

In the footsteps of the Crucified Jesus



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**Spirituality in the line of
Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort**

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Colophon

Most of the illustrations are from the Chapel of the former Seminary of the Montfortians in Oirschot. Sixty years ago, Jaap Min, a Dutch artist from Bergen, painted the frescoes about the life of Montfort and about the Calvary of Jesus. In 1961, he designed the wooden cross that surrounds the statue of the deceased Christ as well.

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provincialaat@montfortanen.nl

www.montfortanen-nederland.nl

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*The cross is a very profound mystery on earth;
without light from above it cannot be fathomed.
Only those whose hearts it touches,
can understand it and be saved by it.*
(Montfort, Hymns 19,1)

Preface

Early 2013, the Study Group Spirituality of the Dutch Province discussed whether there should be a sequel to the book of confrère Wiel Logister **Touched by the humility of God – Spirituality in the line of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort**, and if so, in what way. Wiel proposed to work on Montfort’s *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*. We did not bubble over with enthusiasm: people hummed and hawed, frowned, creases like question marks between brows. “But is the subject of the Letter still relevant in our day and age?” With due hesitation, it was decided that the study group would wait for a concrete proposal and see. This proposal did not remove all skepticism. The impression was that in the Letter to the Friends of the Cross an image of God and a portrayal of humankind emerges that takes sin, penance, and punishment too far and connects them with the cross. A number of meetings later, first the amber and then the green light was given. The result lies before you.

This is no light reading. Whoever tries to fathom Montfort’s spirituality of the cross is bound to feel challenged and shaken. It is not a text that you read at one sitting in an afternoon off. It requires a meditative approach. Moreover, we can hardly deny that certain of Montfort’s phrases and images are past their sell-by date. On the other hand, his view strengthens our objections to the present-day tendency to paint too rosy a picture of life and to avoid speaking about human failure and fault. Montfort calls the Christian spirituality of the cross a mystery. We only gain an idea of it, if we allow it to call us to account and if we are willing to look at ourselves and at life surrounding us with the prophetic discernment of Jesus. Not detached, as onlookers, but as disciples who are ready to set our hands to the plough.

This new publication about spirituality in the line of Montfort would like to prevent that ‘being touched by the humility of God’ is left dangling. Following in the footsteps of the Crucified Jesus calls for an active commitment to those who have – in one way or another – run into trouble. What this means in practice has to be reinvented time and again. In light of Jesus and his disciples, of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort among others. Even though he

lived in other times and spoke in the language of his own century, his criticism of a languid Christianity still challenges. His way of understanding and living Jesus' call to follow him to the cross, is part of his spiritual heritage handed to us.

Valkenburg aan de Geul, July 2014

Peter Denneman smm
provincial superior

Abbreviations used

DSM	Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Montfortaine
FC	Montfort, Letter to the Friends of the Cross.
H	Montfort, The Hymns.
JLM	Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort (New York 1994).
L	Montfort, Letters
LEW	Montfort, The Love of the Eternal Wisdom.
TD	True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin.



Introduction

This book is a continuation of **Touched by the humility of God – Spirituality in the line of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort** (Valkenburg 2012). In the first book, this spirituality is characterized as participation in the humble, serving, and not self-centered way in which God is present in life. The question about the concrete shape of this participation has been left open. What kind of people do we become, if we go along with the humility of God? As regards the answer, Montfort points at Jesus' call to follow him, to take up the cross, and to stand by those who are not valued by society and the church. He calls the cross a mystery. Whereas riddles can be solved, mysteries continue to occupy, address, and challenge us. As we manage to penetrate into them, they get more penetrating. Its meanings and implications for the path that the followers of Montfort must pursue is the subject of this book.

In quite a few drawings and paintings Montfort is pictured as a stern ascetic. Not a smile. He goes through life with a statue of Mary in one hand, a cross in the other. That is, conscious of the fact that he is a rotten apple that can only count on God's grace thanks to Mary, provided that this consciousness is coupled with penance and mortification. His perception of the cross seems to go back to a world that we are happy to have left behind – a world of dark awareness of sin, of guilt, and of penance. It reminds us of medieval processions of the penitents. As in Ingmar Bergman's movie "The Seventh Seal", where the penitents flog themselves and each other bloody in order to avert the harsh judgment or the wrath of God.

Who would want to go back to those times? Isn't it the case that we have discovered that the Bible speaks of Glad Tidings? Did Jesus not possess a contagious and stimulating joy

Montfort's Calvary in Pontchâteau, as rebuilt by the French Monfortians in the 19th century.

in God and God's cause? Do Christians not live from the "existential inability to grieve in the presence of Jesus" (Schillebeeckx)? What cross? Isn't it too gloomy, too ascetic, too depressing? Significant for the religious climate after the Second World War is Walter Kasper's revealing comment on Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, "It had too much cross and suffering and too little resurrection, too much denial of self and world and too little rejoicing at creation and too little attention for the world."¹ Was St. Paul mistaken when he emphatically proclaimed the crucified Christ (1 Cor. 1, 23) or did we only have an eye for "the jubilation side of the resurrection in which there was solely room for a naïvely happy image of God" fifty years ago?²

The change in attitude towards the spirituality of the cross is demonstrated by the Franciscan sisters of Oirschot in the Netherlands. From the time of their foundation in the 17th century they had been embroidering the symbols of Christ's suffering on their habits, "Grant me the habit of your holy State to follow the Crucified Jesus by doing penance."³ It was repeated every morning while dressing, "Grant, God, that I wear this brown habit in the spirit of penance and self-denial, that I may serve you faithfully until the last moment" (89). The emphasis was on asceticism and sacrifice, and on breaking with the spirit of the world (152). Thanks to the unremitting awareness of human sinfulness alone, Christian love of neighbor could be practiced as an individual and as a congregation of educators and nurses, even if the ideals of the Kingdom of God could not be realized in life once and for all.

This way of thinking fades into the background around 1965. Penance, mortification, and self-denial disappear from the dictionary. This goes hand in hand with the loss of a sense of guilt, consciousness of (original) sin, and the practice of confession. Under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, who accuses Christians of over-fostering human feelings of guilt in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Sigmund Freud has followed him in this.

The Montfortian Constitutions show a similar development. Before Vaticanum II they read, "After the example of their founder, the members of the congregation deal with great respect and love with the crosses in their lives," which they "accept with patience and even joy to atone for their imperfections" (152-153). But from 1960 onwards, self-denial, mortification, sacrifice, and penance are put on the backburner for the followers of Montfort. The Dutch Provincial Chapter of 1969 does point at the bond between Montfort

and the Cross in *Ontwerp Leefwijze SMM* (Montfortian Way of Life), but the focal point is dedication to people in need and not asceticism, conversion, and penance. This is consistent with a statement by Willem Grossouw in one of his much-read books on meditation, “The primary intention of evangelical self-denial is positively rather than negatively oriented and is in fact directed at the wellbeing of fellow human beings, not at personal purification or perfection.”²⁴ Is this not too crude an opposition? Does the solicitude for others not require that we begin to live and think differently on the inside as well? Certainly, the point of departure in the theology of salvation is not penance for sin because of its inherent insult of God, but God’s zeal to win us over to peace, reconciliation, and real community. It is not our task to induce God to reconcile. It is precisely the other way around: God wants to win us over to reconciliation in all dimensions of life. But can this be done without conversion and inner change?

In Touched by the humility of God Montfort’s perception of the cross has been left unfinished. It was even suggested that his spirituality of the cross had faded into the background during the last fifteen years of his life. Wasn’t that why he evolved into “le bon père de Montfort” who chiefly brings up the joyful aspects of the Gospel? Or are we thus opposing joy and cross too much and do they actually form a surprising twofoldness? And how about the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* that he writes in 1714, two years before his death? Nowhere does Montfort expound his spirituality of the cross in a systematic way. Sometimes he emphasizes this aspect and sometimes another. Two dimensions are repeated regularly. Firstly, inner conversion, or breaking loose from self-centeredness; it is also called self-denial and is connected with union with God in His humble service to the wellbeing of others. Secondly, actually devoting oneself to all life in need and people in distress, at the possible expense of great personal inconvenience and suffering. It is this second dimension that Montfort is faced with when he encounters opposition and setbacks as a missionary of the Kingdom of God. Both dimensions are referred to as “bearing one’s cross”. Depending on culture, circumstances, or the stage of someone’s life, one or the other dimension dominates. Initially Montfort emphasizes inner conversion; but the last fifteen years of his life the connection between cross and active solicitude is prominent, without the inner dimension ever being ignored.

The title, **In the footsteps of the Crucified Jesus**, implies that the scope of this book is the Christology of imitation. Its basis is the way in which Jesus, in accordance with the humility of God, has been the servant of the homeless and the uprooted. As a consequence, he dies on the cross. He asks that his disciples follow in his footsteps. In light of this and current views and questions, Montfort's spirituality of the cross is examined. Because Montfort repeatedly refers to Jesus' words about imitation and cross and to Paul's theology of the cross, **Chapter 1** discusses Jesus' call to follow him; Paul's view of Jesus' death on the cross and the messianic pains; and the joyful dimension of the spirituality of the cross. **Chapter 2** outlines Montfort's development through the years as a disciple of the Crucified Jesus. **Chapter 3** contains a new translation of Montfort's *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, with some introductory and explanatory notes. **Chapter 4** highlights certain elements of Montfort's spirituality of the Cross of which a striking interpretation can be given in current contexts and situations. The **Epilogue** talks about the enduring challenge of Jesus' call to follow Him and the way that Montfort has responded to it.

This specific order is a conscious choice. Firstly, Montfort presupposes the context of Scripture. Secondly, it thus hopes to prevent certain terms and images that Montfort uses from sticking in the throat in a direct confrontation. We have, often unconsciously rather than consciously, all sorts of ideas, prejudices, and assumptions that can put us on the wrong track. The initial chapters try to reinforce our awareness of these. In accordance with **Touched by the humility of God**, this book has been written with simultaneously the Bible, Montfort, and life in our day and age (Western Europe) in mind. In other words, we regard Montfort in light of Scripture, without forgetting that we are living in a much-changed culture. As Western Europeans at the start of the 21st century we describe with a measure of frankness how Montfort lived, who he was, and what he aimed at as an apostolic missionary. Hopefully with the same frankness and creativity with which the evangelists in early Christian times looked back on the life and the death of Jesus. Without agreeing with Montfort on everything, we feel a strong bond with him and with his basic convictions.



CHAPTER 1

Biblical background

The cross is not a ready concept for Christians. It is hard to do justice to its many meanings and connotations and not lapse into oversimplifications. The cross is a symbol of salvation, but also of revolt and controversy and the moments of fear and despair that come with it. Besides the link with “we shall overcome”, there is the awareness that new life does not come about all by itself, but is accompanied by misfortune, persecution, pain, and suffering. Jesus’ call to his disciples to follow him unto his death on the cross in Jerusalem plays an important part (Mt. 16,24ff.; Lk. 9,23ff.; Mk. 8,34ff.). Through the ages this call has strongly influenced Christian view of spirituality and its art of living, as in the Desert Fathers and St. Francis of Assisi and in the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.⁵ Montfort frequently refers to it as well (TD 59; 80; 154; H 11,13; LEW 133; 173; 194; 225; FC 4; 12; 41).

This call draws attention to the way Jesus has gone since his baptism, in the awareness that the Father was near and that the Spirit of the end-time was driving him. He is involved in his era and its events. The country is occupied by the Romans, and all sorts of Jewish groups are looking for ways to follow in the footsteps of the patriarchs and the prophets. In those turbulent times Jesus associates with people in Galilee and Judea, with the poor and the rich, with scholars and illiterates, with Jews and pagans, in synagogues and in the temple in Jerusalem. His disciples are from all walks of life. He visits the sick and attends weddings, has male and female friends, speaks in parables and stories, joins the crowd and retreats in the silence of the wilderness, chases the merchants from the temple and ends up crucified like a common criminal. His death on the cross does not come out of the blue; it is the consequence of the way he has gone. From the very start, the Pharisees and the Herodians have been wanting to do him in (Mk. 3,6).

This chapter discusses: the context and the purport of the call to imitate (1); the meaning that Paul in particular gives to the death of Jesus on the cross (2); the difficulties involved

in the imitation of Christ (3); the joyful overtones of the Early Christian spirituality of the cross (4).

1. Take up your cross and follow me

In order to be able to envision the meaning of this call, it is outlined how Jesus identifies with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Subsequently, the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus' call to imitation according to St. Mark is discussed. Finally, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of that call is considered.

*Jesus as the Suffering Servant*⁶

The New Testament portrayal of Jesus is influenced by the memory of the Suffering Servant in Is. 53 among others. Here Isaiah is talking about a group of people who had been exiled and dragged off to Babel (in present Iraq) in 587 BC, had settled there, and had become reasonably well-off. Whereas many of the exiles wished to stay in Babel, others decided at a certain point to return to Jerusalem. Not because things were going all that well over there. On the contrary, those who were left behind were doing badly. They were reduced to poverty, felt hopeless and dispirited. The returnees wished to stand by them, even if this involved all sorts of hardship. They gave up their affluent lives and came to Jerusalem to witness that God will not abandon his people. They put their shoulders under the fate, the poverty, and the despair of those who were left behind. They were driven by their belief that the God of Israel does not abandon people, not even if they mess up. By returning they identified with their fellow townsmen of old and with God at the same time. They regarded themselves as the Suffering Servant who puts flesh on God's justice by not breaking the bruised reed and not quenching the dimly burning flame (see Is. 42,3). This was how they experienced the hardships after their return.

Jesus is touched by this figure of the Suffering Servant at a certain point. In this light, he considers his faith in God and his solidarity with fellow human beings. This figure represents his life's calling. As the situation deteriorates and death on the cross is drawing near, Jesus' identification with the Suffering Servant becomes ever more intense. This is how

Mark, in particular, portrays him. The evangelist weaves verses from Isaiah 53 through the story of Jesus' suffering. Those who want to understand Jesus in his life and death should get immersed, as it were, in his identification with this text. The reader of the Gospel will only see the light (cf. Is. 53,11) and discover God's presence in the suffering and dying Jesus on the basis of identification with this text that forms the start of the Roman liturgy of Good Friday.

Then it becomes clear that Jesus was not the cheerful proclaimer of Good Tidings who was bewildered to find himself on the cross in Jerusalem. As the Gospels portray him, he was aware of this possibility from the very start. He took it upon himself. It left its mark in the very depth of his soul. This does not alter the fact of his hopeful attitude towards life and his deep joy; but it does lend it a special color.

Following Jesus: St. Mark

In the middle of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says to the people and his disciples, "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (8,34-35). With these words he addresses the crowd and the disciples. For "crowd" Mark uses the Greek *ochlos*, i.e. the impoverished common people in their wretched circumstances. They are his true family. Them he invites to follow in his footsteps. His solicitude for the crowd is not mildly condescending, but it represents the way in which God wants to found justice in an unjust world. This is how the *ochlos* has to start living; he asks them to develop forms of solidarity that are at odds, unfortunately, with the way the upper classes behave.⁷ In reference to these verses, Bas van Iersel observes, "Today's readers would be well-advised to avoid dissociating this passage from a possible situation of persecution and take it, for instance, as an appeal to a way of life that is characterized by asceticism and self-denial or even self-contempt... The proverbs do not aim at a certain life style in general, but at the willingness to give one's life – if necessary – for Jesus' cause."⁸

"Come, follow me," Jesus says to Peter (1,17), Levi (2,14), and others. He does not ask them to go live in the desert as ascetics, to go around barefoot as penitents, or eat garbage. He asks that they be in touch with life *for my sake, and for the Gospel's sake* and participate in his

Abba-experience, including its resulting solicitude for fellow humans. It is about following his way of life and his view of life. The gravity of this appeal becomes clear when Jesus orders them twice to cross in the boat and brave the storm (4,35-41; 6,45-52). Their hearts are in their mouths and they panic. When Peter walks on the water towards Jesus, believes he is drowning, and cries out, “Lord, save me!” (Mt. 14,28-31), he becomes aware of the risks involved in following Jesus. “Had he stayed on board, he would not have learned to believe,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims.⁹ The consequences turn out to be even more dramatic when the Baptist is beheaded and Jesus is hung on the cross.

The disciples bestow the most impressive names and titles on Jesus but reject his suffering and death. He himself, on the other hand, speaks frankly of what lies ahead of him. He firmly rejects Peter’s protests concerning this prospect: “Get behind me, Satan! For you have in mind not the things of God, but the things of men.” (Mk. 8,33). The aforementioned verses 8,34-35 are the pivoting point between earlier calls to follow and that which is to happen in Jerusalem. Not until his death on the cross, the depth and the extent of titles such as Messiah and Son of God become clear. Following Jesus comprises life and death, his own as well as his disciples’.

The attitude in which this following of Jesus should take place becomes clear in the encounter with the rich young man. He is told, “Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor...; and come, follow me” (Mk. 10,21). The young man likes to debate with Jesus, noncommittally, but he is faced with the radical “come, follow me”. Jesus prevents him from “misunderstanding the imitation as an ethical adventure, as a separate and interesting, but still revocable way of life” (Bonhoeffer 52). Following Jesus requires more than just parting with a few possessions. The young man might have been able to do so, in order to have the short-lived but interesting experience of what it is like to live as a poor man. Only to start all over again and try his very best to get rich once more. Following Jesus radically, up to the point of self-denial and cross, is a wholly different matter. He needs to keep the following in mind, “I should not fixate on whatever lives in me and cling to it; on the contrary, I must resolutely follow Jesus and find my certainty in him.”¹⁰ The young man bolts; it’s too much for him. And even the disciples don’t get it; after the third prophecy of the passion they are still bickering over the question which one of them is the most important one (Mk. 10,35-45). Only the blind Bartimaeus’ eyes are opened and he follows Jesus (10,52). The disciples’

persistent failure to understand is demonstrated again in Garden of Olives (14,37) and in the high priest's palace (14,66-72).

The call to imitate sorts no swift and definite effect. It is a matter of starting over time and again. The fact that the disciples, and Peter in particular, are told to go to Galilee (Mk. 16,7) on Easter “heartens precisely those Christians who worry most about their failures, whether during Roman persecution or in other circumstances... No matter how badly people misbehave, it is never a motive for Jesus – and, the reader may add, for God whose messenger Jesus is – to sever contact. God and Jesus remain faithful, even if people have been unfaithful... Jesus reproaches his disciples regularly and severely, but not once has he said or done anything that might jeopardize the relationship between him and his disciples”.¹¹ Jesus does not grant forgiveness seven times but seventy times seven (Mt. 18,21-22). As a sign that God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that they should return from their ways and live (Ez. 18,23). That imitating Christ and penance and conversion should go hand in hand is the aspect of truth of the ascetic experience from the 17th century up until the middle of the 20th, as mentioned in the **Introduction**. Christian existence cannot be imagined without confession and forgiveness.

Life is at stake

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12,24). A living commentary of these words was Dietrich Bonhoeffer when giving up the safe position of theologian in the United States and returning to Germany where Hitler had proclaimed the Third Reich as a replacement of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached and experienced. Not the person in need, of whatever descent or color, but the glory and the supreme power of the Arian race set the agenda of Hitler and co. Bonhoeffer, as a follower of Jesus Christ, felt compelled to take action.

Two years earlier, in 1937, he had written a book on the imitation of Christ that Karl Barth had called “by far the best that has been written on this subject.” In this book with the short title *Nachfolge* (Discipleship) he had pointedly put forward the radical nature of Jesus' call. What this meant for him personally, he first fully understood in 1939. More than ever, he realized that following Jesus asked for “breaching of any kind of programming, idealism,

legality... Besides Jesus there are no further contents. He himself is the content” (31). Not someone’s personal ideals or the norms of his circle should be the point of departure, but Jesus’ call. “Only that call creates the situation” (36). From the start it should be clear that discipleship, self-denial, and bearing one’s cross are inextricably bound up with one another.

Bonhoeffer turns against those who flaunt their poverty and merely seek their own honor and glory in it (62). What is usually taken as conversion is not radical enough in his view. “The drunkard who keeps off alcohol, the rich man who gives his money away, may be free from alcohol and riches, but not from himself” (39). A disciple of Jesus is not allowed to flaunt his suffering and cross nor go through life like a stoic with an air of invulnerability. To prevent this, Jesus connects suffering with being radically marginalized. “Being marginalized deprives suffering of all dignity and honor... Like Jesus who is only the Christ as the suffering and the outcast, the disciple is only disciple if he takes the suffering of others upon himself and is derided and ridiculed for it” (65). In the palace of the high priest, Peter rightly states that he does not know that Christ. “Being cast out, despised, and abandoned by others in suffering, as is the never-ending lament of the psalmist, this essential identifying sign of the suffering on the cross can no longer be comprehended by those who are Christians in the bourgeois way” (67). Christian suffering results from obedience to Christ who says that disciples should carry the burden of their neighbors, far away or nearby, at all costs. Christians should frankly acknowledge that there is no easy way to let go of self-centeredness. Because of their criticism of a bourgeois lifestyle and of figures like Hitler, the disciples of Jesus are persecuted and cast out by the world, sometimes until death. This threat does not leave Jesus unaffected either. Initially, also he prays, “Remove this cup from me” (Mk. 14,36). This, however, is not his final word. Ultimately his trust in the Father is stronger. In the name of the Father he suffers the indignities of the marginalized. And thus he emphasizes that disciples should not consider themselves to be abandoned by God in such predicaments, contrary to all indications.

Those who follow Christ may not behave according to the norms of the world, Bonhoeffer asserts. Something similar is the case when Abraham leaves his family and, contrary to his deepest feelings, declares his willingness to sacrifice his son. When he comes back down the mountain with Isaac, their relationship has changed. Blood ties are no longer a criterion; a

new and different kind of community has come into being. Likewise does the true disciple – if need be – leave his father and mother, brothers and sister (Mk. 10-28-31). Montfort acts in the same spirit. He does not want his family to give him a warm welcome on the basis of their kinship, but simply and solely because he testifies to the poor and crucified Christ. The latter interposes between him and his family; there is no longer an immediate connection between them; their bond can only be through Christ. That is why it is dangerous to regard the relationship between Jesus and Mary in terms of romantic notions of the mother-child bond.

