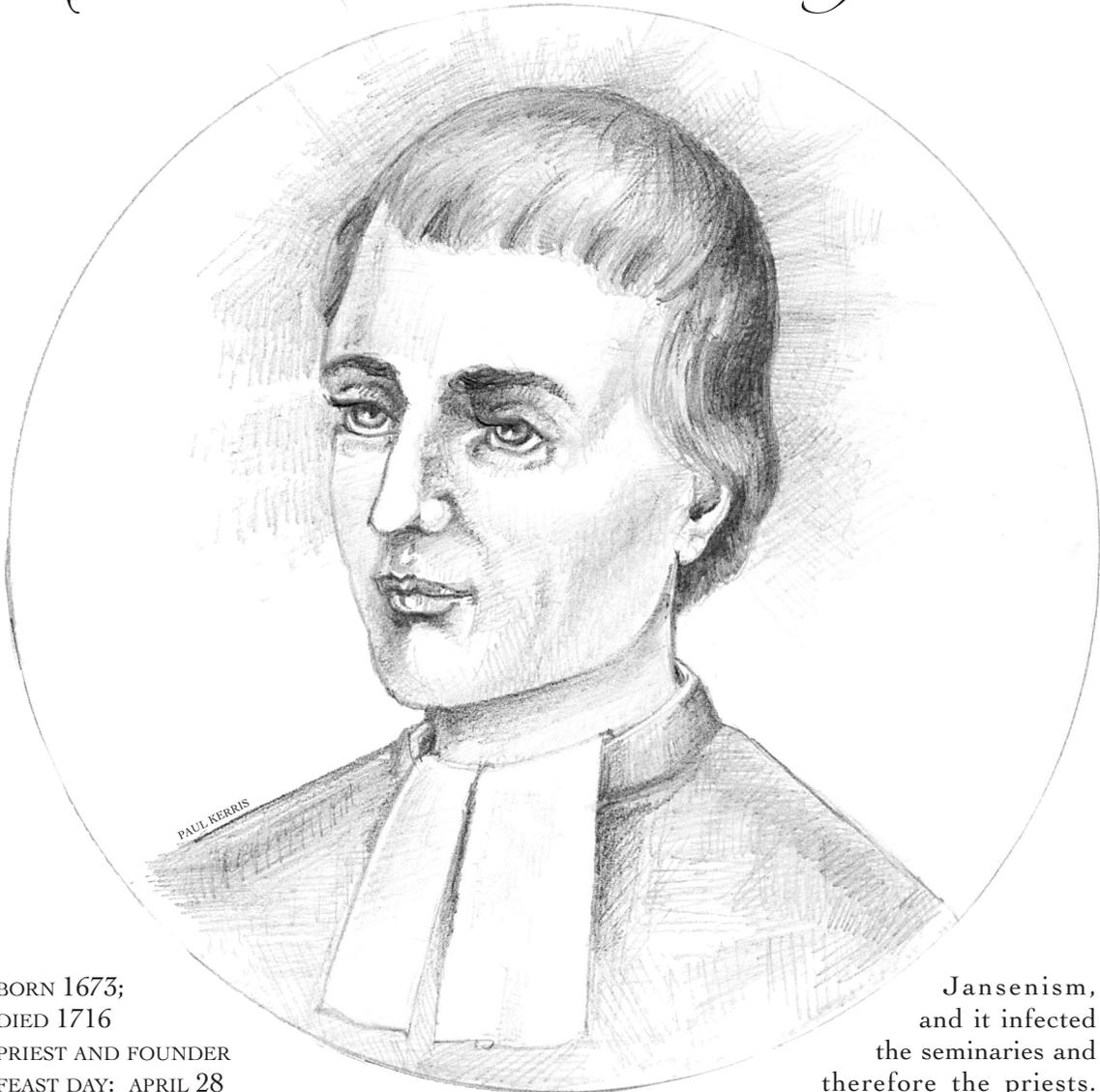




St. Louis de Montfort



BORN 1673;
DIED 1716
PRIEST AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: APRIL 28

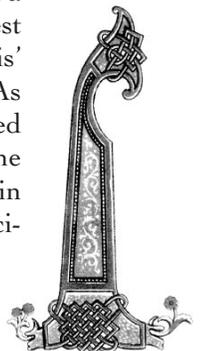
Jansenism,
and it infected
the seminaries and
therefore the priests.

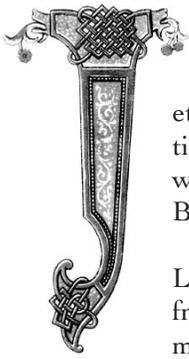
France's most effective force

against Jansenism was St. Louis de Montfort.

