelized. We then saw him radiantly happy, lavishing maternal care on these souls whom he himself consecrated to Mary. Thereby he provoked celebrations of faith worthy of the first ages of Christianity; and on these occasions he even managed to compose hymns which the people sang... For our good Father Pontmain was an oasis where he liked to rest in Mary's presence from his labours. Here he always found peace, tranquility, happiness. Without forgetting his dear shrine of l'Osier, he was so taken by his glorious Lady, the Virgin with the Stars, that he always spoke about her with enthusiasm. What did he not do to spread her cult and promote devotion to Our Lady of Hope among the faithful! With good reason he can be considered one of the founders of the basilica and the main benefactor of its work...<sup>164</sup>

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On December 9, 1993, I asked Father Joseph Chardonnet, who is at Pontmain, what remained of the great reputation that Father Montfort enjoyed in his time. His December 12, 1993 letter replies:

Present remembrance = Zero, and that is not surprising after 98 years. He was neither parish priest at Pontmain, nor Superior of the chaplains there, but a member of the community assigned to preaching parish missions. Father José Duval, a native of Pontmain, has told me that he never heard anyone speak about him locally: perhaps once or twice his mother did mention him, but that is all. So we should have no illusions about the remembrance that remains after us... despite all the ministry we may have done. We have no original papers or writings of Father Montfort. In 1903 there was the "expulsion". Priests of the diocese became chaplains and continued the work. We came back in 1923, took possession of our house again, but we no longer served the shrine. Because of this a certain dispersal of documents, archives and other papers occurred: and we cannot rule out that some things were destroyed in the interim.

May the good example of Father Montfort be again recalled from the contents of this article; and may he himself intercede for and inspire the young Oblate who now is privileged to wear his Oblate cross!

NOTES:

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- <sup>1</sup> General Council Meeting of November 2, 1868. *Register of General Council minutes* (RGC henceforth), vol. 2, p. 236. Father Antoine Had been at l'Osier from January 1862
- <sup>2</sup> Audruger to Fabre, November 2, 1868. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>3</sup> Audruger to Fabre, November 7, 1867. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*
- <sup>4</sup> Audruger to Fabre, December 15, 1867. Rome, Oblate General Archives
- <sup>5</sup> Audruger to Fabre, January 28, 1868. Rome, Oblate General Archives.
- <sup>6</sup> General Council Meeting of February 3, 1868. RGC, vol.2, P. 260.
- <sup>7</sup> Audruger to Fabre, February 28, 1868. Rome, Oblate General Archives.
- <sup>8</sup> Audruger to Fabre, "Rapport sur N.D. de l'Osier February 29, 1868". Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>9</sup> Audruger to Fabre, May 24, 1868. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Audruger to Fabre, July 3, 1868. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>12</sup> Audruger to Fabre, August 11, 1868. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>13</sup> Audruger to Fabre, October 18, 1868. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>14</sup> Audruger to Fabre, January 5, 1869. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>15</sup> Audruger to Fabre, April 10, 1869. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>16</sup> Audruger to Fabre, May 5, 1870. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>17</sup> Audruger to Fabre, October 19, 1870. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>18</sup> Audruger to Fabre, February 2, 1871. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>19</sup> Audruger to Fabre, July 12, 1871. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>20</sup> Audruger to Fabre, July 18, 1871. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>21</sup> Audruger to Fabre, July 20, 1871. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>22</sup> Audruger to Fabre, August 7, 1871, written at Tours. Rome, *Oblate General Archives*. Father Audruger again returned to the France-Nord Province and on October 17, 1871, he was installed as Superior of the Oblate community at Angers: cf. Audruger to Fabre, October 17, 1871, written at Angers; Rome, *Oblate General Archives*. Father Marius Roux was appointed Superior at Notre-Dame de l'Osier: cf. General Council Meeting, August 7, 1871: Rgc, vol.2, p. 407; also Letter of Marius Roux to Fabre, September 16, 1871: Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>23</sup> Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>24</sup> Rome, *Oblate General Archives*.
- <sup>25</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Juillet 1897, p. 89.
- <sup>26</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Mai 1897, p. 27.
- <sup>27</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Juillet 1897, p.90.
- <sup>28</sup> Father Thiriet indicates the wrong year here. Father Montfort's mother died at some time during the first half of 1876 when he was preaching a mission at Meyzieu. Mairot's dates, based on the now destroyed Codex Historicus of the Oblate House of l'Osier, are to be given preference.
- <sup>29</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Juillet 1897, p. 90
- <sup>30</sup> In the minutes for the August 28, 1876 meeting we read:"It is decided that Reverend Father Vigeron of the house of Bon-Secours will transfer to the house of l'Osier; and that Reverend Fathers Avignon and Montfort of the house of l'Osier will transfer to Bon-Secours. When the time of Father Bermond's has expired, Reverend Father Avignon will become Superior." RGC, vol. 3. p. 213.
- <sup>31</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Juillet 1897, p.91.
- <sup>32</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *ibid.*, mistakenly says Audruger
- <sup>33</sup> MISSIONS..., 1878, p. 115-116
- <sup>34</sup> MISSIONS..., 1878, p. 116.
- <sup>35</sup> MISSIONS..., 1878, p. 124-125.