Jesus speaks of suffering and persecution for righteousness' sake (Mt. 5,10). Bonhoeffer translates this as “suffering for a righteous cause” (93), in the footsteps of Jesus. Because the world takes offence, the disciples, like Jesus, are persecuted. “Abuse, deadly persecution, and slander accompany the disciples in their community with Jesus; it is part of their beatitude” (94).

According to Bonhoeffer, the imitation of Christ should be fed by a life of meditation and prayer. In early centuries this imitation has been compared to what Odysseus did when he sailed past the island of the Sirens: he had himself tied to the mast of his ship to be able to resist their seductive lure. For Christian this mast is the cross of Christ; it is what they tie themselves to in order to stay on God's course. Honorius of Autun (12th century) calls the cross the “mast of the ship of the church. Thanks to this pole it sails securely through the seething waters of the world until it safely reaches the joyful port of eternal life.”¹² Jesus prays that his disciples do not succumb to fear and allow themselves to be swayed by cheap temptation, but endure and be there for others and each other in the name of God. This is the cross that they must bear in the circumstances of their individual lives.

In his letters from prison, which have been published posthumously under the fascinating title *Resistance and Surrender*, Bonhoeffer distances himself resolutely from a religious experience that is bourgeois rather than radically Christian. He did not seek death, but neither did he run away from it. He hoped for his release but he was not the slave of this hope. He sought to follow in the footsteps of Christ and in this he found – along with all the pain and grief – a wonderful peace. After a show trial he was hung in the Flossenbug concentration camp (Northern Bavaria) on April 9, 1945.

2. The cross – symbol of the life, suffering, and death of Jesus

At first sight, the Gospels end in disaster: the Proclaimer of Good Tidings dies as if he were a criminal and an outcast. But, according to St. Mark, at that very moment the centurion speaks, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mk. 15,39). When you would expect the Voice from heaven to speak of “my beloved Son”, as during baptism and the transfiguration, an apparent outsider takes over the part. In his call to follow him, Jesus had said that only those who follow him unto death will find true life. Avoiding the clutches of death is no longer the main goal of life. On the contrary, at times true life can only come about through death. It is obvious that the death of Jesus has had great impact on the early Christians. It is talked about by means of Old Testament images regarding salvation and liberation. Paul’s approach differs from that of John or Peter, without there being oppositions or contradictions. It is rather like a symphony with different melodies and ever new entries.

This section recalls some approaches, St. Paul’s in particular, hoping that we will thus get an antenna for the backgrounds and viewpoints of Montfort, for whom Jesus’ death on the cross is the most profound aspect of the Christian belief in the incarnation (see H 27,5-8 or H 109,3-4, among others). He uses all sorts of terms: the eternal Wisdom wished to “redeem the world, to cast out and chain up the devils, to seal the gates of hell and open heaven to men, and give infinite glory to his eternal Father” (LEW 167). What do these terms and images mean in the light of the Bible?

According to Phil. 2, the death of Jesus on the cross forms the heart of the Gospel. To an existing song about the life and death of Jesus Paul adds emphatically: the death of the cross. Elsewhere he says, “we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1,23). By emphasizing the Crucified One, the apostle turns against Christians who have no thought for the death of Jesus. They want to live wisely and justly by obeying certain of his words. They view the Gospel as a doctrine of wisdom; and Jesus mainly as a high-minded person. They ban the cross from their dictionaries and view his death as an unfortunate combination of events. They wish to prevent the people around them from seeing Jesus as a person who acted improperly and was condemned by God because the cross does not pertain to someone who has lived according to the Law (Gal. 6,12; cf. 5,11).

Paul used to think so too until Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). From that moment onwards, Jesus' death on the cross becomes of overriding importance to him. In Gal. 6,14 he states, "But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

About the content and meaning of that cross Rom. 5,8 says, "But God commends his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." To Paul a sinner is not someone who breaks some law or another, but one who is stuck in a destructive lifestyle. This person is without the power of God, without a relationship with God, because he lets himself be determined by the so-called strong and their ways. Thanks to Christ, it has become possible to be strong in a different sense. The way he died on the cross enables us to live differently from the rulers of the world. That is, according to the manner in which God wants to establish his justice among us: as a loving helper. To this God Jesus has been fully obedient. That is how he broke the power of the rulers. "In this macabre death of a criminal, Jesus' selfless surrender to the people takes place. That is, by undergoing what they did to him without holding it against them, by persisting in his loving approach to them, and thus complying with God's will."¹³

Whereas Jesus seems to be a passive victim, he holds on to his relationship with the Father and his serving attitude towards other people. Thus the cross on which he dies becomes a tree of life. When death seems to have the last word, new relations arise between God and people and between people themselves. 'New' does not imply that God's disposition changes; for it is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But among us, in our history, something changes. Thanks to the death of Christ, we achieve a new understanding and a new experience of God. We no longer live within a horizon of a harsh and wrathful God, but of a God who wants to lead us along a path of forgiveness and mutual trust. In this sense Ambrose states in the 4th century, "This is the hour that terminated the times of hard guilt, in which the dominion of death was destroyed and our guilt was taken away."¹⁴

The cross on which Jesus dies thus becomes the symbol of the start of a new era. Venantius Fortunatus (6th-7th century) says in the hymn *Crux benedicta*, "With his pierced hands he delivered the world from catastrophe and with his own death he closed off the way of death." Jesus is concerned about our situation in the name of God, that we may not be the slave of our mortality and its inherent problems. On the cross he seals his promise that the

Infinite One is with us in our need, our powerlessness, and our suffering. Hence in medieval depictions of the Trinity, the Father holds the cross to which the Son is nailed while the Spirit (the dove) descends to earth. Montfort states that the resurrected Christ should not be thought without the cross (LEW 172).

What is called “Incarnation” culminates on the cross. It was not just anyone who inclined to us in Jesus: it is the Son, who shows the Father and who teaches us to think about God as the One who, in his infinity, takes pity on us and stands by us. Believing in the Infinite One means that our fragmentary and conflicting reality is embraced by a Presence that does not exclude and that does not think and live in terms of rivalry. Whereas finiteness goes hand in hand with limitation, isolation, and individuality and easily leads to conflicts, infinity points at a way of being free of such tendencies. It is God’s way of being, in which the follower of Jesus may participate.

The Bible views the human condition in light of Adam. Without fear, he originally let himself be defined by the One who is infinitely there for others. That is why mortal Adam in paradise knew no fear of death. At one point, however, he became overwhelmed by this fear and strove to gain control of what was only possible thanks to God. Because of this revolt all kinds of aspects of life have become a leaden burden. Encouraged by the prophets of Israel, Jesus reestablishes the possibility of living in communion with God who never forsakes people, but forgives, heartens, and encourages us. Jesus appeals to the disciples to prioritize the life of and with God over the powers of death. Therefore the New Testament emphasizes his Abba-relationship and the discrepancy between the First and the Second Adam and views the incarnation as being born from God or being reborn.

Easter indicates that the Father embraces the way in which Jesus has lived and died, from the beginning to the very end. In light of Jesus’ obedience, the Father should be seen as the

In this portrayal of the Trinity in the cathedral of Fritzlar (Germany) the Father presents the cross on which the Son has died for mankind and identifies with him. The Spirit (the dove) is perched to go from the cross to the earth in order to keep the inspiring memory of this dramatic event alive.



primary and ultimate initiator of his life and death. It turns Jesus' life and death into an event of universal importance. That is why Christians see the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the navel or the center of the new world. After all, it is where Jesus – outcast by political and religious leaders – has embraced all in the name of the Father. In 2 Cor. 5,19-21 it is worded as follows, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses... For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” God embraces us to make us understand that our relationship to Him does not start with what we do for Him but with what He does for us. Jesus takes God's boundless love for us for granted; thus he seals with his life on the cross. According to Paul, this is the essence of the Gospel: God initiates reconciliation; God reaches out to us.

Jesus has not regarded or treated others as adversaries or enemies. He has not blamed his executioners for their crime. In the name of the Infinite One. Those who regard Jesus as merely a good person will never understand this. He was more than a man who bears witness to God's love for humankind: this love has actually appeared in him (Tit. 3,4-5). Dying on the cross, he reveals that God is with us in our deepest need, when mortality and death threaten to suffocate us and when we are trapped in sin. Not only has the Son suffered; also the Father suffers because of people's callousness towards and exclusion of others, but He will never stop loving us. Whenever – from our perspective – our way of life deserves the wrath of God, God speaks of reconciliation and the Son reveals the depth and the gravity of the love of the Father. In the light of Jesus' participation in the vulnerability of life and death, we are able to rise above ourselves and devote ourselves to others, even though it takes pain and hard work.

In Paul's opinion, this leads to a new view of life: “Now we who are strong (in Christ) ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, to be building him up. For even Christ didn't please himself. But, as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me” (Ps. 69,10)... Therefore receive one another, even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God” (Rom. 15,1-3.7). In the name of God, Christ stands by those who are haughtily sneered at and looked down upon. In God's solidarity with those who are looked down upon, he dies on the cross. Thus he testifies that God is averse to haughty self-interest and

sympathizes with those who suffer under their powerlessness and are ridiculed for it. Thus God's righteousness, i.e. the way God behaves towards people, has come to light. This righteousness of God wants to stop our domination of one another, to break the power of sin, and to raise us to a new way of life.

A long tradition has it that Christ has overcome more and more negative human sentiments in the course of his life. As a wise pedagogue he has shown how people can acquire a new way of life. By dying on the cross he has recovered the paradisiacal state of Adam and Eve. Thus all things in the heavens and on the earth are again summed up in him (cf. Eph. 1,10). The New Adam frees the old Adam from the chains of captivity (cf. 1 Cor. 15,20-22; Col. 1,18; Rom. 5,12.18). His disciples participate in the new life of Christ by celebrating the sacraments and by means of their mystic and ascetic life. Whenever the Risen One is portrayed with the cross, it serves as a reminder. This pedagogical view of the history of salvation becomes an important factor in monasticism from the 4th century onwards.¹⁵ For centuries, the suffering, which he has endured and which the disciples have to take this upon themselves as well, has been emphasized; but after 1965, mainly the positive possibilities created by Christ are underlined.

3. The Messianic pains

The redemption brought about by Christ has not turned life into a bed of roses or a song of glory and hallelujah. Jesus' death on the cross has not suddenly changed everything in every respect. We still carry much of the old Adam inside of us. And we are still surrounded by much that still breathes the old world, the old way of thinking, the old way of relating. Life in accordance with the disposition or the spirit of the Crucified Jesus requires a lot of effort, at times even the seemingly impossible.

Paul repeatedly speaks of the difficulties that he and other Christians experience as witnesses of the Crucified Jesus and in the service of reconciliation. It reminds us of the type of hardship that the Israelites suffered in the hands of the Pharaoh (Exod. 4,31), but also as a consequence of the failure of Israel itself (Deut. 4,30). This hardship can strike us personally, when we walk in the midst of trouble (Ps. 138,7), in times of trouble (Ps. 37,39; 50,15), in the day of my trouble (Ps. 77,3), when a heavy burden is laid on our backs (Ps.

66,11), when our enemies talk about us and our attackers say, “God has forsaken him. Pursue and take him, for no one will rescue him.” (Ps. 71,10). Those who confess Jesus experience this situation in “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3,10) or in the footsteps of Christ without assenting to the powers of deadly violence. Christ gives them the courage to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6,4). Even if all suffering and tribulation does not disappear in one fell swoop (Rom. 5,3; 12,12), they are able to endure their suffering, thanks to him, in steadfast and patient perseverance against the evil and the injustice of the world. Certainly, “we groan within ourselves” (Rom. 8,23), with oppression, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (Rom. 8,35); and the atmosphere that surrounds us causes torment and anxiety. However, thanks to Christ “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed toward us” (Rom. 8,18).

The cross also, though not in the first place, consists in the pain that we feel at our mortality, darkness, and finiteness, our shortcomings and deceit, misfortune and need, sickness and old age, the loss of loved ones, discontent with our culture and ourselves, powerlessness, despair, and insecurity. We are asked to endure such moments without becoming bitter, rebellious, and pessimistic. Without giving in to weakness and finiteness, confident that also in difficult circumstances God’s love is stronger than anything else. In these difficult moments, the Father and the Son ask us to stand up for the poor and the grieving, for those who are deprived of mercy, justice, and peace, for those who are threatened with death in its many forms. Such solidarity is often difficult and painful. Nevertheless, Paul never gives up the fight. In 2 Cor. 4,8-11 he writes, “We are pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not to despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed; always carrying in the body the putting to death of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake (in community with Jesus – WL), that the life also of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh.” In these verses Paul describes his own life, but indirectly he invites the reader to do the same. Whereas the apostle normally speaks of ‘Jesus Christ’ or ‘Christ Jesus’, here he pointedly uses ‘Jesus’ “in response to developments within the Early Christian community in Corinth that he found alarming. Under the influence of gnostic portrayals, some created

an image of Christ that was utterly spiritualized and put such enormous emphasis on his glorification that the earthly life of Jesus (and his death – WL) disappeared into the background altogether.”¹⁶

Even though Paul does not speak explicitly about the life of Jesus much, there are – contrary to what is often maintained – quite a few similarities between his letters and the traditions that have been preserved in the four Gospels. The fact that Paul’s words and images differ from the ones that Jesus uses can be accounted for by his different context; he addresses the Jews in the diaspora outside of Palestine on the one hand and gentiles with their own ways of thinking and views of life on the other. In the same way that Jesus criticizes disciples who shy away from following in his footsteps, Paul rounds upon those who turn Jesus’ message into an esoteric doctrine and who want nothing to do with solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, nor with cross, suffering, and martyrdom. In the letters to the Corinthians he does so in particular. In the apostle’s view, unity and community with Jesus Christ and sharing each other’s joy and pain go hand in hand.

4. The joyful dimension of the spirituality of the cross

Jesus has suffered greatly during his final days on earth. This is evident in his complaint, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15,34; Cf. Ps. 88). When is this cry of distress answered? Perhaps it takes as much as three days. This is how long despair and loneliness can last. Three days ... it can feel like an eternity. The disciple should reckon with this. It comes with bearing one’s cross in this world. The pain and isolation of the cross should not be smoothed over by the glorious tones of Easter. The cross is accompanied by inner conflict and loneliness. A sense of godforsakenness affects us deeper than physical pain, though the latter should not be underestimated.

Nonetheless, in the depths of his heart and soul Jesus knows himself to be secure in the affection of the Infinite One whom he calls his Father. This security is not only a source of gratitude, but of magnanimity as well. It elicits a sense of deep joy that makes him cry out in elation from time to time. As in Lk. 10,21, “I thank you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to ordinary people.” He is confident that he, living and dying for others, will not be

forsaken by God but will share in the life-giving presence of the Father. Even while the human fear of suffering and death are not unfamiliar to him, the awareness that the Father is one with him and with his followers dominates.

After he has washed the feet of his disciples and served them bread and wine, “knowing that the time has come for him to leave this world and to return to the Father” (Jn. 13,1), Jesus accepts death. At the very moment that he proclaims his humble service as the meaning of his life in word and deed, more than ever he knows himself to be one with the Father. Even if “the world” wants to nail him to the cross. While facing death, he radically turns away from power madness, desire for riches, and religious megalomania, and from those who want none of his solidarity, of standing up for one another, of being each other’s servants, and founding a community of equals. Dying on the cross, he says to those who suffer from marginalization, abuse of power, injustice, oppression, isolation, and their own powerlessness, that God is with them even though death often seems to triumph over life. By dying in this manner, Jesus once again plants the tree of life from the Garden of Eden in our midst. And the cross, the Roman instrument of torture to which rebellious slaves were nailed, receives a new and surprising meaning. The man of suffering becomes the victor – without blowing his own trumpet – and the instrument of torture becomes a symbol of solidarity and salvation. In this sense, we sing the praises of Jesus in the Holy Week as “our life, our salvation, and our resurrection”. Venantius Fortunatus speaks of “the glory of suffering, in which life conquered death and returned life from death” in his Good Friday Hymn *Vexilla regis*.

According to Karl Rahner, the glory and resurrection of Jesus not only start *after* his life, suffering, and death; they are already present in him as he is on his way through the world, comes to the rescue of others, suffers, and dies.¹⁷ “Resurrection does not mean that someone continues to exist in a neutral manner after death, but that he is secure in and saved by God.”¹⁸ Confronted with the emptiness in which death comes to him through the eyes of judges and executioners, the unspeakable jubilation concerning the life-giving presence of the Father wells up in him, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23,46). In all of this, his Easter breaks through. In the same line are Benoît Standaert’s remarks about the mystery of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “Never, not even for a single moment, does he subdivide this secret in something like death and resurrection afterwards, or in: loss,

suffering, deterioration and subsequently gain, reward, restoration, glory. The power of the Johanneic intuition consists in the fact that he sees one in the other, time and again.”¹⁹

The Easter narratives indicate how the insight surfaces of the redeeming and liberating dimension of Jesus’ death on the cross in the circle of the women and the apostles. As a consequence, they no longer succumb to despondency, refusing to give up the fight because of all the negativity caused by their own fault and that of others. The Easter of Jesus gives them a fighting spirit whenever people are exploited, oppressed, treated unjustly, or killed. This fighting spirit and the profound joy based on the awareness that God is with them go hand in hand. It does not mean that they no longer meet with adversity or despair. Also for those who believe in God the way Jesus does life is not a bed of roses. Even great saints have known times of spiritual dryness and despondency. Once again, see Ps. 88.

According to Jn. 16,20-24, the disciples’ sorrow at Jesus’ death on the cross will be turned into joy; they will participate in the joyful horizon in which he has lived and died. This horizon gives them the strength to follow in his footsteps. Then they will also know their lives to be secure in God. “While you are in the world, you will have to suffer. But cheer up! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16,33). This encouragement is related to the fact that Jesus has proclaimed the name of God and has initiated the disciples in the love of the Father, according to the Johanneic reflections and prayers after the footwashing. Those who believe thus will be inspired unto death by the faith that they are secure in God’s endless love. That is why death cannot separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8,38-39). This faith can give people the courage to die as a martyr in a joyful frame of mind. This dimension of the spirituality of the cross creates its own form of living eschatologically: face to face with death but even more so, face to face with God and God’s love for humankind. The realization that Jesus has broken the power of death and its cohorts gives people the strength to no longer be burdened by the yoke of death; the Infinite’s lap of compassion is stronger. This is how resurrection starts. And Christian hope is nothing other than the expectation that God will grant us new life after death. In those who follow Jesus – through praying and acting in his spirit – the conviction grows in the course of their lives that they are secure in God and that death does not have the last word. They believe and trust that nothing can separate them from God’s love that has become visible and actual in Christ Jesus. This faith gives the courage to put oneself in dangerous situations in order to bear witness to hope in word and

deed in the name of God. When Jesus prays on the cross with Psalm 22 against despondency and despair, it arises from his deep faith in God's love for humankind. Not death is thus the utmost limit, but the Infinite One who exceeds all limits and guarantees life that is no longer limited by fear and despair. Dying in this spirit, Jesus rises. The disciples only begin to see this after three days; that is, when the faithful way in which Jesus has died has penetrated into their heads and hearts. Then they start to participate in his joy and his words breaks through, "You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy" (Jn. 16,20). To them Christ again becomes the Living One who is present in their midst. As Paul remarks about the way to see this new approach to life, "The life that he lives, he lives to God" (Rom 6,10). Karl Rahner once said that all we can know is that Jesus has entered for good into the secret of love that we call God: and this is enough. The resurrection or the fifteenth station of the Cross does **not** take place **after** the other fourteen; it is the light in which Jesus, thanks to the Father, lives life, undergoes the death sentence, carries the cross, experiences death, and encourages his disciples. The resurrection is actively, in actuality, present in these. That the same holds true for us is suggested when Rom. 6,4-10 speaks of the life of the baptized in terms of resurrection (See also 1 Jn. 3,14).

This leads to a very specific art of dying. Shortly before his death, Bas van Iersel attests to "the enlightenment that is bestowed upon a person at the inner acceptance of what happens to him or her from the outside."²⁰ For who dies in the awareness of God's presence, dying is "dedication rather than dismay" (20), "subdued and quiet, but certainly not gloomy, comforted by light and enlightenment, even if that light does not exude the exuberance that comes with life" (22). This joy does not mean that the fears and the doubts in life disappear altogether. However, slowly but surely the awareness breaks through that one is safe. Mark has woven the mood swings of Psalm 22 into his account of Jesus' death. The despair that seems to suffocate Jesus gradually turns into confidence and hope. With Psalm 22,25 he is convinced that God "has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted. Neither has he hidden his face from him; but when he cried to him, he heard." The joyful sense of security conveyed in this verse springs from the depth of his soul and only remains authentic if it is heard, read, sung, and experienced from this depth.

Thus viewed, the spirituality of the Cross is not a grim matter. In the midst of pain and grief,

with the cross on one's shoulders, and in the face of death, a sense of security is present that is stronger than fear and loneliness. As Jesus' strength fades, he is fundamentally convinced that the Father will not forsake him. He does not die in despair and desolation; he is trustful that he will be received in the arms of God. Such a way of life – stronger than death and sharing in God's creativity and love for humankind – is a mystery. Already during his lifetime Jesus has been the parable and example of this way of life par excellence. Authentic followers can have no fear for life of this kind of quality since, with Jesus, they know themselves to be safe in God's presence. This insight colors life here and now. Against this backdrop Rom. 5,3 maintains that the Messianic pains should be undergone with joy. Paul puts them in a hopeful perspective: "For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us an exceeding fullness of eternal life" (2 Cor. 4,17). "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh" (Col. 1,24). These are the marks of Jesus branded on Paul's body (Gal. 6,17).