THE HUGUENOT PROTESTANTISM that flourished in France in the hundred years following Martin Luther was a form of Calvinism. In 1640 a heresy called Jansenism arose, influenced by the Calvinist belief that God chooses only some people to be saved. Jansenists, who falsely claimed to be faithful Catholics, were harshly rigorist. People were told that a good confession required perfect contrition, and that few people were worthy to receive the Eucharist. Devotions to Jesus' Sacred Heart were viewed as presumption and to the Blessed Mother as idolatry. Many bishops leaned to

The second of eighteen children and the oldest of eight who survived infancy, Louis was born in Montfort, a town west of Rennes in Brittany, the northwestern region of France. Jean-Baptiste Grignon de Montfort, his father, was a man of position in the community but of modest means. He was prone to violent anger. Louis' mother, Jeanne Robert, was deeply pious. As a child he was drawn to images of the Blessed Mother. He told his playmates stories of the saints, preached sermons to them, led them in praying the rosary, and organized rosary soci-

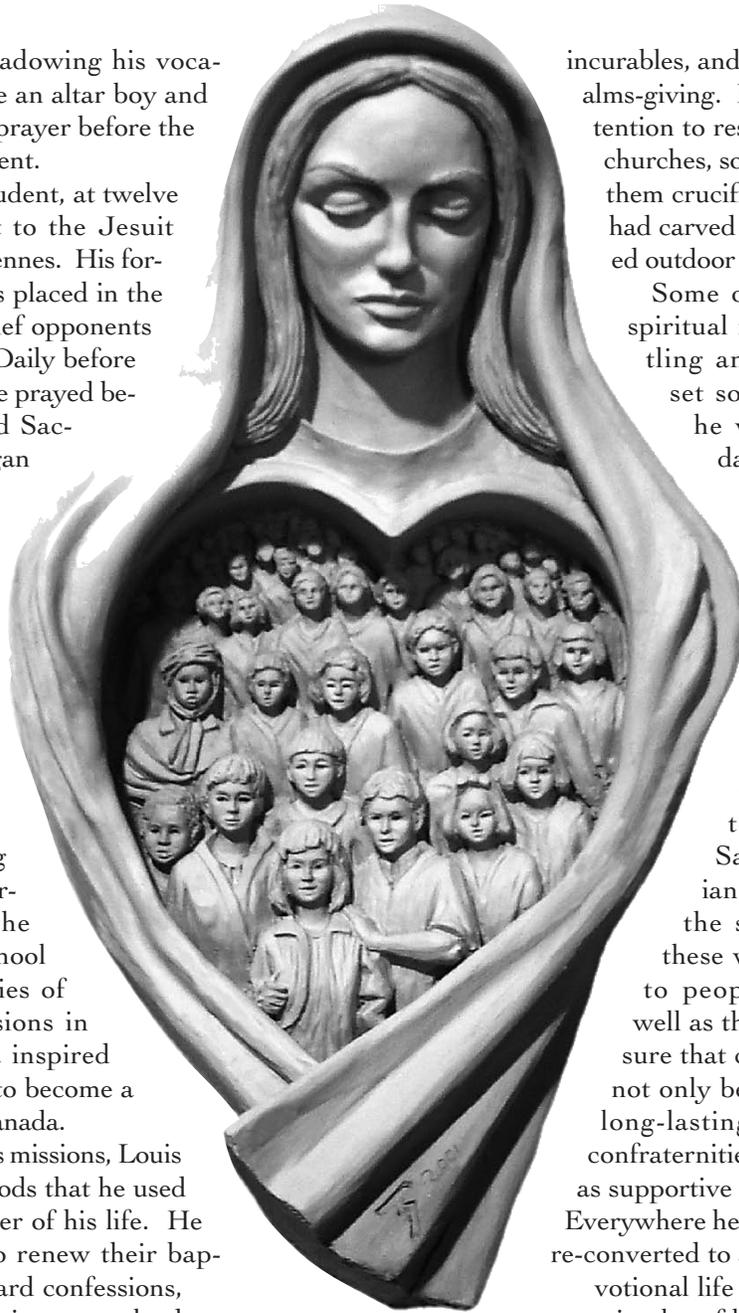




eties, all foreshadowing his vocation. He became an altar boy and was devoted to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

A brilliant student, at twelve Louis was sent to the Jesuit free school in Rennes. His formation was thus placed in the hands of the chief opponents of Jansenism. Daily before and after class he prayed before the Blessed Sacrament, and began fasting and using mortifications such as hair shirts and scourging, which he continued throughout his life. He joined a sodality (a lay association of young men) that undertook care of the poor during school holidays. Stories of the Jesuit missions in North America inspired in him a desire to become a missionary in Canada.