36 That is, the death of his mother and leaving l'Osier.  
37 Thiriet, Edmont, *op. cit.*, Août 1897, p.114.  
38 Quoted in Gaben, Victor, o.m.i., *Chronique de N.D. de Bon Secours, 1846-1960*, Tome I (1846-1898), p. 250.  
39 This effectively means he was scheduled to preach th Oblate annual retreat in October to the General House community.

40 RGC, vol. 3. p. 277-278

41 RGC, vol. 3, p. 279.

42 RGC, vol 3, p. 279.

43 RGC, vol. 3, p 284-285. Assistant General Father Aimé Martinet, writing from Paris to Assistant General Louis Saullier, on August 18, 1877, opens his letter as follows: "I have the great satisfaction of telling you that Father Montfort arrived this morning, totally converted. The Superior General's letter reached him when, it seems, he had already decided to return. This evening he is leaving for Royaumont where, after resting a few days, he will be preaching the retreat."

44 Gaben, Victor, *op. cit.* ,p.297.

45 RGC, vol. 3, p. 274.

46 Rome. *Oblate General Archives: Montfort file.*

47 Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Août 1897, p. 115.

48 According to the personnel information available in the Oblate General Archives in Rome, the Oblate community at Pontmain grew as follows:

- 1872: 2 Fathers and 1 Oblate Brother;
- 1873: 4 Fathers and 1 Oblate Brother;
- 1880: 5 Fathers and 1 Oblate Brother;
- 1882: 5 Fathers and 1 Oblate Brother;
- 1883: 6 Fathers and 2 Oblate Brothers;
- 1887: 7 Fathers;
- 1888: 7 Fathers;
- 1891: 8 Fathers and 5 Oblate Brothers;
- 1895: 12 Fathers and 5 Oblate Brothers.

This community, therefore, more than doubled in number during the years that Father Montfort was part of it: from 5 or 6 Oblates in 1877 to 17 Oblates in 1895.

49 For a detailed and most carefully documented description of this January 17, 1871 apparition and its meaning, cf. Laurentin, René., and Durand, Albert, *Pontmain: Histoire authentique*, Paris, 1970, 3 volumes. For an eyewitness account i.e. by one of the visionaries, cf. Joseph Barbedette, o.m.i., *Récit d'un Voyant*. Father Barbedette wrote this account at Pontmain in August 1891 in obedience to his Superior, Father Jean-Baptiste Lemius, o.m.i. His account is reproduced in full by Laurentin and Durand, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 224-251. It was first published in 1892-1893 and several times since, the last time by the Oblate magazine *Pôle et Tropiques* in 1985. This latest published item is currently distributed at the shrine of Notre-Dame de Pontmain.

50 For the French text of this pastoral letter, cf. Laurentin and Durand, *op.cit.*, vol. 3, p. 172-187.

51 Cf. Laurentin and Durant, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 173-174.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 187

53 Cf. Laurent and Durand, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 116-176 regarding the meaning and future of Pontmain.

54 Alexander Audruger to Joseph Fabre, November 11, 1871. Marc de l'Hermitte (Provincial of France-Nord) to Louis Soullier (Assistant General), January 6, 1872. Alexander Audruger to Joseph Fabre, February 11, 1872. All these letters are in Rome, Oblate General Archives.

55 RGC, vol. 2, p. 427-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 434, 437, 440.

56 Before becoming Bishop of Laval, Bishop Wicart had been at Fréjus.

57 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 236.

58 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 242-243.

56 Before becoming Bishop of Laval, Bishop Wicart had been at Fréjus.

57 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 236.

58 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 242-243.

59 The cornerstone of the shrine church was blessed by Bishop Wicart on June 17, 1873.

60 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 307-308.

61 MISSIONS..., 1873, p. 342-370 describe the many religious activities that took place from June 26 to July 4,

1877 on this occasion: the solemn pilgrimages, the blessing, the acclamations, the inauguration of the Archconfraternity of Notre-Dame de Pontmain.

<sup>62</sup> MISSIONS..., 1877, p. 274-276.

<sup>63</sup> MISSIONS..., 1878, p. 550-558, gives a detailed description of the event. Cardinal de Falloux was born at Bourg d'Iré (Diocese of Angers) on August 15, 1815; he had been made a Cardinal by Pope Pius IX on March 12, 1877.

<sup>64</sup> MISSIONS..., 1879, p. 348. In fact, the French Government suppressed all religious Congregations that had not been approved by French civil law. In November 1880, the Oblates were forcibly removed from 17 houses in France. At the time they were still living in the priest's house which served them as their residence: thus they as yet had no House in Pontmain, and so were seen as parish-priests and chaplains to the shrine. Hence, they were not expelled from there.