The joyful dimension of faith, which comes with hope and love, is fully connected with the notion of and the belief in God as Jesus has put forward in the line of the Old Testament. The present crisis in religious belief – both theoretical atheism and dismissive agnosticism ('I no longer know what to think of God') – causes an emptiness that makes people grasp at certitudes that are tangible. The unbelief concerning God is not an isolated aspect that we can dispense with as the remainder of Christian existence survives. Jesus faith in God is the foundation of the entire New Testament. This faith permeates life with a profound joy that enables people to bear the Messianic pains and stand by each other when life gets rough.



CHAPTER 2

Montfort as friend of the cross

There are sixteen centuries that divide the New Testament and Montfort and a great number of developments in theology and spirituality of the cross. This is demonstrated among others in the depiction of the cross and/or the Crucified One in Christian art.²¹ Up through the 4th century, not the suffering or the death of Christ is portrayed, but his victory over sin and death. In the culture of those days, the cross is considered a sign of disgrace for which no honor can be gained by the small Christian community. In the days of Constantine (312) this changes. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem a large cross is erected; towards the end of the 4th century, Egeria writes at length about the adoration of this cross in her travel report. From the 6th century onwards, the separate moments of Jesus' Way of the Cross start to attract attention but the emphasis remains on the sovereign way in which he has undergone his suffering; hardly ever the death on the cross is depicted. The cross that is decorated with gems gleams in the starry sky as a sign of victory and proclaims the coming of the Son of Man (Mt. 24,30). Christ is not portrayed as the Crucified Jesus but as the Lamb "in the midst of the throne" of God that receives "the power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing" in (Apoc. 5,12).

The ascetic perception of the Cross has a long history as well. It says that Christ, thanks to his communion with the Father, has gradually conquered all negative human sentiments and passions on the way to his death on the cross. Dying on the cross, he has restored for good the paradisiacal state of Adam and Eve. This is a popular theme with the 5th century monks of Palestine among others.²² Depictions of the Risen One with the cross are to remind them of this victory but also of the suffering and the pain that he has endured for it. We can participate in both suffering and victory by celebrating the sacraments and by an ascetic life.

When the actual life of Jesus starts to attract more attention in the Middle Ages, his suffering and death become more prominent as well, and Mary starts being portrayed as the Mother of Sorrows. In those days, meditation and prayer are predominantly focused

on his suffering and his taking on the sins of others. One tries to visualize his feelings as vividly as possible. This tendency is reinforced with the Franciscans erecting progressively more Stations of the Cross for the pilgrims in Jerusalem after the defeat of the Crusaders (1291). At the same time Passion plays crop up in Romance and Germanic countries. The participants loudly express their guilt ('We have renounced you and nailed you to the cross') and gratitude ('You have suffered so for us!'). During the epidemic of plague of the 14th century the cross of Christ is carried around in processions of the penitents begging God to temper his wrath. The attention to the pains in the heart of Jesus (and Mary) increases enormously in Modern Devotion and Jean Eudes (1601-1680). Famous are also the passion plays of Oberammergau, which start being performed in 1634 after a new epidemic of plague.

Many facets of this complicated development play an explicit and implicit part when Montfort speaks of the cross. During his lifetime there was not yet a great deal of emphasis on the optimistic horizon of the Gospel that was to become so prominent between 1960 and 1970. To be sure, connection between cross and resurrection is not absent in Montfort, but it does not stand out.²³ He mainly emphasizes the need to fight against our "sinful" nature, thinking of our weakness and inertia rather than our actual sinful deeds. In *The Letter to the Friends of the Cross* (no. 28) he compares conversion and imitation to the work of the artisan who attempts to chisel a masterpiece out of rough stone. How does this ascetic figure develop into *le bon père de Montfort*? Does the cross gradually fade into the background or does it get a different, intensified, and refined meaning? Like everyone else Montfort was a complex person. Who he was and what he thought and felt cannot be described in a few clear and simple sentences. This chapter will concentrate on a number of facets of his life.

1. Being-human in a network of relationships

People are not born with a blank slate. Even before we come into the world, our genetic makeup has been determined by our parents; we are also influenced by what our mothers eat and drink, by their happy singing or their depressions. Our nature, aptitudes, and personality are colored by all of these factors. Soon we learn to say "I" but this does not

put an end to all the influences that assail us. Often we are hardly aware of it. To what extent do we know ourselves, our feelings, and our drives? On the wall of Apollo's temple in Delphi it already said, "Know thyself". For centuries philosophers, metafysicists, and ethicists have been tackling precisely this assignment. In our day and age, neurologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and many others have joined in. It appears to take a lot of expertise to understand a human being. Even so... We say "I" all the time, but who am I? After a person has died, we often talk about who he or she really was. Many of the facts are known, but they hardly elucidate what he or she was about, what his or her ideals were like, the feelings, the joys, the fears, or the hopes; the horizon in which this person has lived. Neither do we know these things very well about ourselves. We are a puzzle to ourselves, a mystery (Gabriel Marcel). Sometimes we only begin to realize this as we interact with others and fail to understand them; it is then that we also wonder who we are ourselves. When we do something right, or wrong, we often hardly know why we acted the way we did. However clumsy, fragile, vulnerable, and short our lives may be, they are definitely complex.

The same is true of Montfort. In the course of time a stereotypical image has been formed of him: extremely stern, always serious, and much aware of his sinfulness. Is it right to continue to use this image without further thought? Not that it is entirely false, but is it the final word about what moved him, how he worked on himself, and how he has developed? For many it was painful and confusing, for others a relief, when around 1970 Louis Perouas wrote about Montfort from a sociopsychological point of view. Perouas did not see him as someone who had been a pious saint from his earliest years. No, Montfort wrestled with his temperament that had "a touch of abruptness, of roughness, of coarseness, of stiffness."²⁴ Not that Perouas left it at that. He also referred to his growth and development. Montfort encountered quite a few bumps, potholes, and hurdles on his way. He had a troubled relationship with his father and did not feel at home in the culture of the Sun King's Paris; he objected to the lifestyle of fellow clerics and came into action when he was confronted with the miserable circumstances of the poorhouses and the slums. He aspired to high ideals while fully aware of his incompetence, his failures, and his inadequacies. This sensitive man did not just go along with what others considered normal and he was demanding of his colleagues and employees. In order to gain insight into himself and grow, he frequently retreated into silence, praying for hours on end and writing songs and poems. He refused

to be a priest in the manner of the settled clergy and he sought the confrontation with those who ridiculed him. With ups and downs he has become a saint, in his own way, with his specific temperament.

Maurice Blondel once said that a person “comes to an authentic life form through a lengthy birthing process.” So did Montfort. According to Perouas, in the course of time he discovered more and more that man is made to live in freedom, with feeling, actively, and creatively. Perouas also calls him “a man who opens himself to the salvation that God gives freely” (119). Although he was quite introverted as a seminarian in Paris, as a young priest he became involved in the world around him, especially in those situations that he thought inhumane. He put his back into his work, helping the miserable in the poorhouse in Poitiers and founding a congregation with Marie-Louise Trichet that was to apply itself to education and care for the poor and sick. Thus his world expanded. Particularly the terms in which he spoke of Mary and our sinfulness may sound a little over the top to us, but he had a sharp eye for what was happening around him and inside of him.

Perouas draws the following conclusion, “Thanks to an ever greater openness for the Spirit, he has accepted himself the way he was while all sorts of things were happening to him. Now, several centuries later, we admire the way God has straightened out all kinds of crooked lines in his soul.”²⁵ According to Montfort, every person has a certain receptivity for God. He becomes ever more convinced that Wisdom thinks us worthy of its friendship (LEW 64), it addresses us as a lover (LEW 65). Even if we turn away and obstinately withdraw within ourselves, it wants to “unburden, purify, and console” us (LEW 70). It won’t let us down. Montfort starts looking at those around him in light of Wisdom’s love for people; and at himself. Also he is worthy of the attention! From a rather pessimistic view of himself and of others he evolves into someone who can positively accept who he is. Thanks to the nearness of God, Wisdom, and the Spirit, which come to him through all kinds of encounters and experiences.

If there has been continuity in the life of Montfort at all, it must have been his persistent interest in Jesus’ attitude in life. He wanted it to be his point of departure, even when he felt small and insignificant. He never prayed like a Pharisee, well-satisfied with his own piety, but rather like a publican who is conscious of his inadequacy. But he refused to reconcile himself to this fact. Contrary to many fellow students and priests, he never opted for a safe

bourgeois life. He wanted to go for it, follow Jesus, even though he knew that this way of life might get him into trouble. He spoke of it in the apocalyptic imagery of his days. He was of the opinion that Christians should live as if the end of the world was near and the Last Judgment imminent. Like Jesus he wanted to be mild and willing to help those who suffered. He wanted to be there for these people, without glossing over their situation and without foolhardy trust in God. Whoever lives like that does not make friends easily. On the contrary, such a person is laughed at and ridiculed, sometimes even literally silenced. Whoever takes the side of the wretched and stands up for peace and justice has to reckon with cynical mockery. Also Montfort has experienced this.

Time and again a person must take a stand. One can never rest. Unless you're satisfied to just sit back and wait. Montfort was not the passive type. He took a stand and it did not make his life any easier. As said before, he retreated into (voluntary or imposed) silence from time to time. To think, to ask critical questions of himself, to come to terms with disappointments, or look for new fields of activity in a diocese in which a bishop would give him elbow-room. The going was not easy for Montfort.

2. With limitations and openings

Whenever Montfort looks at himself or at others, he distinguishes three levels (for example in FC 26 and H 6,6): the spontaneous inclinations of the senses and of the will (which he often calls 'nature'), reason or the ability to reflect on what is happening in and around us, the supernatural or the openings that God offers in Revelation or in Jesus Christ. Montfort is not a man of clear-cut analyses. He does not set sharp limits and does not expertly wield the dissecting knife. It has the advantage that he does not think in abstractions and stays close to real life. Sometimes one aspect is emphasized, sometimes another. It is important to note his methodology. He tends to start with a firm viewpoint and subsequently refine it by referring to Scripture, to a moment in the life of Jesus, Mary, or another saint (see H 28). The initial thought is refined and concretized by reality. The opening move is like a draft design that is gradually outfitted with shades of color and light. Thus his standpoint becomes more circumspect and closer to real life, to the actual situation, to what is really happening or needed. In hopes that his view of all sorts of aspects of life contains more truth

and more sense of reality than was initially the case. In that sense it has correctly been noted that Montfort was less interested in academic theology than in real-life spirituality, although this statement might easily lead to false contrasts.

According to FC 47, the powers of our minds are corrupted by self-complacency, and the inclinations of the self-will tend to make things worse. FC 48 asserts that the pitfalls of spiritual pride are most deceptive and subtle. FC 15 mentions nature, self-love, and self-interest in one and the same breath. A little later nature is characterized by terms such as world, hell, body (also in TD 79), and self-will. Those who are solely led by emotions, inclinations, or instinct, behave in the manner of animals. We often do so inadvertently (FC 46). With St. Paul, Montfort sometimes calls this “the flesh”, that is, something inside of me that is “bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom. 7,23). Sometimes we deny our vulnerability, limitations, and mortality and overestimate ourselves: at other times we lose spirit.

But still... We can think, distance ourselves, reflect, discriminate, and use our intellectual powers positively or negatively. Positively in the cautious manner of many great philosophers; negatively like “the worldly-wise, the great intellects and the headstrong know-it-alls, puffed up with their own knowledge and their talents” (FC 17). Montfort definitely does not entirely trust reason. The mind, in his view, is sometimes not very alert to the inclinations of the self-will and often not open to the Gospel.

No matter how self-willed we are at times, we are also able to follow the example of the life of Jesus, and of Mary and the apostles after Pentecost. A faithful attitude towards life is a God-given possibility. Montfort calls on us to live this way, and he tries to do so as well. Nonetheless, also the faithful can stray: FC 48 speaks of “those who are proud and full of themselves”. Since we “naturally” lean towards evil, time and again we need to allow ourselves to be led by Christ, by the Messianic dynamics that carry life and drive it forward in the name of God. With the rhetoric of a Baroque preacher he says, “By the light of the Holy Spirit, we become thoroughly aware of our tainted nature... we are habitually unreliable” (TD 79). Those who pay heed to neither Scripture nor the saints but lend their ear to small talk and their eye to cheap amusement, will be drawn into the nets of the devil. In FC 47 he adds that the inclination towards such a life of negativity is caused by “the sin of Adam and the sins we ourselves have committed.” TD 79 says that “the sin of Adam has

almost entirely spoiled and soured us”; and subsequently our actual sins have “intensified our base desires, our weakness, our inconsistency, and our evil tendencies and have left a sediment of evil in our soul.” In ourselves we are nothing (*le néant*). “We have in us nothing but sin, and deserve only the wrath of God and the eternity of hell” (see also TD 213). Once again: this is the rhetoric of the preacher of fire and brimstone.

The aforementioned three dimensions in a human being interact and influence each other. Often the senses and reason drag faith down. Reason offers an opening for faith, but it can also close it off. By means of reflection and concentrating on the Gospel, we can restrain our bad inclinations and become a good person. Montfort’s discussion of these subjects is neither systematic nor really analytic. He can advance a strong view only to play it down a little later. Apparently he takes humankind to be full of contradictions – not least himself. Sometimes he seems to be in doubt, at other times he firmly moves forward. Now he looks at one angle, now at another one. Also the mood of the different hymns varies. The way one day is different from the next. Thus “le bon père de Montfort” shows a phenomenological sensitivity for the dramatic nature of life. It would therefore be wrong to simply use his more robust utterances as the starting point of a logical line of argument.

Food for thought is what FC 51 says about Jesus. The three aforementioned dimensions are present in him as well: nature (i.e. the senses and the self-will), reason, and faith. According to Montfort, “the lower part in Jesus Christ, however holy, could not love the cross continuously.” He does not assume that Jesus walked on air all the time. Less fortunate, however, is the fact that he seems to attribute the difficulties in the life of Jesus to his corporality rather than to reason and spirit. Or should “the lower part” be understood in the sense of “the flesh” in Paul? Jesus did not possess the paradisiacal nature of man of which LEW 38 says, “Man’s entire being was bright without shadow, beautiful without blemish, pure without stain, perfectly proportioned without deformity, flaw, or imperfection.” No, also Jesus did not “naturally” follow the will of God. Even though he has not sinned, he did not immediately agree with the will of the Father or the fire of the Holy Spirit. Here fragments of Heb. 2,14-18 can be heard: “Since the children have shared in flesh and blood, he also himself in like manner partook of the same... Therefore he was obligated in all things to be made like his brothers, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people.” Jesus is called a

high priest who can “be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4,15). Apparently texts like these have taught Montfort not to consider himself superior to others in clerical pride, but to remain someone who knows how hard life can often be. He “can deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray, because he himself is also surrounded with weakness” (Heb. 5,2).

3. Simultaneously righteous and a sinner

Since the Reformation and the Council of Trent in the 16th century, the relationship between sin and grace has been high on the Christian agenda, with an appeal made, this way or that, to Saint Augustine. How profoundly is a Christian defined by sin on the one hand and by God’s grace or love for humankind on the other? What is man’s situation: does the First Adam dominate the scene, or the Second? Which one outweighs the other in the junction of relations that is a human being? Are we, even after Christ, still sinners and incapable of a single good work? Or is God’s grace so efficacious that already during our earthly lifetime we can be a source of goodness and veracity? And how would this work? The controversy concerning these questions is not only an issue between Rome and the Reformation but also within the Roman Catholic community itself. Such as the question in how far the sin of Adam and the entire history of sin have destroyed the orientation on God and still thwart the imitation of Christ. Are we, in spite of Christ, still in the abyss? To what extent are we determined by the self-interest that Augustine calls concupiscence?

At the end of the 17th century, the conflict in France intensifies around the Cistercian monastery of Port Royal. In the line of Jansenism and on the authority of Augustine, the sisters still emphasize the almost all-powerful “desire of the flesh” or our tendency to pretend to be greater and better than we really are. In Jansenius’ opinion – at least in his opponents’ view of him – nothing remains inside of us of God’s good creation and we totally depend on God’s healing grace, on which only the Last Judgment will throw some light. But without God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ definitely no good can be expected at all. The controversy concentrates on piety and participation in the sacraments. According to Port Royal, the Jesuits undermine the gravity of sin and treat notorious sinners with far too much leniency. In practice, this rigorism caused the inhabitants of Port Royal to hardly ever

receive Holy Communion; it illustrates their acute consciousness of sin. “Thus Communion became the reward for our virtuousness, and no longer its nourishment.”²⁶

Montfort was educated by the Jesuits at Rennes, and on many occasions he was their guest later in life, especially in times of trouble. We may therefore assume that their views coincide. “It is remarkable that he, who had such stark religion and was so merciless on himself, remained so moderate and understanding where the ‘sinners’ were concerned,” writes Hubert Hechtermans.²⁷ Also Montfort has said that man has lost his soul because his relation with God has been substantially corrupted by sin (see JLM 1043). This has consequences for the way a Christian must live. According to Pierre Bérulle, we must pray to God for a spirit and an attitude of dying to ourselves. After all, we can only make room for the life of Jesus if we die to self (JLM 454). Montfort subscribes to the need for penance and mortification. However, with Jean-Jacques Olier, he believes that “love for the cross and for mortification is not the heart of Christian religion.” This heart is rather expressed in Jesus’ words “*Follow me*” (ibid). From this Deville draws the following conclusion, “Our aim should be total communion with Jesus, and the only way is total death to self. The way to Jesus is through the Cross, and ‘without him we can do nothing’” (JLM 455).

Certainly, the call to imitation in Mk. 8,34ff does not gloss over the importance of self-denial, but it is not the basic principle. The imitation of Christ and life in the sphere of the Kingdom of God is what conversion is aimed at. This is why the order in the summary of Jesus’ message is important: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand! Turn back and believe in the Gospel” (Mk. 1,15). The conversion of the cross is neither the beginning nor the end; but the way that leads to the joyful goal. Being sinner and righteous are not static; it is not an either-or situation but moments that are simultaneously and complexly present in everyone’s life. Sometimes one aspect dominates, sometimes the other. Advent differs from Lent, and the latter differs from Easter. But every time God and God’s grace are the beginning and the end.

Fifty years ago, people thought that the New Times had come and that the hurdles, holes, and dents of life would soon be over for good. In the year 2000 everything would be put right. With this expectation every form of spirituality of the cross seemed long past. “This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius! Let the sunshine in!” By now, we all know better. It still takes effort, pain, and self-sacrifice to progress. The cross still needs to be carried.

The Messianic pains are not over yet. But there is an undercurrent of joy. This joy does not erupt after all has been accomplished: it is here already. It is based on Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God is near, and on the way that he has gone in obedience to the Father. Conversion, penance, and bearing one's cross do not precede salvation, liberation, or justification and the accompanying joy. The love that comes at us from God provokes conversion, which occurs within a joyful frame of mind. Not joyful because suffering and cross are fun; such masochism is out of the question. The joy is based on the fact that God is with us; it arouses the hope that the dream of the New Jerusalem (Ps. 136) will come true. It makes a world of difference to claim that a baptized person is still a sinner, or to depart from the covenant that God wishes to make with us. At the forefront for Montfort is not the fact that we are sinners, but that Christ has wanted to deliver us from depression and despair.

In order to prevent misunderstandings, it is important to regard Montfort's views of the doctrine of reconciliation, which has been pinned on Anselm of Canterbury. Has Jesus not assumed the punishment for our sins and has he not died a gruesome death to appease the wrath of God? TD 85 says in this vein that Jesus "in his infinite love became our security and our Mediator with his Father, whom he wished to appease in order to redeem us from our debts." This implies a God whose wrath at sinners needs appeasement because his Holiness has been infinitely insulted in such a way that no mere mortal can make amends. But let us read carefully. TD 85 puts the infinite love of Jesus, the Son, first. However great our sinfulness may be, God is not tempted to feelings of revenge. He continues to be led by his infinite love. In other words, He does not think and act out of spite and bitterness, but out of love for peace, which prevents Him from seeing us, in the human manner, as enemies. As a mediator who does not assume an unbridgeable gap between God and humanity, Jesus covers our guilt with his infinite love, puts his mantle on top of it, and establishes the awareness in our midst that God wants to be a father to all. He suffers on the cross "in order to give to God his Father greater glory and to men a proof of greater love" (LEW 164). When, dying, he extends his arms towards all people, sinful as they may be, he gives free rein to the glory of God, i.e. to the way in which God in his infinity wants to embrace all. On the basis of which this Montfort says, according to G. Colzani, "The cross of Jesus should not be seen as something profoundly sad; it is entirely a matter of love. The cross is the gospel of love; it is its sacrament" (DSM 660).

God's love and God's wrath should not be spoken of in the same manner and with the same pertinence. If our point of departure is the wrath of God, a God is concerned who turns his back on the world and leaves people to fend for themselves. The way in which God's love has primacy in the New Testament does not condone evil, to be sure, but it is not determined by it. God allows himself to be guided by love for humankind. Initially Montfort uses a mix of God's wrath and God's love, but gradually his prioritization of love becomes more and more emphatic.

This is evident in the way he speaks of redemption. When discussing the necessity of Jesus' death on the cross, he does not take this to be punishment for sins but a breakthrough of God's love for humankind. When he speaks of God's wrath and revenge, it is meant to encourage conversion instead of it being his deepest theological horizon. This coincides with the New Testament theology of sacrifice "that does not state that God wants to see blood before he relinquishes his wrath. On the contrary, by the bloodshed the lethal power of sin is denounced. In the process of forgiveness the power of sin does not disappear; rather, it is made visible."²⁸ Montfort calls the human being a sinner in order to emphasize the gravity of the situation; it is not the basis of his theology. It would, after all, push into the background what is most important to him: God's love for humankind has appeared in Christ and through his disciples it wants to bring about new élan to the ends of the earth.