In the Poitiers missions, Louis developed methods that he used for the remainder of his life. He called people to renew their baptismal vows, heard confessions, regularized marriages, resolved disputes, and baptized and catechized children. He celebrated liturgies that were alive with devotion and preached sermons infused with the love of Jesus and his mother Mary. He instituted evening rosary devotions (a prayer to which he was so devoted that he eventually became a Dominican tertiary) and processions. He opened schools, founded hospitals for



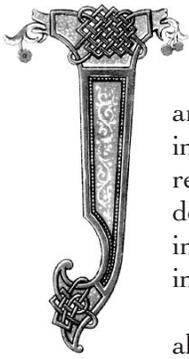
Her Children, by Timothy Schmalz

incurables, and inspired increased alms-giving. He gave special attention to restoring dilapidated churches, sometimes placing in them crucifixes and statues he had carved himself, and erected outdoor crucifixes.

Some of his methods of spiritual revival were startling and dramatic. He set some of the hymns he wrote to existing dance tunes. He encouraged people to make pyres of their irreligious books and pictures. He enacted dramas, for example acting the part of a dying sinner while others took the parts of Satan and a guardian angel fighting for the sinner's soul. In these ways, he appealed to people's emotions as well as their minds. To ensure that conversions would not only be genuine but also long-lasting, he established confraternities and associations as supportive faith communities. Everywhere he went, people were re-converted to a fervent faith, devotional life was renewed, and miracles of healing took place. Yet his missions were so different from the spirit of the time that by 1706 the bishop of Poitiers and several other bishops in western France had forbidden him to preach in their dioceses. Obedient to his superiors, he had reached an impasse. He went on pilgrimage to Rome, walking the entire distance on foot, to ask the Pope if he was doing the will of God

“Everywhere he went, people were re-converted to a fervent faith, devotional life was renewed, and miracles of healing took place.”





and to request that he be sent to the missions in Canada. The Pope instead instructed him to return to France, giving him a commission under the title Missionary Apostolic and instructing him to obey the authorities in each diocese in which he worked.

Louis joined a missionary band for several months in Brittany, working numerous miracles of not only healing but multiplication of food during a famine in addition to conducting a mission. Nevertheless, he was again dismissed,

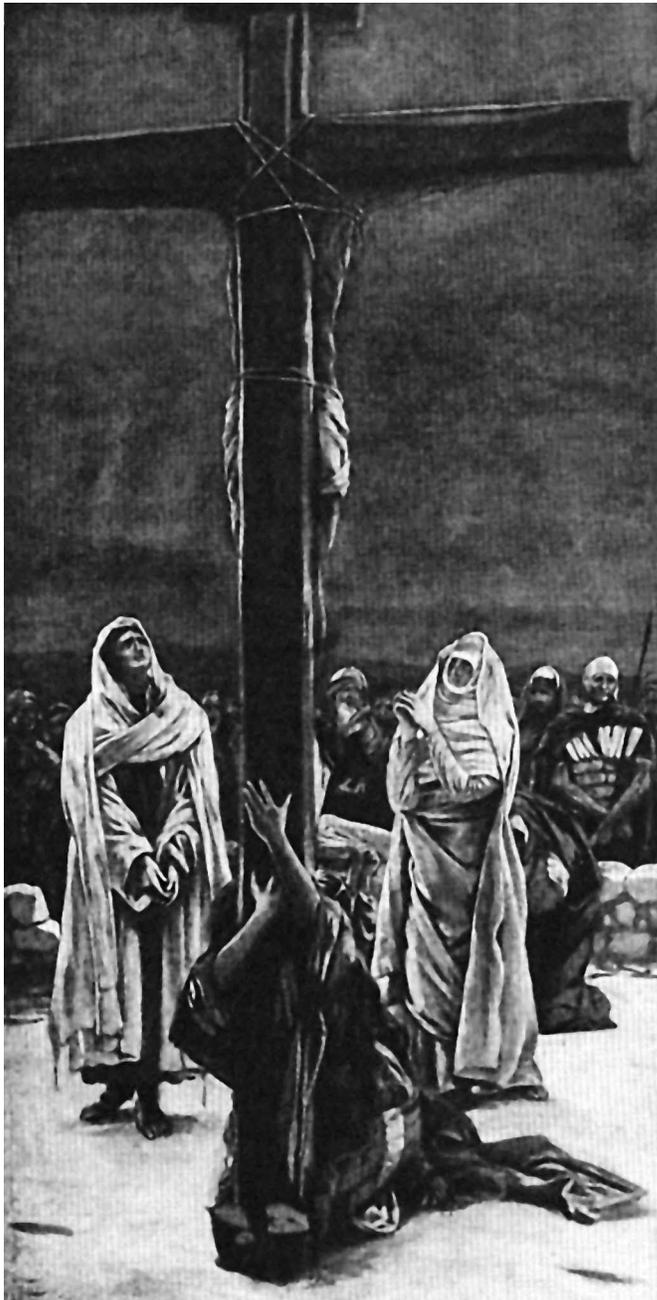
and worked mostly alone for the rest of his life. In 1708 he returned to the diocese of Nantes and spent two successful years there, becoming widely known. Even the soil became fertile wherever he walked. At Pontchâteau thirty miles northwest of Nantes, he inspired thousands of people to help build an enormous outdoor representation of Calvary. It was on the point of dedication when French officials concluded that the English might use it as a fortress if France were attacked (this was during the