<sup>65</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p. 461.

<sup>66</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, août 1897, p. 121-122.

<sup>67</sup> Thiriet, Edmond, *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p. 461.

<sup>69</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p. 466.

<sup>70</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p.467-468.

<sup>71</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p. 469.

<sup>72</sup> MISSIONS..., 1882, p. 471-475. In these pages, Father Joseph Bazin, one of the two assistant priests at Saint-Brice-en-Cogles writes about this mission and the Oblate missionaries. Among other things he says: "They have achieved a success that surpasses all that we had hoped for. They came to speak to us in the name of the Lord. Apostles of truth, they preached to us the Gospel in a tone of conviction, a simplicity of faith, and with all the authority that virtue, the holiness of their ministry and the halo of persecution confers to their word." The "persecution" refers to the expulsions that the Oblates had just suffered in France. Father Charles Moisan had come to the Pontmain preaching team from an Oblate house from which he had been expelled. This mission had lasted three weeks and the feast of Christmas was part of it; during this mission, confessions were heard for eight hours on a daily basis

<sup>73</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 451

<sup>74</sup> This latter was in 1885: cf. MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 267.

<sup>75</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 451-452.

<sup>76</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 452.

<sup>77</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 452-453.

<sup>78</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 453-454. Three times more Father Montfort is mention "en passant" in this report: p 455, 456 and 460. The only new item of information is that Father Montfort had at one time or other preached at Granville.

<sup>79</sup> MISSIONS..., 1885, p. 116-117.

<sup>80</sup> MISSIONS..., 1886, p. 123-124.

<sup>81</sup> MISSIONS..., 1888, p. 102.

<sup>83</sup> MISSIONS..., 1888, p. 103-104.

<sup>84</sup> MISSIONS..., 1888, p. 107.

<sup>85</sup> MISSIONS..., 1888, p. 109.

<sup>86</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 446.

<sup>87</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 461-462

<sup>88</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 460.

<sup>89</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 462.

<sup>90</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 463.

<sup>91</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>92</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>93</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>94</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>95</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>97</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 466.

<sup>98</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 472.

<sup>99</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 474.

<sup>100</sup> MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 474.

101 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 474-475.  
102 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 475.  
103 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 476-477.  
104 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 478.  
105 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 480.  
106 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 480-481  
107 MISSIONS..., 1889, p. 481.  
108 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 299-300.  
109 Rome, Oblate General Archives, Montfort file.  
110 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 309.  
111 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 300.  
112 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 300-301.  
113 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 301-302.  
114 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 302-303.  
115 Rome, Oblate General Archives, Montfort file.  
116 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 307-308.  
117 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 308.  
118 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 308.  
119 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 308.  
120 MISSIONS..., 1890, p. 477-478; 1894, p. 308-309.  
121 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 309.  
122 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 309.  
123 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 309.  
124 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 309.  
125 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 311-312.  
126 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 312-313. The above letter was written on February 7, 1891, at Trémorêt; Father Montfort had by then been ill there from January 29 to February 6.  
127 Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Septembre 1897, p. 150-151  
128 Thiriet, Edmond, *ibid.*, p. 151-152  
129 MISSIONS..., 1894, p. 322.  
130 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 346-347.  
131 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 347.  
132 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 355.  
133 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 357.  
134 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 361-362.  
135 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 362.  
136 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 375-377.  
137 MISSIONS..., 1895, p. 345; 1896, p. 52.  
138 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 51.  
139 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 51.  
140 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 54-57, where Father Rey describes his own experience of this conflagration.  
141 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 57.  
142 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 70.  
143 MISSIONS..., 1896, P. 70-71.  
144 MISSIONS..., 1896, P. 71.  
145 MISSIONS..., 1896, P. 71.  
146 MISSIONS..., 1896, P. 72.  
147 MISSIONS..., 1896, P. 72.  
148 Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, p. 152-153.  
149 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 72-73. Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, p. 154 reports substantially the same.  
150 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 73. Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, p. 154.  
151 MISSIONS..., 1896, p. 73.  
152 MISSIONS..., 1923, p. 895.  
153 Thiriet, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Juillet 1896, p. 90-92.

- 154 Thiriet, Edmond, op. cit. Août 1896, p.121-122.  
155 Thiriet, Edmond, op. cit. Août 1896, p.122.  
156 Thiriet, Edmond, op. cit. Août 1896, p.123-124.  
157 Thiriet, Edmond, op. cit. Août 1896, p.124.  
158 Thieret, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Avril 1897, p. 377.  
159 Thieret, Edmond, *ibid.*  
160 Thiriet, Edmond. *op. cit.*, p. 379.  
161 Thieret, Edmond, *op. cit.*, Mai 1897, p. 21.  
162 Thieret, Edmond, *ibid.*, p. 22.  
163 Thiriet, Edmond. *op.cit.*, Août 1987, p. 117-119.  
164 Thiriet, Edmond. *ibid.*, 119-120.