No doubt, words and images occur in Montfort's work that put us on the wrong track. However, he does not really need these and they do not monopolize his writing. They are not its recurrent horizon. The *Love of Eternal Wisdom* speaks another language (see Section 6). We should not approach the theology of the cross from the perspective of the Anselmian doctrine of reconciliation, but from the humble and loving care that is characteristic of God, Jesus, and Mary. Montfort views the death on the cross in the light of Jesus' preaching in word and deed. This leads to a different view of God's holiness and of human sinfulness. What matters most is Jesus' compassion with the multitude (Mt. 14,14), and the infinite love for humankind of the Father who yearns for the return of the lost son (Lk. 15).

In 1999, a joint declaration of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican was published in Augsburg concerning the theology of justification; in others words, on what grounds do we people, despite our sinfulness, become children of God or participants in the covenant. The conclusion was that Rome and the Reformation had often been in conflict

in the past on the basis of rather divergent premises. Both were using the same words and terms but had different things in mind. The joint statement asserts, “As new people in Christ, Christians are free of sin, but during their earthly lives they must still fight ‘the flesh.’” The Declaration does not maintain that all difference has vanished, but it does form the basis for further dialogue. The same holds true for the exchange of views within the Roman Catholic Church. To what extent are we justified or blessed and to what extent are we still sinners? This is a recurring question in everyone’s life, with the emphasis on the one and then again on the other point of view. This is also the case with Montfort. He does not think exactly the same way every day. However, in the course of his life the primacy of God’s grace becomes more prominent. It is a source of happiness to him. But he never loses sight of his own weakness and the many unredeemed dimensions of life. And he never forgets that we must, in imitation of Christ, carry the cross, both our own and that of others.

Montfort is a realist. He bears in mind that he has to do without the most rightful matters (the approval of bishops and others) and that he is crossed and ridiculed in his most holy wishes (L 13). A veritable anthill of sinners and sins attacks him and does not leave him in peace (L 26). He is convinced that he will meet with resistance and dissent, if he really testifies to God (L 11). He also looks at himself in a commonsensical way. In 1715, one year before his death, he says that his own person and his wicked self-will, though it may appear good (in critical reference to *le bon père de Montfort?*), still spoil everything (L 32). Nonetheless, this confession of guilt is not the last word: beginning and end are the grace of God, the love of Wisdom, and the fire of the Spirit.

4. Amidst all sorts of difficulties

When Montfort speaks of the cross in the life of Jesus’ disciples, he thinks of their fragile constitution on the one hand, and on the way in which Jesus related to this on the other. All sorts of problems occur in life; they are not entirely unconnected but cannot simply be lumped together either.

Certain difficulties stem from physical weakness, disease, infirmities of old age, mosquito bites, fatigue, heartache, hunger, and thirst. At those instances he knows himself to be a fragile human being but at the same time he feels challenged to not allow these problems

to get on top of him. In the language of his days, he sometimes speaks of “the illness which God has sent you to purify you like gold in a furnace” (L 17). This does not refer to a punishing God but One who calls and begs us to bear witness to his compassion, mercy, and solidarity, even in our fragileness and vulnerability.

Other difficulties are caused by the tendency to grab whatever we can get our hands on and give in to the “desires of the flesh” (FC 4); this Pauline terminology refers to the tendency to put self-love above everything else and flatter our vanity. It takes a lot of inner struggle and effort to not give in to this sort of impulse. Prima facie it seems to increase our happiness when we do, but it actually makes us narrow-minded and unfree.

The third kind of difficulty originates from our social environment. The riches of others cause envy and greed; the pride of others makes us small; corruption provokes our anger and insecurity. The fashion of the day has an almost natural allure; economic developments may leave us a pauper and drive us off our land. Friends and relatives can let us down and abandon us for obvious or not-so-obvious reasons. In such circumstances it is not easy to remain honest, straightforward, friendly, patient, and cheerful, without fretting and complaining.

The fourth category of difficulties is explicitly connected with the following that Jesus speaks of in Mk. 8,34ff. Those who follow in his footsteps are mistrusted or taken for sanctimonious hypocrites or fanatics. They lose their friends, are ridiculed, cursed, insulted, discredited, and falsely accused. To the point of physical persecution and death. This is when we feel the nails, the thorns, and the lashes that Christ has suffered. Montfort calls the imitation of Christ supernatural; it exceeds nature, exceeds what pleases the senses (H 6,2), reason or the intellect (cf. 1 Cor. 1). The desire to actually follow the Crucified Jesus arises from the highest part of our being: our desire to live in peace and harmony with one another. Our lower part doesn’t get around to it by itself and groans and weeps (FC 53, FC 51); “nature abhors it” (H 19,2). Reason can understand that only through pain and effort we reach a certain goal, but only the light of faith (FC 53) leads to the imitation of the Crucified Jesus. Those who claim to follow Christ but do not encounter a single difficulty on the way, should wonder whether they really are following.

In the footsteps of Christ, Montfort attempts to develop into the image of God. He does not want to give way to despondency but takes up his cross every day of his life. Sometimes

he feels the ground of hope giving way beneath his feet, when he is not understood or falsely accused, and has to deal with people who scoff at God. Meanwhile he wonders, in consultation with friends and councilors, whether he does not exaggerate his penance and asceticism in this yearning to follow Christ. Are fellow students in Paris wrong when they take him for an eccentric? He needs to purify his fascination for Christ from strange excesses. Armed with the Spirit of the Gospel. He has to shake off the devil who is whispering that God is not demanding and that also Jesus went and ate and drank with the rich. Is it allowed, or not? Montfort attempts to fathom his feelings and behavior in light of Scripture and the tradition based on it. He must not think that he is a saint, but he should not hide behind his feelings of inadequacy either. He should steer his tendency to radicalism in the right direction. That is why he regularly goes into retreat and on a pilgrimage.

Montfort discovers that it is not easy to be led by the humble love of God and Christ. Something's wrong with him, something's twisted inside. He needs to deny himself. No. 172 of the *Rule of the Daughters of Wisdom* also applies to him: "Do not think that you do not need mortification of the flesh; you will not find wisdom with those who live easily and are led by the senses." A person oriented towards God needs to be "raised above mere reason and the senses" (FC 4). He or she is not to be misled by calculating reason, nor by the stimuli and impulses of the senses. But it is not only the senses and reason that are obstacles. According to FC 47, also the "powers of our soul" are to be blamed, "our corrupt mind" and its "self-complacency", the tendency to claim for ourselves, to be the center of attention, and to do whatever we please.

Whereas Montfort initially considers himself a sinner who meets God with his head bowed and begging for mercy, later in life he rather sees himself in the light of God, as a justified sinner who must live in gratitude and joy. He is more and more convinced that God looks after us "even while we are sinners", that He cares for us in spite of it. This conviction becomes a source of profound joy. In this sense Jüngel says, "Someone who does not rejoice about the gift of his life is by definition not a Christian."²⁹

According to H 6,19-20, this faithful approach to life has brought the persecuted apostles true joy. The numerous difficulties notwithstanding, their faith urged them on: "Amidst most bitter torment I made the martyrs laugh, I gave them more delights than their hearts could have desired." LEW 98 cites 2 Cor. 7,4: "I exceedingly abound with joy in all our

tribulations.” In Montfort’s view this faithful way of thinking should permeate all of life, also in bitter circumstances. Then, according to FC 51, the divine joy of the Holy Spirit comes over us and we sing, “My heart and my flesh ring out their joy to God, the living God” (Ps. 84,3 Vulgate). Those who stand up for other people without feeling superior, experience “a great peace; it opens their hearts” (TD 169; cf. LEW 174). Thus Montfort understands Mt. 11,29, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest, for this yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light.” It is this rest and peace that Montfort would like to radiate. It becomes his horizon. It is how he preaches and writes. Without glossing over the state of the human heart. Without disregarding the concerns of one person, the misery of the next, the sorrow of a third. Without sparing himself.

5. Face to face with the Cross

At an early age, Montfort comes into contact with the cross. Brittany, his homeland, is already dotted with crosses in his days. At street corners, at the center of squares, he comes across them everywhere. Also in the many churches and chapels, of course. Later on in his life he will erect a cross himself in a village or a city district at the end of a mission. Its meaning shows in the wooden cross that he erected in the poorhouse of Poitiers in 1702: 1.85 m high and 1.35 m wide. On the vertical beam is written in capital letters *IHS*, an abbreviation for Jesus, but also a reminder of the sign that Constantine saw in the sky: “*In Hoc Signo vinces* – in this sign you will conquer.” Underneath is Mk. 8,34: “denying oneself, taking up the cross and following Jesus.” This is followed by *AM – Ave Maria*. On the crossbeam Mk. 8,38 is written: “If you are ashamed of the Cross of Jesus Christ, he will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father.” Further down on the vertical beam it continues: “Love for the cross – yearning for crosses: being despised, suffering pain, insults, reproaches, persecutions, humiliations, disasters, sickness, defamation.” A small cross planted inside a heart is followed by “*vive Jésus, vive sa croix* – may Jesus and the cross reign forever.” Underneath are the words: “divine love, humility, subservience, patience, total obedience, spontaneous joy, blind perseverance”, followed at the bottom by the nails, the crown of thorns, and a star. The text on the upper part and on the crossbeam shows what Christian life is all about: following Jesus who is carrying the cross. What this involves

and asks of us concretely is explained on the lower part of the vertical beam in a long list of texts and symbols. *Ave Maria* and the star indicate that Mary has followed Jesus under the cross.

With the same intention Montfort erects a large Calvary in 1709 at the end of the missions in Pontchâteau and the surrounding area. It fits in with the tradition of the famous Breton Calvaries. When certain villages in West-Brittany got rich because of the linen trade in the 15th century, large Calvaries carved out of stone sprung up next to the parish churches. Beautiful specimens are still to be admired in Pleyben, Guimiliau, and Plougastel, among others. They represent the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus as key moments of the Incarnation and as a sign of the love of God for humankind that has appeared in him: the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus, the visit to Elisabeth and the flight to Egypt, baptism in the Jordan etc. Often the descent into hell is depicted as a representation of Christ's defeat of the devil: whereas the devil brings Adam and Eve down and turns life into hell, He pulls them up out of a situation of hopelessness. His death initiates an all-embracing movement of redemption. In the back of churches underneath an octagonal canopy a baptismal font can often be found, with a depiction of the baptism of Jesus right next to it. In the narthex are the apostles, ready to set forth into the world.

According to H 164, the Calvary of Pontchâteau is a reminder of the Calvary of Jerusalem (stanza 1). That the Crucified Jesus' courage to live may be in our hearts (2) and find followers (17). Jesus promises, "I will attract the most rebellious hearts and everyone will obey my law" (20). According to a law from 1695, Calvaries could only be erected with state permission, for fear that their height might serve the English attacks in case of a war. Enemies of Montfort have cleverly used this regulation. That is the reason why the Calvary of Pontchâteau had to be torn down right before its consecration on the 14th of September (Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross).

A Dutch version of the Cross of Poitiers in the former Noviciate of the Daughters of Wisdom in Berg & Dal (NL)



ZELFVERLOOCHENING.
ZIJN KRUIS DRAGEN OM
JEZUS CHRISTUS TE VOLGEN

IHS

ALS GIJ U SCHAAMT OVER HET KRUIS
VAN IZUS CHRISTUS, ZAL HIJ ZICH
SCHAMEN OVER U VOOR ZIJN VADER

LIEFDE TOT
HET KRUIS.
VERLANGEN
NAAR KRUISEN
AANACHTING
SMARTE MAAD
HOON. SCHANDEN
VERVOLGENGEN
VERIEDERINGEN
LASTERZIEKTES
BELEDIGINGEN



GODDERIKE LIEFDE
NEDERIGHEID
ONDERWERPING
GEDULD
GEHOORZAAMHEID
VOLLEDIG VERDICHT
BILIGEDIGZELING
STANDVASTIG



At the end of the 19th century the Calvary of Pontchâteau was rebuilt. In conformity with the Breton tradition, the French Montfortians have depicted the life of Jesus in a neighboring park. In order to prevent the cross from losing its context and thus becoming a sign that can be interpreted at random. After all, the New Testament places Jesus' death on the cross in the context of his entire life, of Easter, and of the subsequent acts of the apostles.

6. The Love of Eternal Wisdom and the Cross

This is the title of a book, written in 1703-1704, in which Montfort discusses his view of the background and the horizon of Christian life. The text probably has its origins in sermons for the Parisian community of Poullart des Places; among them were seminarians and Montfort hoped that several of them would join him some time in the future. He moves back and forth between the deuterocanonical bible book of Wisdom and the life and work of Jesus Christ. LEW is not for people who identify Christian belief with the behavior of the sanctimonious, scrupulants, and fanatics. Vincent Taylor's remarks with regard to Mk. 8,34ff are true for LEW as well: "It is only in the case of the man who consciously wills discipleship that the demands are relevant."³⁰

Chapter 14 describes "the triumph of Eternal Wisdom in and by the Cross". It is an explanation of LEW 154 concerning "the suffering [Jesus Christ] chose to endure to prove his love for us." As also Pierre Humblet writes, "Montfort does not wish to show us the suffering first and foremost, but rather the love that is at the bottom of it."³¹ This is the way Montfort sees the Cross. Wisdom wants to reveal the love of God to the people by means of the mystery of the cross. God's relationship to the world is not defined by omnipotence, but by friendship. He does not bring armies in order to win us over. No, He wants to share in the hardship that we encounter in life.

Jesus' choice for the Cross is not a whim, in Montfort's opinion; it has value for all eternity. Jesus has made his choice from the very first moment in Mary's womb. He repeatedly speaks of it during his life and encounters the cross time and again. He dies joyfully while embracing the cross. Jesus is never without the Cross, the Cross is never without Jesus. The cross on which he died has become adorable. This honor falls to no other element of creation. All relics will disappear eventually, but those of the Cross will be gathered on the Last Day.

In light of the Cross judgment will be passed. Its importance for Montfort is illustrated in H 19,12 and H 102,23: “The Cross is to be adored, his Mother is not.” Something like a hypostatic union takes place of Jesus and the cross on which he suffers and dies (see also LEW 172). Thus the Roman liturgy of Good Friday sings, “Come, let us adore” and “We adore your cross, O Lord” and prays “that through the Cross joy has come in the entire world.” The reason for this is in the subsequent hymn:

*Tree which solely wast found worthy
the world's Victim to sustain
harbor from the raging tempest!
Ark, that saved the world again!
Tree, with sacred blood anointed
of the Lamb for sinners slain.*

In reference to Mt. 16,24, LEW 173 states that the disciple must carry the Cross on the forehead, in the heart, and on the shoulders. It is the sign, the characteristic, and the weapon of those who have been chosen by Wisdom. Only the Cross conquers the sin of the world. The wisdom of the Cross is a greater gift than that of faith. Suffering humiliation, poverty, and torture as a witness of Christ is for Montfort the greatest possible grace. Only thus we become deiform, gain insight, and realize what love is in practice and in theory. It is the greatest secret there is (Lk. 10,21), and it is hard to fathom. Those who complain with the least misfortune will not uncover this mystery. We should do all we can in order to get to know the value of the Cross. Real respect for Jesus' Cross asks that we – in contrast to the worldly-wise – ungrudgingly accept our own cross. Many, however, bear it unwillingly. They do not want to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. Yet this is the honor of the Christian on earth, after which the reward will come in heaven. We need to bear our cross with cheer, not opt for an easy life, but choose the wisdom of the Cross.

This is the framework or the context in which Chapter 16 speaks of mortification. In other words, of the lifestyle asked of the disciple of Jesus. The love of and for divine Wisdom implies, in Montfort's opinion, that we crucify the flesh with its vices and desires and renounce the world and ourselves, avoid worldly company and vanities, live in poverty, fast and keep long vigils, curb our self-will, judge and live out of God's word. In other words,

not simply follow the spirit of the times, not think, speak, or act like people of the world, and not follow our spontaneous feelings or desires. “We are not told that we are not allowed to enjoy ourselves, but rather that an *orientation* towards fulfillment of all our material and immaterial needs and wishes should not be the main driving force” (Humblet 49). We need to restrain ourselves. This often feels as our cross. It is not *the* Cross, but it is part of it. *The* Cross means that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus and take the yoke of the Kingdom of God upon our shoulders. This is the only true cause for joy: to become the true image of Jesus and of his love for other people. This joy in turn strengthens our courage to follow Him without fear and aversion and not be deterred by outside criticism.

Montfort does not speak of the cross as a way to pay for our sins. The focus is on the imitation of Christ who has not lived as a supernal being, remote from ordinary life and from the grief that can strike people. On the contrary, he has shared the burden of others and taken it upon himself. This commitment, however painful or difficult, is an essential facet of the spirituality of the cross. No doubt the struggle against inclinations that oppose this commitment is part of it; it is not its core, however. The core is the participation in the missionary or apostolic orientation of Jesus. That is the driving force and the criterion to judge whether someone’s asceticism and mortification are within the proper horizon.

Put differently, Jesus has not sought the cross for the sake of the thrill or out of contempt for the world. It was the consequence of his view of life and his experience of God. For him everything revolved around the Kingdom of God. In other words, around the conviction that God is near and wants to give people the strength to live in all simplicity, meekly, and peacefully, without threatening, terrifying, or getting the better of each other. This is no sinecure in a world full of cynicism, envy, domination, misunderstanding, and miscommunication, where sickness and death can strike anywhere and anytime. Some days it makes us lax and weak, on others we become aggressive. We are weighed down by the fact that other people are more intelligent, skilful, and shrewd than we are. We are painfully confronted with our lack of solidarity, or when someone’s heartfelt love for others forms a living indictment of the self-interest that seems to be our main motive, or the honor of our family, the glory of our race or country. Jesus was only interested in God’s love for humankind and in strengthening people’s confidence in this God.

7. In dialogue with Jesus and Mary

We do not know in what year the Hymn *Treasures of the Cross* was written. Hence it does not enable us to draw strict conclusions concerning the development of Montfort's spirituality of the cross. The Hymn's subtitle is: *dialogue of our Lord with the faithful soul*. It allows us a glimpse into the inner life of Montfort. He was engaged in constant conversation with Jesus and Mary. This continuous dialogue is the main feature of his spirituality of the cross and it keeps him from relapsing into routine and weakness. Thanks to the presence of Jesus and Mary he knows himself to be encouraged and challenged day in, day out.

The melody of the hymn is derived from the song *En secret le Seigneur m'appelle* from the circle of Jean-Baptist de la Salle (1651-1719), founder of The Brothers of the Christian Schools. Montfort may have chosen it because of its opening verse: *In secret the Lord calls me and says: give me your heart. My God, you have won me; I will always be faithful to you. God, you have won me, the world is untrustworthy and deceptive*. The word "faithful" returns in the subtitle of the hymn: 'faithful soul'. The contrast between God and a deceptive world in the first stanza is a recurring topic in the aim of implementing in France the reforms of the Council of Trent. Organizationally, but especially in religious life. Stereotyping the enemy in order to react against him is a classic method. In eschatological and apocalyptic literature such war rhetoric is the order of the day. In translation the text runs as follows:

The disciple 1. O Jesus, my adorable Master,
Show me the way to heaven,
Show me which is more valuable:
To be rich or poor,
To rule or serve,
To be at ease or suffer greatly.

Jesus 2. Listen, dear faithful soul:
I who am exalted and God,
I so strongly loved contempt,
And the cross appeared so stunning,

I came down from heaven and took flesh,
To adorn myself with them.

3. In my wisdom I find
Treasures in poverty,
Splendor in humility,
Greatness in lowliness!
With great scorn I look upon
Wealth, pomp, all worldly honor.

4. I lived in obedience,
Humbled myself to serve,
Chose to be born and to die
In want and suffering.
Would you reign with me?
My example must be your law.

The disciple 5. But Lord, my dear model,
The world seeks grandeur,
Pleasures, wealth, honors;
You do the exact opposite.
Its pleasure is to dominate,
It knows nothing of obedience.

Jesus 6. Learn that I esteem
What the world shuns.
Unhappy whoever follows it,
For it leads straight to the abyss.
I curse those the world deems happy
But bless those it considers unhappy.

7. With kindness, I regard
The afflicted, the poor and the despised,
Those suffering without a cause,
If they bear it patiently
My favors are theirs,
A thousand wonders await them in heaven.

8. Would you offer God, my Father,
Great, perfect honor?
Suffer well, esteem the pain,
Embrace the cross,
Be the servant of everyone;
Then my spirit will rest upon you.

9. For the crosses I send you,
Offer me thanksgiving
As for my greatest gifts;
For the cross begets joy,
Virtue, grace, and peace,
And in heaven, happiness forever.

10. Is your life hidden,
Are you overlooked?
Is your status vile and lowly?
Be consoled, my well beloved,
Your plight, so like mine, is a sign
That I love you dearly.

11. Have you been slandered?
Are you bearing bodily pain,
Within or on the outside?

Is someone envious of you?
Fine! I am delighted.
My close friends are all treated in this way.

The disciple 12. O Mary, O afflicted Mother,
Let me partake of your sorrows,
Share your flowing tears with me
So that my soul be cleansed.
No cross without you and Jesus;
Without you both the cross is merely bitter.

Mary 13. The cross is my tree of life,
I am the Mother of the living,
All my good children share the cross,
Do you not desire some?
I have crosses of great price
But they are only for my favorites.

The disciple 14. With all my heart, O afflicted Mother,
I shall share your grief
If, with your sweetness, my cross will be
Sweetened and well blended.
No cross without you and Jesus,
Without you both the cross is merely bitter.

15. O Jesus, thank you a thousand times
For your lesson all divine!
How I beg you for forgiveness,
So poorly have I followed you.
I set forever my true joy
In modeling you, my Savior.

16. If your gentle Providence
Grants me a share in your cross,
It is far too much an honor.
But strengthen me in my weakness,
Humble, sever, and strike
And I'll still be happy, if you help.