war among England, France, and Spain called the War of the Spanish Succession). The king had it destroyed (it was rebuilt after Louis' death and is today an important shrine) and the bishop forbade Louis to preach in his diocese. Yet Louis was discouraged neither by the destruction of the Calvary nor the bishop's restrictions.

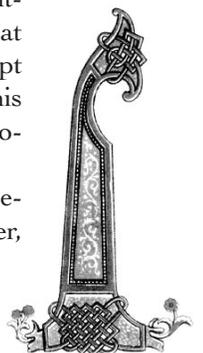
In 1711, at the invitation of the bishop of La Rochelle (south of Nantes), Louis began giving missions there. The bishop became his strong supporter, and he became the bishop's chief instrument in rebuilding the Catholic faith in an area that had long been a center of French Protestantism. Louis worked there and in the coastal region between La Rochelle and Nantes for the rest of his life. In addition to the numerous missions he conducted, he was finally able to realize his dream of founding not only the Daughters of Wisdom in 1715 but also a missionary religious order for priests and lay brothers, the Company of Mary (SMM or Montfort Missionaries) in the same year.

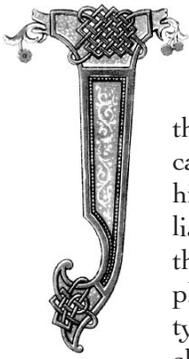
Over the years, there had been several efforts to kill Louis, inspired by Jansenist opponents. Once he was set upon by thugs, but it was they who fled. Another time, a man threatened Louis' life with a sword while he was at prayer, but the man left with his own heart converted. In La Rochelle, Huguenots frequently pelted him with stones, shouting that he should be killed. Finally an attempt at poison nearly succeeded. Despite his taking an antidote, his health was broken and his death hastened.

Louis was especially devoted to Jesus as the Eternal Wisdom of the Father,



Stabat Mater, by James Tissot, 1856-1902





the ardent lover of humankind who became incarnate in human flesh and was crucified to save his beloved creatures from their sins. Louis' reliance on Divine Providence was so complete that "God alone" was his most frequently-used phrase. Although docility and obedience were his characteristic response to the multitude of setbacks, rebuffs, and humiliations he experienced, he struggled all his life to subdue the explosive temper he inherited from his father. Buoyant by temperament, he also truly loved the trials inflicted on him, seeing them as the daily cross he was to carry in following Christ. He was also subjected to direct attacks from Satan; many people heard the sounds of whips and blows from behind his door.

The areas of France that Louis evangelized were among those that most strongly resisted the French Revolution's efforts to destroy Catholicism eighty years later, and many of his hymns and prayers continue in use in France. There are today more than twenty-five hundred Daughters of Wisdom worldwide, and almost

one thousand Montfort Missionaries serve in thirty countries.

The most well-known of Louis' five works, *True Devotion to Mary* (also known as *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*) was based on his mission sermons. He prophesied that it would not be published in his lifetime, and Jansenists indeed prevented its publication. The manuscript was not rediscovered until 1842, one hundred twenty-six years after his death. *True Devotion to Mary* gives the key to Louis' spiritual life, which had a strongly Marian character growing out of the centrality of the Incarnation of God the Son in human flesh and of Mary's free cooperation in God's

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plan. The only appropriate response is to become conformed into the likeness of our Redeemer, through knowing him and loving him. Consecration to Mary thus is responding to God by the path chosen by God to come to his people. *True Devotion to Mary* shows a way of holiness that is short, secure, and perfect — a way of holiness that indeed was an important part of the spiritual journey of Pope John Paul II.

