

Montfort's 'Bucket List'

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Those of us who have seen the movie *Bucket List*, featuring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson, will remember that these two stars played the parts of a couple of feisty yet terminally ill patients faced with the reality that they would soon be 'kicking the bucket'. They decided to make a list of all the things that they truly longed to do before they died, and actually carry out as many of those wishes as they could.



Well, St. Louis Marie de Montfort never sat down and wrote his 'bucket list' on paper, but it is very enlightening to consider what he felt impelled to do in the jam-packed years before his death at the age of 43. We may well ask ourselves when and how he first began to intuit his impending death.

Let's begin in the summer of 1713, a little more than six months after Louis Marie's 40th birthday. In hindsight, we know that he had only three and a half years of life left to him and much that he still ardently desired to accomplish.

We are also aware that there were clear signs of diminishment in his health and well-being and that he was fully aware of them.

In the spring of that year, Louis Marie had been poisoned by radical Calvinists in La Rochelle. He owed his survival to an anti-toxin administered almost immediately and his own robust constitution. But this crisis took its toll on him and became a turning point in his life.

Everybody, including Montfort himself, noticed his chronic fatigue and diminished energy. He was, in fact, struggling with weariness every day. Most people looked at him and said, "*He works far too hard in his missions*": or "*All that mortification over the years has finally caught up with him.*" or "*He has walked thousands of miles through broiling sun, slashing rain, bitter ice and snow.*" or "*These last ten years of frustration, failure, opposition, and tension have been too much for any human being to bear.*"

But Montfort himself maintained stubbornly that the chief cause of his weakness was the attempted poisoning.

So at some level of his being, conscious or unconscious, he mobilized himself to do all things he most ardently desired to do until the day when he could do no more.

And what were the things on his 'bucket list'. Here's the short list:

- to 'touch base' with the two of his dearest friends from his adolescent years at the Jesuit 'college' in Rennes – Claude-Francois Poullart-des-Places and Jean-Baptiste Blain
- to look back on his life and struggle with its meaning and potential impact on the future
- to complete and ensure the future transmission of *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*

- to establish canonically the congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom, and to set in place (at least potentially) the future members of the Company of Mary (Montfort Missionaries).

The Summer of 1713

Still recovering wearily from the attempted poisoning, Montfort did an amazing thing – he walked all the way to Paris to try to recruit seminarians for the company of poor priests that he intended to found. The seminary of the Holy Spirit had been founded ten years earlier by one of his two best friends from high school and college days, Claude Poullart-des-Places. These two had shared a missionary vision of the church. And even though Claude did not feel called to follow Louis-Marie as a member of Montfort’s missionary band, he had promised that if his Seminary of the Holy Spirit succeeded, he would be delighted to furnish potential members for Montfort’s future band of missionary priests.



Now, ten years later, Claude, whose health had always been precarious, had already been dead for five years. Yet Montfort, remembered for his affection for their founder, was welcomed warmly by the healthily growing Congregation of the Holy Spirit Fathers. And here, among them Montfort was about to advance two of the items on his ‘bucket list’.

First of all, by his vocation promotion talks during this visit to the seminary, he sowed the seed of the call of Adrian Vatel who, soon after his ordination, joined Louis Marie’s missionary team. About five years after Montfort’s death, Vatel would become one of the first vowed members of the newly founded Company of Mary. Later still, two other seminarians who had listened to Louis at the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris in August 1713, would join his missionary congregation.

Secondly, Louis Marie gave a series of extraordinary conferences on his treatise, *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*. Radiant and graced, Montfort’s face literally shone as he spoke passionately, and lovingly of Wisdom. Fr. Bouic, who was there, reports how deeply the hearts of his listeners were moved. A prolonged encounter with Wisdom had been an earth-shaking experience in the life of Louis Marie at a time of rejection, pain, failure, and isolation when he had lived just a few blocks from Claude Poullart-des-Places and had shared much with him.

Almost certainly, it was during and after his 1713 visit, that Montfort did the final editing of LEW. Two years later in 1715 he gave an unnamed book to Marie Louise. That she knew the contents of LEW is evident from the Constitutions of 1759, which she produced together with Fr. Besnier. At about this time also Louis Marie Montfort gave Marie Louise a statue of ‘wisdom as she is described by Solomon in the Old Testament’.

Did Montfort sit down and cross off these two items from his ‘bucket list’? Not literally, but surely there was a surge of peace and sense of accomplishment somewhere deep within him.

The Summer of 1714

In June 1714, Louis Marie walked all the way to Nantes to visit other close friend Jean-Baptiste Blain; the two had been together through high school, college, and the major seminary. They were so used to each other, that they could spar earnestly and long without breaking the bonds of affection between them.

Blain did not pull any punches. He attacked Louis Marie on two painfully vulnerable points. Did Montfort really think that he could convert ordinary Christians by his radical preaching the gospel? And, if he was so eager to found a company of poor missionary priests, did he really believe that any sane man would take up his rigorous asceticism and his itinerant style of living?

Montfort listened. We shall never know what questions he asked himself, for he was very sensitive to the needs of those to whom he preached. In the end, he held up his New Testament and confessed simply, "I truly don't know any other way. If God is asking for something else, please, make it clear to me." We owe to Jean-Baptiste Blain this insight into Montfort's soul-searching as he moved closer to his death.

The Summer of 1715

In March 1715, Marie Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet arrived in La Rochelle in response to Montfort's insistent invitation. Within the next six months, Louis Marie had arranged their lodgings, their work, their way of life, and their contacts with a few women who would eventually join them.



More importantly he had written a Rule of Life that was admired and canonically approved by Bishop Champflour, canon lawyers, and other clerical experts. He had made it possible for the first two Daughters of Wisdom to make their canonical vows. He had, in short, founded a new religious congregation and rooted it solidly in his spirituality.

There was such urgency and energy in all that he accomplished during these months. How much did he sense that he had only eight more months more to live?

That we shall never know, but this we do know: another great objective of his life had been brought to fruition.

Bear in mind that during this period, Louis Marie also preached 19 month-long retreats and led two week-long pilgrimages. Incredible!

And he died a happy man. On the day before he died, though mortally ill, he preached his last sermon. In the presence of Bishop Etienne Champflour, he gave his favorite sermon on the tender love of Jesus, Wisdom Incarnate. He never heard the Bishop's affectionate testimony about him, "I have lost the best priest of my diocese." I think Montfort, who during his life had heard just the opposite from so many prelates, would have chuckled just a little bit at that.