The hymn is about a person who wants to learn from Jesus and, according to the stanzas 12-14, from Mary as well. In the first stanza he is faced with an important question: does he want to be rich or poor, does he choose to rule or to serve? Jesus has come to serve (4); this could not be accomplished without suffering and misery. Jesus explains that the way to heaven is through the earth. Incarnation is not something vague, remote from real life; on the contrary, it involves actual commitment (2). It involves poverty and humility (3) and calls for obedience to the appeal to be the servant of life (4). Jesus himself chose to be born and die in want and suffering (4), in solidarity with others. This choice is opposed to the way of the world (5-6). Jesus rejoices, when someone bravely shares the plight of the questioning, searching, doubting, and despised neighbor. That is the cross that he sends (9) or that “naturally” comes with him: being the servant of every one (8), not seeking grandeur (5). The cross is the consequence of that life choice. Friends of the cross must patiently (7) share the fate of those who are looked down upon. Does he choose the side of the poor and the humiliated or is he afraid to? Does he choose half-heartedly and prefer the higher circles that stanza 5 mentions?

Also Mary has known pain and suffering and did not run away from it. Through her tears she has recognized Jesus' cross as the new tree of life. What the Hymn has to say about Mary is brief and compact. There is a whole world behind it. Since the Middle Ages, Mary's place under the cross has been approached in light of the Song of Songs.³² According to Jn. 19, Jesus and his mother share in each other's joy and pain. Furthermore, their relationship is defined by their solicitude for others, personified in the beloved disciple. Without it being a direct reference to this tradition, the dialogue in the stanzas 12-14 breathes this atmosphere. The faithful soul is admitted into the relationship between Mary and Jesus for the sake of others.

That someone may bear the cross in the company of Jesus and Mary provides strength and comfort. It even begets joy, virtue, grace, and peace (9). The disciple sees the hand of Providence in the cross (16). Belief in Providence entails that God and Christ are involved in our course of life and help us with words of the prophets and the wise. In the same attentive way God also follows the Friends of the Cross. With blessing, if we allow ourselves to be led by these words. With horror and regret, if we make bad choices. Belief in Providence does not mean waiting passively for God's deeds, but living actively in the footsteps of Scripture and the lives of saints. Like Mary who said to the angel, "Be it to me according to your word", and immediately went into action. Like Jesus who said in Gethsemane, "not my will, but yours, be done", and faced his betrayer. According to H 28,29-31, belief in Providence or confidence in the footsteps of Jesus is opposed to love of riches. Whoever follows in the footsteps of Jesus does not experience the cross as coincidence or bad luck, but bears it in the conviction that God watches him or her the way a sympathetic father or mother holds a crying child. It gives Montfort the strength to keep going and not throw in the towel (15). He agrees with the task that is assigned to him, even if he continues to feel his inadequacy (16) and needs to fight the inclination to go the way of the world. He prays to share in the pains and the tears of Mary. The cross came into her life because she followed Jesus and because she lived in solidarity with the afflicted. It is obvious here that the center of Montfort's spirituality of the cross is not penance and mortification, but compassion and attention for the affliction of others.

The faithful soul is not someone who remains outside of life. Montfort himself is an example, at one of those times he has been put out of action in a diocese, is no longer allowed to preach, say mass etc. To muster up his courage he enters into conversation with Jesus. His piety does not consist in rattling off a number of prayers or required spiritual exercises. Scripture in hand, he consults friends and spiritual leaders and dares to be appealed to and challenged by the miserable circumstances of the homeless, the unemployed, and the beggars. The degrading conditions in the poorhouses make him sit up and take notice. Something needs to be done! In the spirit of Jesus and Mary. The faithful souls in our days might devote themselves to heroin prostitutes, asylum seekers who have exhausted all legal procedures, the emotionally disturbed, orphans, or traumatized child soldiers. His piety is not sanctimonious and unworldly. On the contrary, it is characterized by bravery, actual

dedication, and solidarity through thick and thin. Based on an intimate connection with the Passion of Jesus and Mary.



CHAPTER 3

The letter of montfort to the friends of the cross

1. Introduction

In 1714, when Montfort is banned from working in the diocese of Nantes, he goes to the Jesuits in Rennes for a short retreat. He attempts to view this umpteenth setback in light of the Cross of Jesus. By his own account, he writes a long letter to the Friends of the Cross at the end of the retreat. The original manuscript has been lost. The oldest complete version that we have available goes back to 1839. Fragments are to be found in the first biographies from the 18th century.

The Friends of the Cross, both men and women, was an association that Montfort founded towards the end of a mission in the St. Similien parish of Nantes in 1709-1710. The *Letter* describes how the Friends should regard and experience their commitment. It is placed against the background of Jesus' call to follow him unto death and live in solidarity with the afflicted. Friends of the Cross are touched, in the footsteps of God and Jesus, by the suffering of others and wish to stand by them, even if acquaintances mock them for it or disapprove of their behavior. They should not turn to Christ primarily for comfort in their strictly personal troubles. The perspective also differs from Heb. 12,7 that says, "It is for discipline that you endure." All this also, but at all times it should be clear that the imitation of Christ is the basic principle.

The structure of the *Letter* is as follows. After a short salutation (1), the name of the association is explained (2-5) and the Friends are placed in opposition to the worldly by means of the well-known image of two armies (6-12). This leads to the scriptural passage that is the central point of the *Letter* and that is paraphrased elaborately in the numbers 13 through 20: "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16,24). From number 20 onwards Montfort speaks of the necessity of carrying one's cross (21-33), but also its lightness and joy (34) and its glory (35-40). Finally

fourteen guidelines are discussed in the numbers 41-62 about the pitfalls and difficulties that arise when someone actually follows in the footsteps of Christ. The question cannot be answered whether the original *Letter* ended as abruptly as is the case for the one that has been passed down. Another unresolved issue is whether the *Letter* was really written at one sitting. As regards content and tone, there seems to be a split between the first part and the numbers 21 through 33. In no. 41 the perspective changes once again.

At places in the *Letter* expressions and thoughts are used that have become unfamiliar to us. Some will be commented upon in the footnotes. The strangeness has to do with shifts in language and in the experience of faith. In **Touched by the humility of God**, it has been suggested that these shifts correspond to the basic idea of Montfort, but it cannot be denied that a number of passages of the *Letter* are at odds with it. It has to do with the influence of the pessimistic anthropology of St. Augustine and the lack of attention to the metaphoric character of the eschatological-apocalyptic language of the Bible, especially with regard to the impact of sin and the gravity of God's judgment. Many a passage gives the impression, contrary to the fundamental conviction of Montfort, that God is unrelenting and threatens revenge and punishment, and that the spirituality of the cross should be seen and lived in that light. Olivier Maire asserts that the personal relationship between God and human being, as put forward in Scripture, thus fades into the background and is substituted by a view of God as a bookkeeper who closes the accounts on the basis of our good or bad achievements (JLM 594-595). This does not correspond to Montfort's words and beliefs in LEW among others.

2. The text

Salutation

1. Since the divine Cross keeps me hidden and prevents me from speaking to you personally, I cannot, and I do not even desire to express by word of mouth the feelings of my heart on the excellence and exalted practices of your solidarity in the adorable Cross of Jesus Christ. However, on this last day of my retreat, I leave the delights of interior life. I would like to develop on paper a few little points on the Cross with which to pierce your hearts. Would to God I could use the blood of my veins rather than the ink of my pen! But this would be a crime! May the Spirit of the living God be the inspiration, strength, and content of this letter; may his unction be my ink, the holy Cross my pen, and your hearts my paper.¹

A glorious title: Friends of the Cross

2. Friends of the Cross, you are like soldiers united to fight against the world. Not by retreating from it, like monks, for fear of being overcome by it, but like brave warriors on the battlefield, who refuse to retreat or turn back. Be brave and fight courageously! You must be joined together in a close union of heart and soul, which is stronger and far more formidable to the world and to hell than are the armed forces of a great nation to its enemies. Devils are united to destroy you; you must be united to crush them. The money-grubbers trade to amass gold and silver; you must combine your efforts for the sake of the eternal treasures hidden in the Cross. Pleasure-seekers gather to enjoy themselves; you must gather to carry the Cross together.²

1 In this paragraph the divine Cross, the adorable Cross of Jesus Christ, a few little points on the Cross, and the Holy Cross are mentioned. The associations that Montfort wishes to evoke by means of these adjectives is not yet clear in the Salutation, other than the fact that the Cross is most important. The 1839 version uses a capital 'C' up through no. 26 and a lower case letter afterwards; the translation does likewise.

2 Here an early definition occurs. The Cross has to do with a way of life that is radically different from the world, the devils, the money-grubbers, and the pleasure-seekers.

3. “Friends of the Cross” – such a glorious title! I am charmed and captivated by it. It is brighter than the sun, higher than the heavens, more magnificent and resplendent than all the titles given to kings and emperors. It is the glorious title of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. There is no better title for a Christian.³

4. But, if I am captivated by its splendor, I am no less frightened by its burden, for it embraces difficult obligations. Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit calls you a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.⁴

A Friend of the Cross is one chosen by God, from among thousands who live only for pleasure and enjoyment. A Friend should be fully dedicated to God, raised above mere reason and the senses, living in the light of pure faith and with an ardent love of the Cross.

A Friend of the Cross triumphs as a powerful king and hero over the devil, the world, and the flesh in their three-fold concupiscence. He crushes the pride of Satan by his love of humility; he overcomes the greed of the world by his love of poverty; he restrains the desires of the flesh by his love of suffering.

A Friend of the Cross is one who is holy and set apart from the things that are visible. His heart is raised above all that is transient and perishable. His citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3,20) and he lives in this world like a stranger and a pilgrim; he does not set his heart on worldly things and hardly takes notice; he is indifferent to them; he tramples them underfoot with contempt.

A Friend of the Cross is a glorious trophy gained by Christ, crucified on Calvary, and by his holy Mother. Like Benjamin (Gen. 35,18) a difficult delivery, for born from the pierced right side and the suffering heart of Jesus colored crimson by his blood. True to this bloodstained birth, he yearns for crosses and blood and for the death to the world, the flesh,

3 Those who speak of the Cross should keep Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, in mind. He is the way to God and to humankind as well.

4 These four qualifications should not make us forget that the Friends need to testify to the way in which the Crucified One has lived. Once again we can see the difference between what is called nowadays: the worldly, the devils, the greedy, and those who only chase the material.

and sin, so as to be here on earth hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3,3).⁵ In short, a Friend of the Cross is a true Christ-bearer. Or rather, another Jesus Christ. He can truly say, “I live, no it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me” (Gal. 2,20).

5. My dear Friends, do you live in accordance with the noble title that you bear? Do you have a real desire and a sincere determination to be worthy of it with the help of God’s grace, under the shelter of the Cross of Calvary, and of our Lady of Sorrows? Are you taking the means necessary for this? Are you walking along the true way of life, the narrow way of the Cross? Or are you, without perhaps realizing it, on the wide road of the world that leads to the abyss? Beware: there are roads, to all appearances straight and safe, which really lead to eternal death!

Two armies⁶

6. Do you clearly distinguish the voice of God and his grace from that of the world and of nature? Do you listen to the voice of God, the voice of our good Father? After his threefold malediction on all who follow the desires of the world (Apoc. 8,13: Woe! Woe! Woe for those who dwell on the earth), He stretches out his arms to you in loving appeal, “set yourselves apart, my chosen people; beloved Friends of the Cross of my Son, set yourselves apart from worldly people who have been cursed by my Majesty, rejected by my Son, and condemned by my Holy Spirit (Cf. Jn. 16,8-11). Beware of sitting under their stinking pulpit, avoid their company, and don’t even linger on the road they take. Hasten away from the great and

5 *The references to blood encountered less opposition in the 17th – 18th century, in late Romanticism and its related devotion to the Heart of Jesus and Mary, than it does today. It forms too dramatic a disturbance of our easy lives. Nonetheless, also Bible and liturgy, and even popular songs, still refer to blood to indicate that at certain times the utmost is needed to reach a certain goal.*

6 *From his schooldays with the Jesuits of Rennes, the idea of two armies has been known to Montfort in the form of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, a one-time army officer. In military terms the appeal to resist the world is emphasized.*

shameful Babylon. Listen only to the voice of my beloved Son, follow only the footsteps of him I have given you to be your way, your truth, your life (Jn. 14,6) and your model. Listen to him (Mt. 17,5).” Listen to the lovable Jesus who, burdened with his Cross, calls out to you, “Come after me (Mt. 4,19); anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; have faith, I have overcome the world (Jn. 16,33).”

7. There are two armies that appear before you each day: that of Jesus and that of the world. On the right is our dear Savior’s army. It climbs up a narrow road (Mt 7,13-14), made all the narrower by the world’s corruption. Our good Master leads the way, barefoot, crowned with thorns, covered with blood, a heavy cross on his shoulders. Only a few brave soldiers follow Him; his quiet voice is not heard amid the tumult of the world. People lack the courage to follow him in his poverty, sorrows, humiliations, and other crosses that his servants must carry, all the days of their life (Lk. 9,23).

8. On the left is the army of the world or of the devil. It is far more numerous, more imposing, and more illustrious, at least in appearance. The great of the world run to join it. They all crowd together, no matter how wide the road. It is continually being made wider than ever by the multitude that pours along it; it is strewn with flowers, bordered with bars and amusement arcades, paved with gold and silver.

9. On the right, the small flock that follows Jesus Christ only speaks of tears, penance, prayer, and contempt of the world. Continually these words, interrupted by sobs, can be heard, “Let us suffer, cry, fast, and pray. Let us seek solitude. For those who do not possess the spirit of Jesus Christ, i.e. the spirit of the Cross, do not belong to Him. Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified all natural passions and desires (Gal. 5,24). If we are not the true images of Jesus Christ, we will be eternally lost!” “Be brave!” they cry out, “be brave! If God is with us, in us, and for us; who can be against us?” (Rom 8,31). He who is within us is stronger than the world. The servant is not greater than his master (Jn. 13,16). Our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4,17). The number of chosen is not as great as some people imagine (Mt. 20,16). Only brave heroes take heaven by storm; only those are crowned who

have fought in the spirit of the Gospel and not according to the fashion of the day. Let us fight with all our strength, let us run to attain our goal and win the crown (1 Cor. 9,24-25).” With these divine words the Friends of the Cross must encourage each other.

10. The people of the world, on the contrary, loudly urge each other to continue in their evil ways without scruple. Day after day they call to one another, “Let us live; everything is going fine; let us be happy! Let us eat and drink, sing, dance, enjoy ourselves, for God is good and has not created us to damn us. God does not forbid us to enjoy ourselves; we shall not be damned for so little. We are not to be talked into scrupulousness and fear of death.”

11. Remember that our good Jesus has his eyes on you this very moment, and he says to each one of you individually, “Look, almost everyone deserts me on the royal road of the Cross; the blind idolaters ridicule my Cross as foolishness; obstinate Jews are repelled by it as by an object of horror; heretics tear it down and break it into pieces as something contemptible. Alas – I say with tears in my eyes and grief in my heart – my own children whom I have brought up and instructed in my ways; my members whom I have animated with my spirit..., even they have forsaken me, they despise me and have become the enemies of my Cross. Will you also go away (Jn. 6,67) and desert me by running away from my Cross like the worldly people or the antichrists? Will you, in order to follow the world, look down on the poverty of my Cross and seek after earthly goods, shun the sufferings of my Cross and look for enjoyment, hate the humiliations of my Cross and chase after the honors of the world? There are many who pretend to be my friends and say they love me, but in their hearts they hate me because they do not love my Cross. Many friends sit at my table but very few under my Cross.”

12. At this loving appeal of Jesus, let us rise above ourselves. Unlike Eve, we must not be misled by our senses, but keep our eyes fixed on the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12,2), the crucified Jesus. Let us flee from the desires of the corrupted world. Let us love Jesus in the right way, that is, through all kinds of crosses. Let us gravely contemplate the remarkable words of our kind Master that contain all of the perfection of Christian life: “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me (Mt. 16,24).

If anyone desires to come after me,⁷

13. Christian perfection consists in this: resolving to become a saint, that is, denying oneself, carrying one's cross, and actually following Jesus Christ. Once again, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

14. *Anyone*, not many a one. Few chosen ones are willing to conform themselves to the crucified Jesus and carry their cross. Only few. If we knew how small their number is, we would be dumbfounded and sad. It is one in ten thousand. This has been revealed to St. Simon Stylites, St. Ephrem, St. Basil, and a few other saints. Their number is so small that God, should He wish to gather them, would call them as He once did through one of his prophets: You will be gathered one by one (Is. 27,12), one from this region, one from that kingdom.

15. If *anyone really* wants to. Not prompted by nature, by habit or self-love, by self-interest or human respect, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit that wins him over and that is not given to everyone. Practical knowledge of the mystery of the Cross is given to few (Mt. 13,11). Anyone who wants to climb Calvary and allow himself to be crucified with Jesus, in his own country, needs to be brave, heroic, resolute, and exalted in God; he must despise world and hell, body and self-will, and be determined to leave everything, undertake everything, and endure everything for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Anyone among you, who is without this determination, is only walking on one foot, flying with one wing, and is unworthy to be one of you. He is not worthy to be called a Friend of the Cross, of the Cross that we must love, like Jesus, with a generous heart and a willing mind. It only takes one half-hearted sheep to spoil the entire flock. If such a sheep has entered your fold through the evil door of the world, then in the name of the crucified Jesus

⁷ The numbers 13-20 form the heart of the letter. In the beginning of Chapter 1 it has been pointed out that Montfort often quotes texts concerned with the imitation of Christ. The point of departure is not the sinfulness of the human being. This is certainly not denied (see 21-22), but following in the footsteps of Christ is the basis.

Christ drive it out, as you would a wolf that has crept up on the sheep (Jn. 10,12).

16. *If anyone wants to come after me.* After me, who so humbled and emptied myself that I became a worm rather than a man (Ps. 22,7). After me; who came into the world only to embrace the Cross, to set it in the middle of my heart, to love it from my youth, to long for it all the days of my life, to carry it joyfully, and to prefer it to all the joys and the delights of heaven and earth. After me, who was not content till I died in the divine embrace of the Cross.

let him deny himself

17. If anyone wants to follow me thus self-emptied and crucified, he must glory with me in the poverty, the humiliations, and the sufferings of my Cross: let him deny himself.

There is a yawning gap between the Friends of the Cross and those who take pride in their sufferings, the worldly-wise, the great intellects, and the headstrong know-it-alls puffed up with their own knowledge and talents. Far away from you are also the endless talkers who make a great show but produce nothing but vanity. And far away from you are the sanctimonious who in their pride say after the proud Lucifer, “I am not like the rest of men” (Lk. 18,11); if they are reprimanded, they immediately make some excuse. If they are attacked, they immediately defend themselves. If they are humiliated, they immediately walk tall!

Be careful not to admit into your association those delicate and sensitive people who are afraid of the slightest pin-prick, who cry out and complain at the least pain, who know nothing of the hair-shirt, the hair-belt, the discipline, or other instruments of penance, and who mix their hypocrisy with a most refined penance for appearance’s sake and fashionable devotions.

and take up his cross.

18. The one that is *his*. Let this rare man or woman, more valuable than all the precious stones of the earth, take up his or her cross joyfully, embrace it passionately, and carry

it courageously on the shoulders. One's own cross, not that of another. The cross that I, in my wisdom, have designed for them in number, measure, and weight. The cross that I have fashioned with my own hands and with great exactness as regards its breadth and length and height and depth (Eph. 3,18). Out of infinite love I have carved for them a piece from the Cross that I bore to Calvary. It is the greatest gift I can bestow upon my chosen ones on earth.⁸ The breadth of their cross is made up of the loss of one's possessions, humiliations, contempt, pain, illness, and inner grief. These will come to them daily until death in accordance with my Providence. The length consists of the number of months or days in which they enduring slander, lying on a sick-bed, or being forced to beg, victim to temptations, dryness, desolation, and other inner torment. Height refers to friends, housemates, and relatives who treat them harshly and bitterly. The depth is made up of the hidden trials that I shall inflict on them, without them being able to find any comfort from other creatures; they will even turn away from them, by my order, and join with me in making them suffer.⁹

19. Let him *take it up*. He should not drag it, shake it off, lighten it, or stow it away. Instead

8 The greatest gift means that someone is allowed to participate in the way in which God, in his humble ways, comes very close to people. That God bestows crosses upon those He loves, is also said in H 123, verse 9. In this respect, the notion of God has changed quite a bit in recent times. God is no longer seen as an exalted hierarch who is involved in all that happens, who adjusts, acts, and steers. He is not a bookkeeper who painstakingly keeps track of the individual balance of debit and credit. Instead, the point of departure is that God can be found and should be sought close to people who suffer and are despised. Those who do not show solidarity with people in distress, who have no compassion on the multitudes and are unwilling to help carry another's cross with Jesus, Mary, and the beloved disciple, have not yet understood God or the Gospel. Also in this notion of God the cross is not absent; after all, God challenges us to not avoid certain difficulties and crosses.

9 Faith in Providence is based on the conviction that God is near in good days and in bad ones. It does not mean that we can immediately attribute to God all that happens to us. The friends of Job, for instance, were much too quick to do so. In this respect we have become more careful. Faith in Providence demands that we, like Jesus, experience and interpret all sorts of situations in light of the Psalms and other Biblical texts. Jesus departed from the Father's call to stand by others and not be afraid if this solidarity led to difficulties or crosses. This is also Montfort's conviction, even if his words seem to come close to those of the friends of Job at times.

let him lift it on high without impatience or sadness, without fear or grumbling, without sparing himself, without shame, without conforming to what the world thinks right. He should set it on his brow and say with St. Paul, “Far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of Jesus Christ (Gal. 6,14), my Master!” Let him carry it on his shoulders like Jesus Christ, that it may become the weapon of his victories and the scepter of his empire (Is. 9,6-7 Vulgate). Finally, let him lovingly set it in his heart and turn it into a burning bush where it may burn day and night with pure love for God without being consumed (Exod. 3,2).

20. *The cross.* Let him carry it, for nothing is so necessary, so beneficial and gentle, or so glorious as to suffer for Jesus Christ.

