

CHRONICLE OF AN UNFORGETTABLE VISIT

St. Laurent was in a festive mood... Yellow and white flags adorned the houses and shops, a banner proclaiming "Welcome to Pope John Paul II" on the facade of the basilica, an immense painting of Montfort above the door of the corner bookstore. All was ready!

At the Motherhouse, the papamobile had arrived the night before, the chapel was decorated, six televisions lined the central aisle ready to transmit the historic moment. It was raining! 9.30 h. All assembled in the chapel for the community Mass celebrated by Fr W. Considine, smm, superior general. Sr Barbara translated a message from the provincial of G.B.I.: "I would like to express that we are united in thought and in prayer. We share your joy and profound sentiments of pride to be members of the Montfortian family". Sr Liliana followed with a message from the provincial of Italy: "In union with all of the Sisters of Italy united in prayer and in joyful expectation of the Pope's visit, I send greetings to St. Laurent where Montfort and Marie-Louise continue to speak wisdom to the heart of the whole Montfortian family in its search for holiness and for wisdom".

10.45 h. He's here! The landing in Tours was transmitted by television. The flags of France and of the Pope flew from the windows of the cockpit as the plane approached the terminal. 16.55 h. The sound of the helicopter! All the bells of St. Laurent rang out. When it landed in the field facing Bethany, Bishop Garnier of the diocese of Luçon and Sr Catherine, provincial of France, welcomed the Pope. The prayer vigil in the basilica was interrupted to permit those present to hear what was going on outside. An explosion of joy from the students from St. Michel, St. Gabriel and the public high school assembled in the garden in front of the community St. Joseph! The Pope gave them rendez-vous in Paris for the summer of 1997.

As he advanced, Pope John Paul passed between the people of St. Laurent and the religious women and men who braved the rain to greet him. In front of the basilica, people filled the square, inside a group of children and the three superiors general of the Montfortian family awaited him along with the president of the Major Superiors of Western France and the Abbot of the monastery of Bellefontaine which had recently suffered the martyrdom of three of its monks at Tibhirine in Algeria.

Words cannot express the impact of the moment when the Pope knelt before the tombs of Montfort and Marie-Louise for a prolonged moment of prayer. The three superiors general knelt behind him. Profound silence reigned in the basilica. The memory of that moment will be forever imprinted in our memories. The procession continued towards the beautifully decorated sanctuary. Fr W Considine, smm, welcomed John Paul II. Montfort and Marie-Louise looked down on the assembly during the Vespers which followed! In his homily, the Pope noted the profound influence of Montfort on his spiritual journey: "You know that I owe much to this Saint and to his 'Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin', I want to stress above all that, in the spirit of St. Louis-Marie, the spiritual life flows directly from baptism." Magnificat!

After vespers, the parish, the diocese of Luçon and the Montfortian family offered gifts. In the name of all, Jean Friant, sg, superior general of the Brothers of St-Gabriel, presented a manuscript of the True Devotion ; Sr Barbara O'Dea offered a relic of Father de Montfort in a handcrafted case of wood. The Pope reciprocated offering a beautiful chalice to Fr Michel Simonnet, smm, pastor of the parish. It was time to leave! The Holy Father took the time to greet people along the central aisle.

Au revoir... and thank you!

May this visit, which made our founders known to so many people, renew our desire to deepen and our zeal to share the heritage received from all those who have gone before, as to the people of our time.

September 19, 1996

Sr Barbara O'Dea, D.W.

Superior General