Nothing is so necessary,¹⁰

10 Montfort now leaves the topic of imitation of the Crucified One and starts to speak of averting eternal doom. This leads to different features in the image and the experience of God. Human sinfulness is not surrounded by the always much greater mercy and love of God. God’s possibilities seem limited by the bad actions of people; only if we convert, God is willing to forgive. Since this condition clashes with Montfort’s deepest convictions, these numbers should be read with caution. There is a risk that topics like sin, penance, and conversion start to dominate in the spirituality of the cross. Is it not more in line with the Bible to start with joy (34) and glory (35-40) and its inspiring power, and speak of penance and conversion in light of these? After all, on the forefront are Good Tidings, even if the accompanying call to repent and turn back should not be glossed over.

Punishment for offenses (21) and God’s avenging justice are discussed in order to make it apparent how much is at stake. Without a crusade against selfishness, the flesh, or the world the Friends cannot follow in the footsteps of God’s and Christ’s love for humankind. These numbers are a commentary on 2 Cor. 4,17, “Our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory.” Günther Bornkamm asserts in relation to 2 Cor. 4,16-18, “These verses shock those who wish to change the history of Early Christianity into a paradisiacal landscape and who deny that the victories of the Gospel are gained on the battle field... In Paul’s opinion, the New Creation and the Day of Salvation only come closer, if the messenger of Christ takes up the cross and testifies in everyday life that God wants to reconcile with the world” (Paulus, Stuttgart 1969, 180). In this sense, Montfort expressly points to the responsibility of the Friends of the Cross. If they pass over this too lightly, the consequences will be disastrous.

Montfort uses biblical images and expressions that are also present in the documents of Vatican II. According to no. 40

21. Mind you, we are all sinners. There is not one of you who does not deserve hell, and I do more than anyone. Our offenses have to be punished, either in this world (Mt. 24,50) or the next (Mt. 25,31-46). If we are punished here, we will not be punished later. If we are punished by God on earth and we willingly accept, this punishment will be full of love; for we will be punished by his mercy that rules on earth, not his strict justice. The punishment will be light and brief, accompanied by consolation and merit, and followed by rewards both here and in eternity.

22. If we keep putting off the punishment due for our sins, God's avenging justice will put everything to fire and sword. Dreadful punishment, indescribable, incomprehensible (Heb. 10,31; Ps. 90,11), without mercy, without relief, without merit, without limit, and without end. Yes, without end is the deadly sin that you commit in the blink of an eye, the deliberate evil thought that is quickly forgotten, the word carried away by the wind, that small and brief action against God's law. So long as God is God, they shall all be punished for eternity, in the company of the devils in hell. This avenging God will have no pity on your torments, on your cries and tears, violent enough to cleave the rocks. We will continue to suffer forever, without merit, without mercy, and without end!

23. Do we think of this when we have to suffer some trial in this world? How fortunate we are to be able to exchange a never-ending and fruitless punishment for a temporary and meritorious one just by bearing our cross with patience! How many of our debts are still unpaid? How many sins have we committed which, despite heartfelt contrition and sincere

of the Constitution about the Church, "we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life (Heb. 9,27)... we be numbered among the blessed (Mt. 25,31-46) and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire (Mt. 25,41) like the wicked and slothful servant, (Mt. 25,26) into the exterior darkness where 'there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth' (Mt. 22,13 and 25,30)." Montfort, who quotes the same verses in TD 68, emphasizes that we should not imitate Christ out of fear for hell, but in the awareness that we have become his members through baptism. Without forgetting that Jesus gravely confronts us with our behavior, even if he does not distance himself from us.

confession, will have to be atoned for in purgatory for centuries, simply because in this world we contended ourselves with a few slight penances? Ah, lets us settle our debts in this life by properly carrying our cross; in the next, a strict account is demanded down to the last cent, even an idle word. If only we could snatch from the devil the book of death in which he has entered all our sins and the punishment due to them! We would find a heavy debit and be delighted to suffer for long years on earth rather than a single day in the world to come!¹¹

24. Do not flatter yourselves that you are, or want to become, the friends of God! Well then, drink the cup that you must drink in order to become a Friend of God. The beloved Benjamin was given the cup, while his brothers received only the wheat.¹² The beloved disciple of Jesus received his heart, went up to Calvary, and drank of his cup. *Can you drink the cup?* (Mt. 20,22). To desire God's glory is good, but to desire and pray for it without resolving to suffer all things is both foolish and nonsensical. We can only enter the Kingdom of Heaven by means of many tribulations and crosses.

25. Rightly you glory in being God's children. You should glory, then, in the whipping that your good Father has given you and will give you yet, for he chastises all his children (Prov. 3,11-12). If you are not included among his beloved children, you are – what disaster, what thunderbolt, says St. Augustine – included among those who are lost. He also tells us, “The one who does not mourn in this world like a stranger and a pilgrim will not rejoice in the world to come as a citizen of heaven.” If your heavenly Father does not send you any worthwhile crosses from time to time, it is a sign that He no longer cares about you and is

11 In the final lines of this number, Montfort makes little distinction between the acts of God and the devil. Does the Bible not eliminate the devilish approach from the image of God instead? Contrary to the devil, God does not look upon our failures with sadistic pleasure, but in the hope that we convert. The way in which God and Jesus judge the sinner is vastly different from the devil's conduct. Also Montfort is convinced of this, but in these passages of the Letter he unthinkingly uses the apocalyptic imagery of the Bible. The difficulty involved in its interpretation is demonstrated by present-day theology's attempts to do justice to the moment of truth in the prophetic-critical view of humanity.

12 According to Gen. 44,1-14, Joseph had a cup stowed away in Benjamin's sack because he loved him the most. In the same way, Montfort takes a cross on someone's path as a sign that God loves him or her. This idea, however, should not be bandied about whenever someone is going through tough times.

angry with you.

He is treating you as an outsider, no longer belonging to his house and deserving his protection, or as an illegitimate child who has no claim to a share of the inheritance and deserves neither care nor correction.¹³

26. Friends of the Cross, disciples of a Crucified God, the mystery of the Cross is unknown to the Gentiles, rejected by the Jews, despised by heretics and bad Catholics. This great mystery you must learn in practice in the school of Jesus Christ, and nowhere else. In vain will you look in all academies of ancient times for a philosopher who has taught it. In vain will you appeal to the senses or reason to throw some light on it. Jesus Christ alone, through his victorious grace, can teach you this mystery and make you appreciate it.

Strive then to become proficient in this all-exceeding science under such a great Master. Then you will possess all other sciences, for the science of the Cross contains them all to an eminent degree. It is our natural and supernatural philosophy, our divine and mysterious theology, and our philosopher's stone. Patient suffering transforms the basest metals into precious ones, the bitterest pains into delight, poverty into riches, and the most profound humiliation into glory. The one among you who knows best how to carry his cross is the most learned of all, even if he can neither read nor write.

Listen to St. Paul. He returned from the third heaven, where he learned mysteries hidden even from the angels, and he proclaimed that he did not know, nor want to know, anything but Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2,2). Rejoice then, ordinary man, poor and uneducated woman: if you know how to suffer joyfully, you know more than a doctor of Sorbonne University who does not know how to suffer as you do (Lk. 10,21).

27. You are the members of Christ: what honor! But also, what obligation to suffer does

13 Simply telling someone that God sends him crosses out of affection can be arrogant and extremely painful. It is better to start from the following assumption: those who try to follow in the footsteps of the liberating and loving God of Scripture will not always have an easy time of it. Those who never stop flourishing should wonder if they take God's Word seriously enough.

this status impose! If the Head is crowned with thorns, can the members expect to be crowned with roses? If the Head is jeered at and covered with dust on the road to Calvary, can the members expected to be sprinkled with perfumes on a throne? If the Head has no pillow on which to rest, can the members expect to recline on feathers and down? That would be outrageous! No, my dear companions of the Cross, do not be deceived. There are Christians everywhere who are fashionably dressed, extremely delicate, exceedingly proud, and dignified. But these are not the real followers, not the real members of the crucified Jesus! To think they are would be an insult to that thorn-crowned Head and to the truth of the Gospel. O God, how many so-called Christians imagine they are members of our Savior when in reality they are his treacherous persecutors! For while they make the sign of the cross with their hand, in their hearts they are its enemy!

If you are guided by the spirit of Jesus Christ, lead the same life He does, and your Head is crowned with thorns, you must expect thorns, lashes, nails; that is, nothing but the cross. For the disciples need to be treated like the master, the members like the head. If heaven were to offer you a crown of thorns and one of roses, like Catherine of Siena, choose, like her, the crown of thorns without hesitation and press it upon your head, so as to be like Christ.

28. You know that you are living temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6,19) and that you are to be set as living stones into the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem (1 Pet. 2,5) by the God of love. Bear in mind that you will be shaped, cut, and chiseled under the hammer of the cross; otherwise, you would remain rough stones, good for nothing and cast aside. Be careful that you do not cause the hammer to recoil when it strikes you; pay attention to the chisel that is carving you and the hand that is shaping you. It may be that the skillful and loving architect wishes to make you into the most important building block of his eternal city, one of the most beautiful works of art in his heavenly kingdom. So let Him do whatever he pleases: He loves you, He knows what He is doing, He is experienced. All his strokes are skillful and loving; not one miscarries unless your impatience makes it do so.

29. The Holy Spirit compares the cross to a winnow which separates the good grain from the chaff and the dust (Mt. 3,12). Like the grain, let yourselves be shaken up and tossed about

without resisting: for the Father of the household is winnowing you and will soon put you in his granary. At other times the Holy Spirit compares the cross to a fire that removes the rust from the iron by the intensity of the heat (1 Pet. 1,7). Our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12,29) dwelling in our souls through His cross in order to purify them without consuming them, as He did of old in the burning bush (Exod. 3,2). Finally, the Spirit likens the cross to the crucible of a forge in which the real gold is refined and the false gold vanishes in smoke (Prov. 17,3). The real gold patiently endures this trial by fire, the false disappears in the heat of the flames. And it is in the crucible of torments and ordeals that the true Friends of the Cross are purified by their patience, whereas its enemies go up in smoke because of their impatience and their grumbling.

30. A great number of witnesses lead the way; without a word they prove what I say. For example, the righteous Abel who was killed by his brother; the righteous Abraham, a stranger on earth; the righteous Lot driven from his own land; the righteous Jacob, persecuted by his brothers; the righteous Tobit, stricken with blindness; the righteous Job, impoverished, humbled, and covered with sores from head to toe.

31. See the apostles and countless martyrs, crimson with their own blood; the many virgins and confessors, reduced to poverty, humiliated, persecuted, or exiled. With Paul they all cry out, “Look upon Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12,2); we have faith in him and in his Cross; He had to suffer and so enter through the Cross into his glory (Lk. 24,26).

See, at the side of Jesus, also Mary. A sharp sword pierced her tender and innocent heart even though there was neither original nor actual sin in her. How much I would like to dwell on their Passion to show that what we suffer is nothing compared to theirs!

32. Who, after all this, would refuse to carry his cross? Which one of us would not hasten to where he knows his cross awaits him? Who would refuse to cry out with holy martyr Ignatius, “Come, fire and gibbet, wild beast and all the torments of the devil, that I may delight in Jesus Christ!”

33. If you refuse to suffer patiently and carry your cross with resignation after the example of God's chosen ones, then you will have to carry it grumbling and impatiently like reprobates. You will resemble the two oxen that drew the Ark of the Covenant, lowing with reluctance (1 Sam. 6,12; see also LEW 178). You will follow Simon of Cyrene who unwillingly carried the Cross of Jesus Christ and did nothing but complain. And in the end, you will share the destiny of the impenitent thief who from the cross plummeted down the abyss.

Alas, this accursed earth on which we live does not make us happy; we do not see clearly in this land of darkness; there is no perfect calm on this stormy sea; we can never avoid conflicts in this field of trial and battle; we cannot escape being scratched on this thorn-covered earth; both the chosen ones and the reprobates must carry their cross, willingly or unwillingly. Keep in mind these lyrics:

*Three crosses stand on Calvary's height;
One must be chosen, so choose aright;
You must suffer like a saint or repentant thief,
Or like a reprobate, in endless grief.*

Those who are unwilling to suffer with joy like Jesus Christ or with patience like the penitent thief will have to suffer like the unrepentant thief. You will have to drink the cup of bitterness to the dregs without the consoling help of God's grace. You will have to bear the whole weight of your cross, deprived of the powerful support of Jesus Christ. You will have to carry the deadly weight that the devil will add to your cross by means of the impatience it will cause you. And after sharing the unhappiness of the unrepentant thief here on earth, you will have to follow him into the flames of hell.

nothing is so beneficial and gentle¹⁴

¹⁴ Of profound importance in the following passage is the reference to Jas. 1,2: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various temptations." This joy is fundamentally different from that of the foolish that sit in the seat of scoffers and laugh at God and God's law (cf. Ps. 1). To the latter James says, "Let your laughter be turned to

34. But if you suffer in the right way, the cross will become an easy and light yoke that Christ will carry with you. It will be the double wings of your soul that ascends to heaven or the ship's mast that will bring you smoothly and easily to the harbor of salvation. Carry your cross patiently and it will be your light in your spiritual darkness, for one who has never suffered trials, knows nothing.

Carry your cross patiently and you will be filled with divine love. Without suffering it is impossible to dwell in the pure love of the Savior (*Imitation of Christ* 3,57). Roses are to be found among thorns. The cross alone nourishes our love to God, as wood is the fuel that feeds the fire. Remember this beautiful saying in the *Imitation* (1,25): In proportion as you do violence to yourself, by suffering patiently, so will you make progress in divine love. Do not expect anything from those sensitive and slothful people who reject the cross when it approaches them, and who are careful not to seek out crosses. What are they but untilled soil that produces nothing but thorns because it has not been dug up, plowed, and harrowed by a wise farmer? They are like stagnant water that is unfit for bathing or drinking.

Carry your cross cheerfully and you will draw from it an all-powerful strength that none of your enemies can resist. You will also find gentleness beyond anything you have ever known. Know that this is the true earthly paradise: suffering for Jesus Christ. Ask the saints: they will tell you that their souls have never enjoyed a banquet more delicious than when undergoing the severest torments. "Let all the torments of the devil come upon me," said Saint Ignatius the Martyr. "Let me suffer or die," said St. Teresa of Avila. "Not death but suffering," said St. Mary Magdalen of Pazzi. "May I suffer and be despised for your

mourning, and your joy to gloom" (4,9). True joy has to do with enduring temptation (1,12), it belongs to someone who rises above jealousy and selfish ambition, who is without partiality and hypocrisy (3,16-17). It goes together with patience (5,7) and reminds us of the steadfastness of Job during his trials (5,11). This is not about stoically resigning oneself to fate, but about actively resisting the temptations of the devil. The essence of Christian joy is the realization that Christ has delivered us from the claws of the devil in the name of God and wants us to share in the humble way in which God is near. The joy that springs from this is a taste of the eternal joy. In LEW 98 Montfort speaks in the same vein of the effect of Wisdom that "enlightens his mind with the brightness of its light and pours into his heart an indescribable joy, sweetness, and peace, even when he is in the midst of the most harrowing grief and suffering." See also Chapter 1, section 4.

sake,” said John of the Cross. And many others have spoken in similar terms. Just read their biographies. Have faith in God. For if we suffer cheerfully for God, the Holy Spirit tells us, the cross is a source of great joy for people facing trials of every kind (Jas. 1,2). The joy that comes from the cross surpasses the joy of the poor man who suddenly comes into a fortune, the joy of the peasant who is raised to the throne, the joy of the trader who becomes a millionaire, the joy of the general who wins victories, the joy of the prisoner released from his chains. In short, imagine the greatest joys that can be experienced on earth: the joy of the crucified who suffers much surpasses all of them.

nothing so glorious.¹⁵

35. So rejoice and jump for joy when God favors you with a heavy cross. For without realizing it, you are blessed with the greatest gift of heaven and of God. If you really appreciated that, you would have Masses offered, make novenas at the shrines of the saints, undertake long pilgrimages, as did the saints, to obtain from heaven this divine gift.

36. The world calls it foolish, outrageous, stupid, ill-considered, and without common sense. Let them say what they like: the blindness that makes them view the cross in a human and distorted way is part of our glory. Every time they cause us to suffer by their contempt and persecutions, they present us with jewels, set us on a throne, and crown us with laurels.

37. All the wealth and honors and scepters and jeweled crowns of kings and emperors are not to be compared with the splendor of the cross. It is greater even than the glory of an apostle or evangelist, according to St. John Chrysostom. “If I had the choice,” continues this holy man, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, “I would willingly leave heaven in order to suffer

¹⁵ *Following in the footsteps of Jesus implies that we convert. Only thus can we share here and now in the way that God seeks his glory: by leading people to true life (cf. Maximus Confessor: God’s glory is in our true life). Montfort alludes to the Biblical term ‘glory’ (in Greek: doxa; in Hebrew: kavod). The glory of God consists in his loving compassion. In the life and death of Jesus, we can see God’s glory (Jn. 1,14).*

for the God of heaven. I would prefer dungeons and prisons to the thrones of the highest heaven. I wish for the glory of the seraphim less than the heaviest of crosses. I value the honor of suffering more than the gift of miracles, giving me the power to command devils, shake the elements, halt the sun in its course, or raise the dead to life. St. Peter and St. Paul deserve more glory in their prison chains than the latter in being caught up into the third heaven or the former in receiving the keys of heaven.”

38. Is it not the cross that has given to Jesus Christ “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and in hell” (Phil. 2,9-10)? The glory of one who suffers in the right way is so great that angels and people, yes even God in heaven, gaze on him with joy as a most glorious sight. If the saints desired anything, it would be to return to earth so as to bear some cross or other.

39. But if this glory is so great even on earth, what will it be in heaven? Who could ever explain or understand the eternal weight of glory that is brought about in us by a single moment of carrying the cross with dignity (2 Cor. 4,17)? Who could understand the glory gained in heaven by a year, and sometimes a whole lifetime, of crosses and pains?¹⁶

40. Friends of the Cross, according to a great saint, heaven destines you to greatness, since the Holy Spirit has united you intimately to that which all others carefully avoid. God will make of you as many saints as there are Friends of the Cross. Remain faithful to your calling and willingly carry your cross as Christ did.

Fourteen guidelines¹⁷

16 This last sentence should not be taken out of context. Firstly, it would give the impression that Friends should passionately seek the cross and suffering. Secondly, the fact that commitment to the Kingdom of God gives joy here and now should not be made to disappear from view.

17 After the speculative reflections of numbers 21-40, Montfort turns his attention back to the way that Jesus has gone (See 42, 43, 51, 53, 57, 58). In these guidelines Montfort distances himself from all forms of masochistic pleasure in suffering and pain. Between the lines some of his earlier penance is put into perspective. The guidelines demonstrate

41. To suffer is not enough; also the devil and the world have their martyrs. We must suffer and carry our cross in the footsteps of Jesus Christ; we must suffer and carry our cross the way he carried his. The following rules must be observed.

First: do not bring crosses upon yourself

42. Do not contrive to deliberately bring crosses upon yourself. You must not do what is wrong in order to bring about something good. Nor must you, without a special inspiration, do things badly so as to be despised by others. Rather, you ought to imitate Jesus Christ of whom it was written, “He has done all things well” (Mk. 7,37), not out of self-love or vanity, but to please God and win over your neighbor. If you fulfill your duties as well as you can, you will find no lack of opposition, persecution, and contempt. Divine Providence will take care of this, without your choosing or wanting it.

Second: practice the love of neighbor

43. If without reason anyone takes scandal at what you do, you’d better refrain from doing it, out of charity or so as to avoid the annoyance of the weak. Such a heroic act of charity is of infinitely greater worth than the action you were doing or intending to do.

If, however, what you are doing is necessary or beneficial to your neighbor, and some Pharisee or evil-minded person takes offence without reason, refer the matter to a wise adviser to find out whether it is really necessary or useful to others. If so, then carry on and don’t worry what they say as long as they let you be. In that case, say what the Lord said when some of his disciples told him that the scribes and the Pharisees were scandalized at his words and actions, *Leave them alone, those blind guiding the blind* (Mt. 15,14).

Third: do not consider yourself a great saint

44. Some of the great saints have prayed for crosses, contempt, and humiliations, and even brought them upon themselves by their ridiculous behavior. Let us admire and praise the

Montfort’s pastoral wisdom in guiding people. He might have learned a few things from the authors of the 17th-century French School of Spirituality.

marvelous work of the Holy Spirit in their souls and humble ourselves at the sight of such sublime virtue, even though we do not dare to reach such heights ourselves. Compared with those swift eagles and roaring lions, we are scaredy-cats and shivering lap dogs.

Fourth: pray for the wisdom of the cross

45. You may, and should, pray for the wisdom of the cross. I mean that precious and experiential knowledge of the truth that by the light of faith deepens our knowledge of the most hidden mysteries, such as the mystery of the cross. It is obtained only by much effort, deep humiliations, and fervent prayer. If you desire this strengthening spirit that enables you to courageously carry the heaviest crosses; this good and sweet spirit that enables us in the higher faculties of the soul to take delight in the most repulsive bitterness; this sound and upright spirit that seeks God alone; this science of the cross that embraces all things; in short, this infinite treasure that, if made good use of, will make us share in God's friendship..., if you do desire this, then ask for the wisdom of the cross, continually and fervently, without wavering or fear of not obtaining it. Without doubt it will be yours, and you will understand from your own experience how it is possible to desire, seek, and taste the cross.

Fifth: your faults should make you humble

46. If you have done something that brings a cross upon you, inadvertently or through your own fault, immediately bow down inside under the mighty hand of God, without worrying. You might say within yourself, "See, Lord, another sample of my handiwork." If it was a sin that you have committed, accept the humiliation that it causes you as punishment. If it was not a sin, accept your cross as a means of humbling your pride. Often, very often even, God allows his greatest servants, those who have advanced most in his grace, to fall into the most humiliating faults. He thus wants to humiliate them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others and keep them from indulging their proud eyes or even thoughts in the grace that He bestows upon them and the good that they are doing. That "no flesh should boast before God" (1 Cor. 1,29).

Six: God humiliates us in order to purify us

47. Be convinced that through the sin of Adam and through the sins that we ourselves have

committed, everything in us has become debased, not only our bodily senses, but also the powers of our soul. The moment our corrupt minds reflect with self-complacency on some gift of God within us, that gift, that action, that grace becomes tarnished and spoilt, and God averts his eyes. If the looks and the thoughts of our minds can thus spoil our best actions and God's greatest gifts, how much worse will be the works of the self-will, which are even more corrupt than those of the mind?

No wonder that it pleases God to hide those who are his in the secrecy of his face, that they may not be defiled by the esteem of others or even themselves. What does this jealous God not do to hide them! How many humiliations does he send! How many mistakes does he allow them to make! By what temptations does He permit them to be attacked, as St. Paul was (2 Cor. 12,7)! In what uncertainty, darkness, and perplexity does he leave them! Oh, how wonderful is God in his saints and in his means to lead them to humility and holiness!

Seven: beware of the traps of pride¹⁸

48. Do not imagine, like those who are proud and full of themselves, that your crosses are very heavy and proof of your fidelity and of God's exceptional love for you. The pitfall of spiritual pride is most deceptive, subtle, and poisonous. No, don't fool yourself:
- because of your pride and oversensitivity you take splinters for planks, pinpricks for wounds, molehills for mountains, a trivial and insignificant word for a gross insult;
- the crosses that God sends you¹⁹ are loving punishments for your sins rather than marks of God's special favor;

18 This guideline puts the viewpoint of number 18 – crosses are signs of God's love for someone – in perspective. This is not something that can be said at all times and in all circumstance. It is another demonstration of Montfort's tendency to start out harshly and then tone his ideas down.

19 Whereas Montfort is straightforward in maintaining that God sends us crosses, nowadays we say that certain crosses have to do with the condition humaine, others with the fact that it is difficult to find the correct attitude towards life amidst all sorts of trouble, others yet are the consequence of dedicating oneself to the Kingdom of God in a world that wants none of it. The same was true during the life of Jesus. However, he experienced all those different crosses in light of the Father or in union with the Father, that is, without letting these crosses run away with him. The latter is also our assignment.

- whatever cross or humiliation God sends you is infinitely light in comparison with the number and the abhorrence of your wrong-doings. You should consider your sins in the light of the holiness of God who cannot tolerate anything that is defiled, whereas you have attacked it. You should consider them in the light of God's dying in pain while overwhelmed with sorrow at the sight of your sins; in the light of an everlasting hell that you have deserved a thousand, perhaps a hundred thousand times;²⁰

- the patience with which you suffer is tinged with more 'natural' feeling than you think. Think of the way you look after yourself in all sorts of small matters, how you unobtrusively seek consolation, the little confidences you make to your friends, maybe even your spiritual counselor. It is also evident in your quick and clever excuses, the complaints, or rather criticisms, of those who have done you an injury, expressed in such pleasant words and charitable manner. You speak badly of those who have hurt you, and you talk repeatedly and with a measure of satisfaction about your faults, while you actually entertain, with Lucifer, the fallacy of your own greatness. I should never finish if I were to describe all the twists and turns of nature, even in suffering.

Eight: take advantage of little sufferings

49. Take advantage of little sufferings, even more than of great ones. God considers not so much what we suffer as how we suffer. To suffer a great deal, but badly, is to suffer like the damned; to suffer greatly and bravely for an evil cause is to suffer as a martyr of the devil. No matter whether you suffer a little or a lot; if it is for God's sake, you suffer like a saint.²¹

If we ever get to choose between certain crosses, we must choose the small and obscure ones, when they are sent to us at the same time as the great and spectacular ones. Natural pride can make us pray for great and dazzling crosses, to pursue them, and even prefer and welcome them. However, preferring insignificant and unobtrusive crosses and carrying

²⁰ *In spiritual growth a person becomes ever more aware of his or her mistakes, shortcomings, and sins. If he or she loses sight of the joyful aspects of the imitation of Christ, this awareness can result in the scrupulous feeling of never doing anything right. It is quite a feat to keep consciousness of guilt and Christian joy together in the right manner.*

²¹ *The latter we should not say or think too quickly, according to the third guideline (44).*

them joyfully can only come from a special grace and a great fidelity to God. Act the way a shopkeeper does in regard to his till: turn everything to profit, do not allow the tiniest piece of the true Cross to be lost, even if it is only a mosquito bite or a pin-prick, a small whim of your neighbor, some small unintentional slight, the loss of a cent, some insignificant turmoil in your soul, a little bodily weariness, a slight pain in your limbs, etc. Turn everything to profit, as the shopkeeper does with his wares, and soon you will become rich in God (Lk. 12,21), as the shopkeeper becomes rich by adding cent to cent in his till. At the least setback say, “Praise God! My God, I thank you!” Then hide the cross that you have just gained in the memory of God that is, so to speak, your money till and think no more about it except to say “thank you” or “have mercy”.

Nine: love the cross with supernatural love²²

50. When we are told to love the cross, it is not sensual love that is referred to. Nature is not capable of it. There are three kinds of love: sensual love, rational love, and faithful or highest love. In other words, the love of our lower part or of the flesh; the love of the higher part or reason; and the love of the highest part or of the summit of the soul, that is, reason enlightened by faith.²³

51. God does not ask you to love the cross with the will of the flesh; after all, it is totally defiled and perverted like all that proceeds from it. Of itself, the will of the flesh cannot be submissive to the will of God and to God’s law of the cross. It was this will of God that Jesus

22 This rule is of immense importance in Montfort’s spirituality of the cross. It goes back to the three dimensions in human life: that of the senses, of reason, and of the faithful approach to life grounded in Scripture. A person can suffer physical or psychological distress, as Montfort has experienced in the poorhouse of Poitiers. This kind of suffering is not directly related to the Christian spirituality of the cross, even though a Christian should not ignore it. Secondly, we may conclude matter-of-factly that disease, adversity, and misfortune are simply part of life. Montfort fears that such matter-of-factness leads to a stoic and impassive attitude towards life. In his view, Christian spirituality of the Cross has to do with the imitation of Christ and Mary and he uses the term supernatural love here. Christians should have an attitude of solidarity and sympathy, that is, be Friends of the Cross, even if this is hard work.

23 The ultimate form of love has come to light in Jesus’ self-emptying – touched by the humility of God.

referred to in the Garden of Olives when he cried out, “Father, let your will be done, not mine!” (Lk. 22,42). If the lower human part in Jesus Christ, however holy, could not love the cross continuously, then in us, where it is totally corrupted, it will reject the cross with still greater reason. From time to time we even experience a sensible joy in our suffering, as several of the saints have done. But that joy does not come from the flesh, even though it is felt in the flesh. It comes exclusively from the highest part: if this is overwhelmed with the divine joy of the Holy Spirit, it overflows into the lower part. In these moments someone who is most crucified can say, “My heart and my flesh ring out their joy to God, the living God!” (Ps. 83,3).

52. The second form of love of the cross I have called rational because it involves the higher part of a human being: reason. This love is entirely spiritual and springs from the insight that it is happiness to be suffering for God; that is why it can be experienced by the soul to which it gives interior joy and strength. Although this rational and conscious love is good, excellent even, it is not always necessary to suffer with joy for God.

53. The third form of love of the cross is the love of the summit of the soul, as it is called by the masters of spiritual life, or the love of the intellect as it is known to philosophers. Although this love does not bring about pleasure of the senses or rational joy in the soul, one loves the cross that one is carrying. One takes delight in it by the light of pure faith, even while the lower part of the soul may often be in a state of conflict and turmoil, groaning and complaining, crying and longing for relief. In this case, one says with Jesus Christ, “Father, let your will be done, not mine” (Lk. 22,42). Or with the Holy Virgin, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to your word” (Lk. 1,38).

It is with one of these two forms of love of the higher part that we should love the cross and accept it.

Ten: accepting any kind of cross

54. Make the resolution, my dear Friends of the Cross, to bear any kind of cross without excluding or choosing any: poverty, injustice, loss, illness, humiliation, contradiction, slander, spiritual dryness, desolation, interior and exterior trials. Keep saying, “My heart is

ready, o God, my heart is ready” (Ps. 56,8 Vulgate). Be prepared, then, to be forsaken by men and angels, and, as it were, by God himself. You will be persecuted, envied, betrayed, slandered, discredited, and abandoned by everyone. You will suffer hunger and thirst, be reduced to beggary, nakedness, exile, imprisonment, the gallows, and all kinds of torture even though you have done nothing to deserve it. Finally, imagine that after the loss of your possessions and honor you are turned out of your home, like Job and St. Elizabeth of Hungary; that you are thrown into the mire, like Elizabeth, or dragged on to the stinking dung heap, like Job, all covered with ulcers, without a bandage for your sores or a piece of bread to eat – something people would not refuse a horse or a dog. Or that God, in addition to your utter misery, leaves you a prey to all temptations of the devil, without imparting to your soul the least feeling of consolation.

Be convinced that this truly is the divine glory and genuine happiness of the true and perfect Friend of the Cross.

Eleven: four points for reflection

55. To help you suffer with dignity acquire the holy habit of reflecting on these four points. Firstly, God, like a great king from the height of a tower, watches his soldier and observes him with satisfaction in the heat of battle and praises his courage. What is it that attracts God’s attention on earth? Is it kings and emperors on their thrones? He often regards them only with contempt. Is it the great victories of a country’s armies, precious stones? In short, all that is great in the eyes of men? No, what is thought highly of by men is loathsome in the sight of God (Lk. 16,15). What, then, is it that He looks upon with pleasure and satisfaction and about which He inquires of the angels and even the devils? It is someone who is fighting for God against fate, the world, hell, and himself, and who carries his cross with joy. “Have you not seen on earth a great wonder at which all heaven is filled with admiration?” says the Lord to Satan. “Have you seen my servant Job who is suffering for my sake?” (Job 2,3).²⁴

²⁴ In this number it is shown once again that Montfort uses traditional terms (God as great king, humans as soldiers) only to refine them a little later.

56. Secondly, consider the hand of that mighty Lord: all natural misery that befalls us, from the smallest to the greatest, is his doing. The same hand that killed an army of a hundred thousand men on the spot, causes a leaf to fall from the tree and a hair from your head (Mt. 10,30). The hand, which pressed so heavily on Job, touches you gently and causes only light pain. It is the same hand that brings about day and night, sunshine and darkness, good and evil. He permits that people insult you; He is not the cause of the evil that strikes you, but allows it.

If you are ever faced with a person who is cursing you or throwing stones at you, as happened to David (2 Sam. 16,5-14), say to yourself, “I will not take revenge; I will let him carry on for the Lord has commanded him to act in this way. I know that I deserve every kind of insult and it is only right that God should punish me. My arms stay still; my tongue be silent: do not strike, do not say a word. This man or that woman who is insulting me with words or actions is a representative of God; they come on behalf of his mercy to settle this lawsuit amicably. Let us not offend God’s justice by usurping his rights to vengeance. Let us not slight his mercy by resisting its loving lashes, lest he should deliver me, to avenge himself, to the harsh justice of eternity.”

See how the one hand of God supports you with almighty and infinite caution, while with the other he afflicts you. With one hand He deals out death, with the other He dispenses life. He humiliates you and raises you up. His arms reach with kindness and with power, from one end of your life to the other (Wis. 8,1): with kindness in order to prevent your being tried and afflicted beyond your strength (1 Cor. 10,13); with power by supporting you with his mighty grace in proportion to the violence and duration of your trial and sorrow. According to the Church’s Prayer for a Journey, God’s grace is your support at the edge of the precipice, your companion when lost, your shade in scorching heat, your mantle when the rains overtake you and the cold makes you grow numb, your vehicle when weariness drags you down, your aid in adversity, your stick on slippery paths, your refuge in the midst of storms.²⁵

25 Also this paragraph contains expressions that may be dangerous if used out of context. When the harsh hand of God is constantly used as a threat, the Gospel is wrenched out of joint. The same is true, however, if God is merely

57. Thirdly, reflect on the wounds and sufferings of the crucified Jesus. He tells you, “All you who pass by the way of thorns and the cross that I have gone, look and see” (Lam. 1,12). Look with the eyes of your body and see through the eyes of your contemplation. Is your poverty, nakedness, disgrace, sorrow, desolation like mine? Look upon me who am innocent, and then lament, you who are guilty.

The Holy Spirit urges us, through the apostles, to contemplate the crucified Jesus Christ in such a way. He tells us to arm ourselves with this thought that is more piercing and more formidable against our enemies than any other weapon: Are you assailed by poverty, disrepute, pain, temptation, or any other cross, arm yourself with a shield, breastplate, helmet, two-edged sword (cf. Eph. 6,11-17), by remembering the crucified Jesus Christ. It is there that you will find the way to overcome all difficulties and conquer every enemy.

58. Fourthly, look upwards and see the beautiful crown that awaits you in heaven, if you carry your cross well. It was this prospect that sustained the patriarchs and prophets in their faith and during persecutions, and that encouraged the apostles and martyrs in their actions and in their torments. We would rather, said the patriarchs with Moses, be afflicted with the people of God and be happy with him forever, than enjoy for a time the pleasures of sin (Heb. 11,24-26). We suffer persecution for the reward, the prophets could say with David. The apostles and martyrs could say with St. Paul, “By our suffering we are as victims sentenced to death, on show for the world, the angels, and people, as the offal of the world and the scum of the earth, for the sake of a weight of eternal glory that this small and temporary suffering will work for us” (2 Cor. 4,17).

Look upwards and see the angels who exclaim, “Be careful not to forfeit the crown that is marked out for the cross allotted to you, if you carry it with dignity. If not, another will and take your crown.” “Fight bravely by suffering patiently,” we are told by all the saints, “and you will receive an eternal kingdom.” Finally, listen to Jesus Christ who says, “Only to the one who suffers and is victorious through his patience I will give my reward” (Apoc. 2,7.11). Now look downward to the place we deserve and that awaits us in hell in the company of

represented as a sweet old grandpa.

the bad thief and the reprobates, if we suffer as they did: complaining, with resentment, and revengeful. Let us cry out with St. Augustine, “Burn, Lord; chop, cut, and hack in this world as punishment for my sins, so long as you pardon them in eternity.”

Twelve: do not complain!

59. Never willingly complain and grumble about the creatures that God may use to put you to the test. There are three kinds of complaints we may make about our afflictions. The first is involuntary and natural: the complaints of the body that moans, sighs, groans, weeps, and wails. If the higher parts of the soul are resigned to the will of God, there is no fault in this kind of complaint. The second kind is rational, that is, if you complain and talk about your suffering with those who can give you some relief, such as a superior or a doctor. There may be some imperfection in this if we are too eager to do so, but there is no sin in it. The third kind is criminal, that is, if you complain about someone either to get rid of the affliction or to take revenge on him; or if you just give in to your complaints, become impatient, and start fretting.

Thirteen: welcome your cross with gratitude

60. Never receive a cross without kissing it humbly and with gratitude. If the good God favors you with a considerable cross, thank Him in a special way and get others to thank Him as well, after the example of the woman who had lost all she had in an unjust law-suit. Immediately she used her few remaining coins to have a Mass said to thank God for her good fortune.

Fourteen: voluntary crosses

61. If you want to become worthy of the best crosses, that is, those that come to you without your choosing, then in consultation with a wise spiritual counselor take up some voluntary crosses. For example, are you rather attached to a piece of furniture, give it to a poor person and ask yourself, “Should I have things I don’t need, whereas Jesus was poor?” Do you have a dislike for a certain kind of food, a certain practice of a particular virtue, or an offensive odor: eat that food, practice the virtue, smell the odor, and thus conquer yourself.

Or again, your fondness for a certain person or thing may be immoderate: go away, see less

of that person, keep away from those things that attract you. If you have a natural inclination never to miss what is going on, to be always doing things, to be in the limelight, to frequent popular places, then guard your eyes, watch your tongue, and stay put. Do you have a natural aversion for certain persons or things? Then overcome it by not avoiding them.

62. If you are truly Friends of the Cross, the ever-imaginative love will make you discover thousands of these little crosses. Without your knowing it, you will be enriched, without the risk of vain self-complacency that so often spoils the patience with which people carry their spectacular crosses. Because you have been faithful in little things, the Lord will place you in charge of the greater, according to his promise. That is, in charge of the many graces He will bestow on you, of the numerous crosses He will send you, of the greater glory He will prepare for you.

3. A complicated heritage

The *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* is no easy reading. So many aspects are brought up that one's mind reels at the first or second reading. Are not all sorts of things lumped together? Another difficulty originates in the feelings that arise in the reader when the cross is the topic of discussion.

It is obvious that Montfort wants to draw attention to the Cross that comes with the imitation of Jesus. The focus is on what a person does and awaits, if he follows in the footsteps of the Crucified Jesus, or if she really takes the Gospel of Jesus seriously. Then life will no longer be simple, even if, according to the Bible and the saints, this choice goes together with a profound joy based on the consciousness that one is united with God and God's love for humankind.

Other than that, Montfort discusses the precarious situations Christians and non-Christians may end up in, as a result of things like physical ailments or disease, psychological suffering, social discrimination, exploitation, etc. It takes a lot of effort to not get depressed or rebellious, or so cantankerous that one becomes impossible to get along with. It is part of the life task of Christians to not allow oneself to be burdened down altogether by such difficulties. Also in those types of circumstances Montfort deems it possible to follow Jesus on his path.

These aspects tend to fade into the background from time to time because here and there in the *Letter* opinions are put forward that we find annoying or intolerable. In the footnotes this has been pointed out expressly. There is no need to agree with all that Montfort has written. Not because some passages run counter to modern feelings, but because they raise theological criticism. At times Montfort employs concepts of God, sin, judgment, punishment, and hell that are open to question. The preacher in him lets his rhetoric run away with him. Also this is part of what he has left behind. If we want to pass on his heritage, we must also allow for these difficult aspects. In contemporary hermeneutics this is called: attempting to understand someone better than he has understood himself and his God. Treating our heritage sensibly encompasses more than passing on only those words that sound good to us. The discomfort about certain aspects challenges us to search for new ideas and a new language by rereading Scripture and Tradition and by wondering in what

way the Spirit speaks to us through the signs of the times, the things that happen around us, new questions, ideas, and ways to behave.

Then again, the question is whether we do not dismiss the prophetic criticism in the Gospel all too easily nowadays. Although suffering should not be sought and glorified, Jesus is convinced that dedication to the Kingdom of God should go together with self-denial. This does not mean that self-denial is the point of departure; this is situated in the way that Jesus has gone grounded in faith, hope, and love. Whoever follows in his footsteps, however, encounters tendencies and inclinations that are opposed to the contours of the Kingdom of God. If we do not fight these resolutely, life becomes a hellish affair. Do we not wash our hands of the responsibility all too easily? In light of God's love for humankind the circumstances of the needy raise the question, "Where is your brother or your sister? Are you concerned about them at all? Don't you see what's going on?" Even if we are not to blame for their situation, it should not leave us unaffected. This is the subject of the next chapter.



CHAPTER 4

Friends of the cross in our days

Also Jesus has experienced problems with his inclinations and fantasies at times and had to fight them. But time and again he got over these crises and swung into action when other people were having a hard time of it. He listened to them, stood up for them, and pled in their defense. Like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 he identified with these people. From the bottom of his heart, in union with that Presence that he called “my Father”, the Son showed what happens if we answer the call of that Presence and allow the Fire of the Spirit to burn inside of us. Once again, it is not true that all this was always easy for him. According to Jn. 4,3 and 10,39, he leaves Jerusalem twice when things got too hot for him. The third time, however, he stays and faces the high priests and Pilate. In his divine vulnerability he stands up for charity, solidarity, and mercy. In all modesty, but indomitably and frankly he dies on the cross, bearing witness to the Father’s love for all people. Ridiculed by bigwigs and by an anonymous crowd, abandoned by many of his friends, praying in distress, clinging to the loving presence of the Father. As a sign of his conviction he washed the feet of his disciples the night before and begged them to serve each other and thus go out into the world. He prayed that they would preserve unity with each other and the poor, also in difficult circumstances.

Montfort’s spirituality of the cross does not ignore the vulnerability of life. Those who are doing well are reminded of their duty to show solidarity with those who are burdened with life. Happiness and joy of life do not consist in avoiding the sick, the suffering, and the dying. They have to do with carrying the burdens of life together, of life in its undeniable vulnerability and fragility. Montfort turns against those who are blind to the misery of others – or even worse – who claim in advance that it is their own fault. They shortsightedly cherish their own happiness and lack the courage to stand by others. Sure, one should not go and search for crosses. But people who open their eyes and hearts and sympathize with

others happen upon them automatically. As Jesus did. The memory of his path is a key moment in Montfort's spirituality of the cross.

This chapter concentrates on three aspects of the spirituality of the cross in line with Montfort: the passion that goes with following the crucified Jesus, the self-denial that needs to go hand in hand with the attention for other people, the harsh consequences that may result from the imitation of Christ.

1. Living with Messianic passion

Montfort's spirituality of the cross is related to the passionate way in which Jesus lived his life, never sparing himself and never avoiding risks that might prove to be fatal. During a congress in Rome in 2004 on the theme *A Passion for Christ, a Passion for Humanity* two New Testament texts were brought to the attention: Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4,5-26) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10,30-35). Both times strangers are involved, people from Samaria that the Jews gave a wide berth on their way to Jerusalem.

When Jesus starts up a conversation with the Samaritan woman, he allows her to vent the entire story of her life. Only thus can she express her deepest need: her longing for the Messiah, for someone who takes her absolutely seriously and accepts her the way she is. To get around to a real spirituality of the cross we should be able to relate to another person with such intensity. The episode is a commentary of what Is. 42,3 says about the Servant: "A bruised reed will he not break, and a dimly burning wick will he not quench." This takes inner freedom; one should be without fear to start up a conversation with others, without prejudice, and without prior knowledge of what the outcome will be. It takes a lot of effort to get this close to another person from the bottom of one's heart. It is impossible without profound self-reflection. In order to be able to live this way, Jesus often retreated to the mountains to pray, with fragments of the Psalms and of Isaiah in mind.

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that in regular society it is not self-evident that people give attention to someone who is wounded and make time for him. In contrast to the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan does not only see the wounded man with his eyes but also, and mainly so, with his heart. Without the heart one can never become a real helper. For whoever dares to listen to his heart loses control over his own time and agenda. His

future becomes uncertain. The priest and the Levite wish to remain in control, even over their religious experience and faith. The Samaritan has a different way of believing in God. Or perhaps we should say that he believes in a different God. He does not give the wounded a wide berth but enters into communion with him. The parable is a concrete illustration of Is. 53,4, “Surely he has borne our sickness, and carried our suffering.”

It is not simple to let a Samaritan woman get in touch with her life story or to allow one’s agenda to be interrupted by a chance meeting with a wounded stranger. One needs to be without preconceived ideas and able to put aside social and religious prejudices. Only then one can see whoever and whatever crosses one’s path. Pope Francis tells us not to worry about dirtying our clothes, even if it means that we are denied access to a perfectly clean church with an esthetically sound liturgy and lofty ideas. People who strive for the perfection of the infinite God are open to encounters that interrupt the order of the day and undermine unassailable certainties. In **Touched by the humility of God**, God’s infinity was characterized as the ability to fearlessly and passionately sympathize with those who are filthy, covered in sin, or crippled by life. The congress in Rome about *A Passion for Christ, a Passion for Humanity* reminds us of our fear to engage in a history full of wounded relationships. In the encounters with the lonely woman from Samaria and the half-dead man beside the road Jesus and the Good Samaritan conquer this fear.

Jesus’ passion with respect to the Samaritan woman and in the parable of the Good Samaritan turns our ideas and our outlook on life upside down. “Apparently God, as He has come to us in Jesus, is not interested as much in how and what we think of Him: He is concerned with how we treat others. The way we behave towards others shows what we think of Him and how we view Him.”³³ In the line of the wise and the prophets of Israel Jesus does not dissociate himself from “the incongruities, the horrors, and the chasms of our reality” nor does he seek comfort in “myths and ideas that are remote from the concrete reality surrounding us” (28-29). “Those who can no longer hear the scream of the Crucified One in the message of the resurrection of Christ hear the myth of the victor, not the Gospel” (29). Unfortunately, we often “leave the world and its history to its own devices and to fate and only wish to bring our own individual time of life in relation to God.”³⁴ Thus the Gospel is reduced to “a gnostically-tinted myth about my personal identity alone” (156f.) without concern for others. The same is true when the spirituality of the cross goes no further

than penance for the sake of one's spiritual welfare and the fear of missing out on eternal salvation. This is not the Messianic passion for life with which Jesus lived as the suffering servant.

2. Solicitude for others – self-denial

Montfort does not want to relate to other people from a safe distance or look down upon them. As a witness of the Crucified Jesus he wants to identify with their vulnerability, be there for them, and treat them with respect. His testimony of Christ is not authentic if he only remembers Christ with words; he must also embody his Spirit here and now. This is not something he can accomplish just like that; in other words, he is a sinner. He should not look at life from his own point of view but from that of the other. He should not focus on his own self. In that sense he must deny himself. That is part of the attitude of the Suffering Servant. Only thus the proclamation that Messianic times have come is not an empty assertion. Like Jesus Messiah, the disciple should, in his dedication to others, anticipate the future that already manifests itself in the wise, the prophets, and the poor in spirit. Without sparing himself, by resolutely dissociating himself from the tendency to grab all he can get or to be the center of the universe. By denying himself in such a way he takes Jesus' call to "turn back" (Mk. 1,15) seriously. There is no other way to believe in the Gospel.

There is a remarkable similarity with the opposition to a Modernity that has led to an obsession with power and an "I-am-superior" attitude towards life. The self is at the center in Modernity. The attitude to life that is advocated here is called in philosophical terms: living from a deconstructed self, that is, without blowing one's own trumpet, without an air of "I control life", but also without denying that it is difficult to be there for others. After the many histories of doom of the 20th and early 21st century, it means speaking of matters we have forfeited the right to speak of.

Montfort does not keep at a safe distance from those who are having rough times. Like Jesus, thanks to Jesus, and with God he wants to help them carry their cross, not patronizingly but with solidarity. Although he uses terms and expressions that go back three centuries, in his actions he is still the type of person that is badly needed in our day and age.

He contrasts sharply with those who are out to feel good about themselves and give the so-called losers a wide berth. He wants nothing to do with the yearning for spiritual enjoyment without commitment, like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

3. Losing one's life

The ultimate consequence of the imitation of Christ and the spirituality of the cross has been revealed by a number of Christians in North Africa.

At the end of March 1996, several Cistercian monks were murdered in the Algerian village of Tibhirine. They were living at its edge and maintaining good relations with their Muslim neighbors. Without being zealous in their Christian testimony, they lived among them in a diaconal way. They wanted to be Good Samaritans to anyone in distress. However, certain people in the surrounding area looked upon their presence with distrust. The monks were threatened and wondered what to do: stay, in spite of all the risks involved, or leave? They did not see eye to eye right away. Why exactly were they there? All sorts of emotions and basic convictions went through them: fear, carrying your cross, testifying to the Gospel of humanity through thick and thin, not letting down the villagers, putting your life in God's hand, using common sense. They decided to continue to bear witness to fraternity in the village in the name of Jesus and across all borders, no matter how grave the threat, face to face with death. In the middle of the night they were captured, carried off, and assassinated. Only two of them survived by chance. This is not the place to elaborate on the circumstances of the assassination: this is about their drives and their ideals. These are put forward in the testament of Brother Christian, the prior.³⁵

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found

worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder.

.....

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic: “Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!” But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied.

This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.

For this life given up, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. ...

Algiers, December 1, 1993.
Tibhirine, January 1, 1994
+ Christian

Christian and his fellow brothers have followed Jesus unto the cross. After periods of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, they allowed the cross into their lives, in communion with the Crucified Jesus. Those who care to fathom the Gospel of the Cross should take these monks as an example. They stayed in Tibhirine, fully aware of the consequences. For the sake of God, of Jesus, and of their friends in the village they stayed put. Without yearning for the cross, they did not strive to avoid it. They hesitated at first, but after much prayer and discussion they determinedly remained at their post. They were only worried that the innocent would be blamed and that the guilty would be judged mercilessly. The words of Jesus on their lips: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Lk. 23,34; See also Stephen in Acts 7,60). This corresponds to the quiet sense of security that was mentioned in Chapter 1, section 4, and that Montfort possessed as well.

The spirituality of the cross asks for compassion, which we do not achieve without a battle with ourselves, without ascetics and conversion. That battle with ourselves, however, is not the main issue: the orientation towards others, at all costs, is. Time and again, before, during, and after their decision to stay in the village, the Cistercians of Tibhirine kept going to the chapel where the cross of the Crucified Jesus had a prominent place. In imitation of and communion with Him they kept vigil and prayed that God would fit the back to the burden.

How different from the sleeping disciples in the Garden of Olives who fail to notice the gravity of the situation! Should Jesus really take the risk of being persecuted in the name of God, or should he keep God – and himself – out of it? The question is: where is God to be found? According to Jesus, God is present as a protester at those places and moments that evil, injustice, and contempt for people dominate. “Jesus has to die on the cross because God is not only present in the spirit, but also gets in touch with the weakness of the flesh. Not just Jesus’ inner willingness to acquiesce in the violent reality of the cross, but precisely the actual violence to his body is characteristic of God... There isn’t an evil situation in the

world that God does not confront immediately.³⁶ In Jesus' view the disciples should also face evil and withstand and expose its power. Quite a challenge for irresolute disciples! Is it not understandable that they fall asleep in the Garden of Olives? It is rather much to demand of them. They simply cannot believe it. "I do not know that man," Peter says a little later. He was right: he did not know the Son of Man and was not yet ready to follow Christ. When Jesus speaks of self-denial, he alludes to a new way of thinking and of choosing sides, with the loss of one's life as a possible consequence. Only by actually standing at the foot of the cross, like Mary and John, the disciple becomes a follower. Not just by reflecting on it or speculation.

In the name of God Jesus speaks every once in a while during his trial, on the Road to Calvary, and from the Cross. More often he is silent. This silence is telling. "With Jesus' last scream a specific way of speaking of God dies down – that of power."³⁷ A different God and a different view of God arise, both marked by the cross. That is why Montfort erects a Calvary in Pontchâteau, visible from all sides. Those who do not look at the Cross of Jesus from time to time run the risk of dozing off as disciples and to be cut off from the Association of the Friends of the Cross.

Another voice from North Africa belongs to Pierre Claverie (1938-1996), born to a French family in Algeria, Dominican, bishop of Oran with the epithet of "bishop of the Mussulmen". In his opinion, deep inside of us is the inclination to consider ourselves superior to others, to view them as opponents, or to look down upon them. Jesus has taught him to look upon others as fellow sufferers and friends. He strives for "a dialogue in friendship" of which he says, "The appearance of the other, the recognition of the other, being on an equal footing with the other: these things have not left me in peace at a certain point in time ... Then we start to rejoice in everything that makes us friendly and available, more concerned about surrendering than defending ourselves." Such an attitude is dangerous; it makes you vulnerable since it elicits negative responses in a world that puts the interests of family, tribe, nation, race, and religious tradition first. Those who pull down walls and cross borders look threatening. Openness for another person is diametrically opposed to the desire to control everything and everyone. The invitation to live with an open mind arouses fear since one has to give up much in order to do so. But Claverie does not budge, not even when threatened

with death. He is assassinated on 1 August 1996, a few months after the monks of Tibhirine. Shortly before his death he writes:

Since the beginning of the Algerian tragedy, people have often asked me: 'What do you do there? Why do you stay? Shake the dust from your sandals! Go back home!'

Home ... Where is our home? ... We are here because of this crucified Messiah and because of no other thing and no other person! We have no interest to defend, no influence to maintain. We are not driven by any sort of masochistic perversion. We have no power. We are just here, as it were, at a friend's bedside, a sick brother's, in silence, grasping his hand, wiping his brow. Because of Jesus, since it is he who suffers here, in this violence that spares no one, crucified again in the flesh of the thousands of innocents. Like Mary his mother and St. John, we are at the foot of the cross where Jesus dies abandoned by his own and mocked by the crowd. Isn't it essential for Christians to be present in places of dereliction and abandonment? Where would the Church of Jesus Christ be, itself the body of Christ, if it were not first of all here?



Epilogue

Montfort lived before the great earthquake in Lisbon on November 1st, 1755. After the quake Voltaire called God to account before the tribunal of Reason. It was the start of new questions and sentiments concerning the Christian experience of God. Also in Montfort's days, disasters of all kinds occurred. But, with Job, people submitted to the incomprehensibilities of God. All of this changes with Voltaire. More and more the question is posed where this almighty God is in all this innocent and also guilty suffering. According to the Dutch historian H.W. von der Dunk, a heroic humanism without God becomes the answer to the meaninglessness of life in the course of the 20th century.³⁸ In this context he mentions Albert Camus who maintained that the idea of justice cannot be developed without the consciousness that from the depth of the earth and from the height of the heavens a protest can be heard against defeatism and despondency. And against this defeatism and despondency Camus opts for truthfulness and solidarity. Does this not bring him closer to Jesus' faith in God than the devout who give up the fight?

Christianity points, amidst all the suffering and apparent meaninglessness of life, at the Gospel of the "foolish" humanity of the Father whose Son dies on the cross. In this dramatic way God asserts that He is with all those who suffer, fail, or are weighed down with powerlessness. The Gospel of the Crucified is still "a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1,23-24).

Montfort gets more and more fascinated by the way in which God reveals Himself in Jesus, and by the plea of the Crucified Jesus to follow in his footsteps. This allows him to see more clearly what is wrong in life and how many suffer because of it. All the more he devotes himself in word and deed to the solidarity that comes with the Kingdom of God. He is thoroughly aware of the fact that self-denial is necessary and that he needs to take the cross of others unto his shoulders. In the footsteps of Jesus, the Suffering Servant who draws courage and energy from the conviction that God is looking forward to the return of the son who has gone off the rails, the lost sheep, or the marginalized daughter. In the

spirit and the praxis of Jesus and Mary, Montfort shares in “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes 1*). This is how we rise above our own pettiness, in Jesus’ view, and not only take our own cross on our shoulders but also that of others who have been struck by mishap and misfortune, sickness and death, poverty and exploitation, feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness. Jesus wants to stand by these people and share their lives. With the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah 53 in particular, he is convinced that this commitment takes a great deal of effort and that you can be ridiculed for it and, at worst, nailed to a cross. Nonetheless, he holds on to his principles. So does Montfort!

Living like Jesus and Montfort is no easy feat. A petty outlook on life is always tempting. Without hurting a fly but also without risking our necks, convinced of our own decency. Montfort, on the other hand, is constantly aware of what he calls “his sinfulness”, that is, the tendency to let things slide and not bother. In his view, the devil scores his greatest triumphs whenever people are content with their way of life. He prays that there will be people who will tell others in word and deed, “You have the right to be. Even if you behave like a headstrong sinner, I will not desert you. I will try to put you back on your feet. Hoping and assuming that you will not let others down either. Even if it takes a great deal of effort; you might call it your cross. Take it up and bear it. Jesus has shown you the way. Follow him, tread in his footsteps. I promise you: no matter how hard it is, you will find peace and joy if you follow him. This mystery can only be understood if your heart is touched by the words and the actions of the prophets and of Jesus.”

That is why the Montfortian Constitutions of 1994 say, “To communicate the Father’s gifts to all mankind, they become, like Montfort, close to those whom they evangelize, sharing in their life, their sufferings, their hopes. They accept, after the manner of Christ and in Christ, the common destiny of their kindred, even to the cross” (12). We must commit ourselves “to the proclamation of salvation through the cross, which is the summit of the wisdom and the power of God (1 Cor. 2,1-3), the unsurpassed sign of love and of total gift” (51). “Through obedience we desire to go to the farthest limit in communion with the Father’s will, even to the sacrifice of the cross, after the example of Mary, the servant of the Lord” (92). “We allow ourselves to be inspired by the wisdom of the cross, which teaches us to be faithful even to the point of real sacrifice” (105).

Those words in the line of Montfort's spirituality of the cross are hard to put into practice. Sure, we sympathize with those who have been struck by great sorrow but how do we put flesh on this compassion? We raise our eyes to heaven, do some intercessory prayers, and return to the order of the day. Montfort went further, really became poor with the poor, and kept nothing to fall back on when things went downhill. That is precisely why the cross became a gentle and joyful mystery to him. Those who try to steer clear of this will never understand it and will remain on the outside. It only becomes gentle and joyful if we live for others, without reserve. But we usually don't get around to this, and the cross remains foolishness and a stumbling block with no appeal whatsoever.

"The cross is a mystery most profound here below" (H 19,1). It does not fit in with our spontaneous desires and expectations. In our best moments we catch a glimpse of the truth that nothing is greater than giving our lives for our friends, that is, for those in distress. But we recoil from it as from a hot flame. To prevent such relapses Montfort always carried a crucifix in his hand. Not out of devotional routine, but as a sign of his passionate desire to be one with Christ. A person, at least a Christian, is not truly alive if he does not live with the passion and in the horizon of the crucified Jesus. The spirituality of the cross is aimed at keeping us alert.

A passion for Christ and for humanity, living with Messianic dynamics, denying ourselves, making room for others, dying a martyr... At first sight and in line with our spontaneous sentiments, all this is hard work and it does not seem to bring a great deal of joy. It takes a lot of effort and it hurts to leave self-centeredness and ambitions of superiority behind. We recoil when hearing that we should stand by those who are despised and who suffer because it might get us into hot water. Nonetheless, the Christian spirituality of the cross is most profoundly characterized by joy. For thanks to God and in the name of God we may stand up for and be near people in distress. Not vaguely or unthinkingly in God's name; for Israel and the Early Christians think and speak of God in a horizon of compassion.

It might take a long time before we get around to it and experience its joy. It is based on the understanding that the glory of God is not in being superior to everything and everyone, but in passionate care for all that lives. Montfort calls it a mystery. The awareness only arises if we dare to deeply reconsider our spontaneous feelings and desires. This seems

like a foolish undertaking. It is not the way we like to go. Those who claim that concern for and solidarity with others is our most profound impulse and that it fulfills our deepest desires seem foolish. This joy can sometimes more easily be encountered in people who are poor and have to endure much than in those on whom fortune seems to smile and who are surrounded by all sorts of comforts. The joy of certain poor people is grounded in the awareness that God is near and saves those who are exploited and not given a fair chance in society. God is to be found close to them.

In Phil. 3-4, St. Paul writes about this joy that has broken through in Christ, “that I may know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed to his death; if by any means I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3,10-11). Paul mentions resurrection and suffering in one breath. The power of Jesus’ resurrection becomes manifest in the way in which we deal with the difficulties that we experience as witnesses of the Gospel. Paul does not maintain that our suffering is over after or because of the resurrection. On the contrary, union with the Risen One pushes us towards suffering fellow beings, with all the associated difficulties. This compassion “is taken in the New Testament as the birthing pains of the new times of real peace and justice.”³⁹ In this perspective suffering and joy are mentioned, without glorifying them.

Twice after the footwashing, Jesus says that Peter cannot follow him (Jn. 13,33-36). A little later he states that the disciples still do not understand how very much he is one with the Father, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14,11). This awareness and its diaconal impact first break through in and thanks to the death of Jesus. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (14,20). However much Jesus’ death will cause sadness, “your sorrow will be turned into joy” (16,20) and “no one will take your joy away from you” (16,22). This is a painful process. “In the world you have oppression; but cheer up! I have overcome the world” (16,33). Easter does not simply state that there is life after death, but that the serving attitude of Jesus unto death is guaranteed in and by the Father. This insight makes disciples into different people. They start to think and live along different coordinates. Whatever may happen to them as witnesses of the Gospel, their lives are anchored in God. As Jesus endured his suffering in communion with the Father and His humility, so the disciples should give their lives unto death. This might seem like a radical loss, but St. John interprets it in light of the self-loss of the footwashing Jesus.

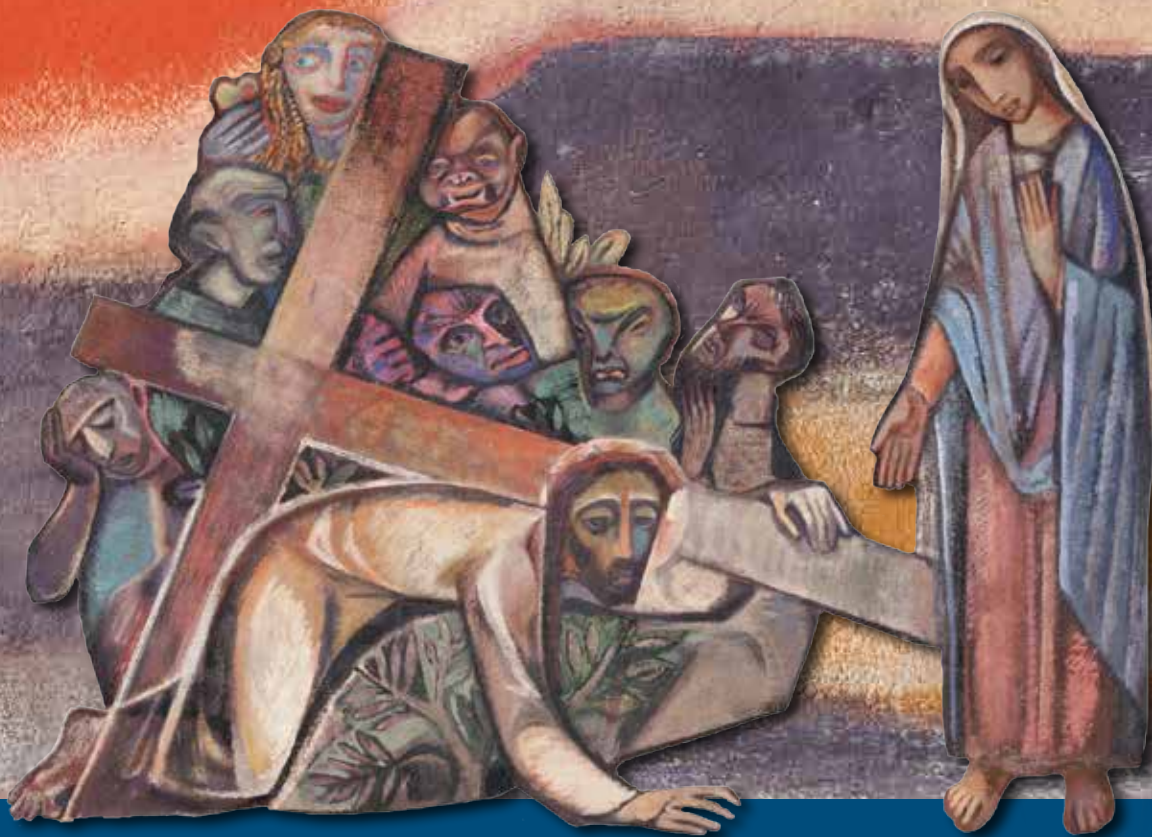
This is also the perspective from which Montfort views life and faces the future. He uses apocalyptic images to underline the gravity. Only one thing is necessary: becoming one with Jesus and the way in which he has given his life on the cross. Those who live after this manner will find eternal life, that is, life that has to do with God (see Rom. 6,10). Such a view turns our approach to life upside down. Losing one's life for the sake of life is finding life. This is the mystery of the Cross.

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In the footsteps of the Crucified Jesus



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Spirituality in the line of
Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort