Wiel Logister smm

Touched by the humility of God

Spirituality in the line of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort

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Colophon

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. The latter was made in the workshop of the Brom Brothers in Utrecht.

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Contents

The essential terms of our religious tradition are never understood instantaneously: love, humility, wisdom, even God – we can only grasp the full meaning of these words after years of keeping watch over them and wrestling with them, when we continue to surround them with diffidence and (inner) conflict, at a respectful distance and with great passion. Culturally such an attitude has become most unusual.
Benoît Standaert osb

The truth of our faith cannot be transmitted by means of simple explanations… (It takes) a series of endlessly repeated attempts to catch another glimpse of it.
Timothy Radcliffe op

Preface

Some three hundred years ago, around 1712, Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort writes *The True Devotion to the Blessed Mary*. He maintains that it is a summary of his own pastoral approach. It never gets published during his lifetime. After his death in 1716, the manuscript ends up in a chest and is forgotten.

It isn't until 1842 that it resurfaces by chance. The year after, the first edition appears. The text has been published over four hundred times since, in more than twenty-five languages. The first Dutch edition appeared in 1853 in Sint-Truiden (Belgium). John Paul II had a Polish copy on his night stand. After the arrival of the Montfortians as French refugees in the Netherlands in 1881, there has been a continuous stream of new translations in Dutch, the last one appearing in 1998 thanks to our Belgian confreres.

In 2011, the Dutch Provincial Chapter of the Montfortians has a discussion about the question whether *The True Devotion to the Blessed Mary* is still relevant for our times. Isn't its appeal lost because of the language and the images that are outdated? After the Chapter, a group of confreres tackles this question: Jan van Loo, Piet Schoen, Wiel Logister, Ben Faas

and Peter Denneman, with the administrative support of Marian Claeren. Soon, the plan of a new translation or a rewording is abandoned. In light of Montfort's missionary activities we have gone in search of the foundations of *The True Devotion* and his other writings. In our view, his deepest motives are still entirely relevant for a modern day Christian spirituality.

It is my conviction that the result is a fascinating, inspiring, and also provocative book by Wiel Logister. At the center is the grand and fascinating horizon of Christian faith, of the strength of the Gospel of Jesus and of the powerful figure of Mary. The legacy of Montfort challenges us to open our minds and allow ourselves to be touched by the humility of God.

Valkenburg aan de Geul, 8 december 2012

Peter Denneman smm
provincial superior

Abbreviations used

FC	Montfort, Letter to the Friends of the Cross.
GA	God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort (New York 1987).
H	Montfort, The Hymns (= God alone II, New York 2005).
JLM	Jesus Living in Mary: The Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort (New York 1994).
L	Montfort, Letters.
LEW	Montfort, The Love of the Eternal Wisdom.
PM	Montfort, Prayer for Missionaries.
RM	Montfort, Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary.
SR	Montfort, The Admirable Secret of the Most Holy Rosary.
SM	Montfort, The Secret of Mary.
TD	Montfort, The True Devotion to the Blessed Mary.

Introduction

What will happen to Christianity in Western Europe? Does it have a future? For all kinds of reasons, many wish to be deleted from church registers; others don't even bother to do so. The number of baptisms, marriages, and funerals has drastically decreased. Religious socialization has been put on the back burner. Many still call themselves Christians, but they barely know what Christian living is really about. Here and there a cry is heard for new forms of evangelization, but how these could and should be realized is far from clear. (Wo)mankind has changed; we no longer resemble our ancestors from (half) a century ago, and we no longer ask the same questions. Yet many of these questions remain. Life in the rich western world is going through a crisis; support of classical authorities such as church, state, political parties, and unions is decreasing. At the same time, the optimistic belief in progress falters, and natural resources are inadequate to sustain our present standard of living. In order to turn the tide, a moral revaluation seems imperative; perhaps an entirely new metaphysical sentiment is needed.

It is important to remember that the history of Christianity is not a steady evolution; it is accompanied by occasional head-on collisions and unexpected turns. All great figures in the Bible lived on the verge of radical change and even breaks in life. Abraham was a vagrant in a foreign land. Moses was the instigator of the uprising of slaves. Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel acted during the Babylonian exile when Israel no longer knew how to proceed. Jesus proclaimed his Gospel in times of great religious and social insecurity; it is based on ancient prophets and wise men but at the same time it is "a new teaching with authority" (Mk 1,27). Also the *prime* of the history of the Church has been connected with new questions and challenges that involved uncertainty as well as unexpected creativity. The clash between the Biblical and the Greek-Roman outlook on life led to a new and colorful synthesis in the fourth and fifth century. Only a short while later, however, new questions arose as a result of the mass migration of peoples. Increasing urbanization, a new middle class, and budding capitalism in the Middle Ages aroused the countermovement of Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, and others. Nowadays people wonder how to deal with contingency, and

how to dodge the claws of ideologies and structures that are saturated with megalomania and in which domination over one another is unquestioned. According to the English historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), cultures have always found a way out of deadlock situations thanks to creative minorities. Perhaps, it will be no different in our century.

In a new age, all kinds of elements start shifting and new patterns arise. Handing down a tradition is an adventurous undertaking. Only when looking back, it becomes clear that continuity and discontinuity are closely interwoven. Peter Wust says in *Ungewissheit und Wagnis* (Uncertainty and Venture, 1937) that the religious ground of our existence does not provide mathematical certainty, but encouragement to take up challenges without over-anxiety and fundamentalism. In a similar sense, Paul Tillich characterizes faith as "the courage to be" (1952). Milestones in the history of this courage are to be found in Socrates and Saint Augustine, in Teresa of Avila and Simone Weil, in Saint Francis of Assisi and Dag Hammerskjöld. This book focuses on Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, founder of the Montfortians, the Daughters of Wisdom, and the Brothers of Saint Gabriel. In order to progress, congregations such as the Montforians should allow themselves to be challenged by Christ, by the original spirit of the institutes and the changed constitution of our time, according to the Second Vatican Council (*Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life nr. 2*). That is why the attention for Christ, Montfort, and contemporary life interface in this book. In the light of questions of our day and age, we focus on Christ and Montfort: taught by both, the question forces itself upon us which steps we should take as present-day people. Because of the latter question, this book is not a historical study of the developments in Montfortian spirituality from 1700 up till now: it is rather an attempt to take a stand for today and tomorrow.

Montfort lived three hundred years ago. Many of his views and arguments have become alien to us. Yet we still encounter a number of insights that are worth reflecting upon, even though we live in entirely different times. This book hopes to hand a few building blocks that may contribute to the "courage to be" in our confused and confusing times. The title indicates that this courage is not within easy reach. That it has to do with God is not an easy given in these godless times. All the more so where "a humble God" is concerned. Let us say this for now: God has to do with the realization that we have been life first and foremost to surround each other with sympathy and solicitude, with nearness and attention, without

outdoing or dominating one another. God has little or nothing to do with a world in which everything is or is supposed to be "super". That God is associated with humility challenges us to think *differently* about God: not in terms of omnipotence and power, but in terms of the willingness to serve and to sacrifice.

"The courage to be" was not a common expression around 1700. Nonetheless, **Chapter 1** characterizes Montfort as a man of courage. Not for the sake of material gain or public recognition but in order to be there for others. He emphasizes that a person is not baptized in order to lean back afterwards, but to approach life with hope and truly bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus in the company of Mary. All this has to do with his main conviction in life: Montfort's letters were headed "Dieu seul" – "God alone".[1] **Chapter 2** discusses which God is concerned or in which sense God is concerned. To be aware of this is even more necessary in our times in which the who, the what, the where, and the when of God is no longer unquestioned. 'God' has become a complicated word in our language. As long as nobody asks for its meaning, we believe to know who or what God is, but once we do ask, we start stuttering and stammering. **Chapter 3** describes how Jesus is touched by God during his baptism in the Jordan River, and subsequently becomes a servant of those who are oppressed religiously and politically and robbed of their human dignity. **Chapter 4** sketches how Mary says "yes" to God in a comparable manner and chooses to side with those who are despised; she is present among the disciples who pray for the fire of the Holy Spirit. **Chapter 5** argues that "the courage to be" in the line of Montfort involves our going along with the humility of God, as it has taken shape in our midst in Jesus and Mary.

To conclude: the lifestyle of Montfort sometimes seems to suggest that "le bon père – the good father" as he was called, was a somber person. The Montfortian way of being "touched by the humility of God" has none of this sentiment.

CHAPTER 1

Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716)

This chapter provides a short sketch of the life of Montfort. It names his most important writings and indicates which subjects have become important to him in the course of time.

In Search of Wisdom

Louis Grignion is born on the 31st of January 1673 in Montfort, a small town to the west of Rennes in Bretagne. His father has a difficult personality and is not very successful as a lawyer, his striving for prestige and a good position notwithstanding. The son is more like his mother and prefers to be of help to others – a disposition that will characterize his entire life. During his secondary education in Rennes, he turns out to be a somewhat solitary figure with a great devotion to Mary and a remarkable commitment to the poor. Gradually the longing to become a priest starts to grow in him. The final decision, he reports, is taken at the foot of a statue of Mary. In 1692, he starts his studies at a seminary in Paris. Initially he lives in homes for poor theology students. In 1695, he moves to the seminary of Saint-Sulpice where he is librarian among other things and starts a collection of notes about Jesus as the Wisdom of God, and the meaning of Mary. Of these he will make frequent use in his later sermons and writings.

In Saint-Sulpice his radical asceticism is noted; it alienates him from his fellow students. This does not seem to bother him. He frequently speaks about the need for an ascetic aversion to the world (cf. LEW 174-176) and tries to discipline himself in various ways to resist his ego that is always asserting itself. He is thoroughly aware of the effort it takes to become like the poor Jesus, and he deems it necessary to maintain a strict asceticism in order to crush his selfishness. For years and years he seems to be burdened by a pessimistic view of humankind and of self. Only in his final years he has become free enough to make the

impression of a contented and happy person. Concerning the way in which Montfort has understood the need for self-denial, our German confrere Hermann-Joseph Jünemann writes, "Montfort lived out his renunciation so completely that he caused people to accuse him of despising himself. In this he was influenced by the generally accepted way of thinking of the time: human nature is spoiled; we must suppress all its manifestations. But what appeared to be contempt of self was, rather, that forgetfulness of self whose model is the *kenosis* of God made man. And it was to become increasingly so" (JLM 665). We will get back to this in Chapter 5.

He is ordained on the 5th of June 1700 in the *Société de Saint-Sulpice*, a company of priests without specific religious vows but supportive of the Council of Trent. From now on the young priest calls himself Louis-Marie. He longs to go to Canada as a missionary, but Leschassier, his father confessor and advisor who has become Superior General of Saint-Sulpice, considers it too dangerous for the young man with his passionate fervor. He sends him to a community in Nantes to be schooled as a missionary for the poor and marginalized. However, Louis-Marie does not find real apostolical zeal here. In a letter to Leschassier he writes:

> *On the one hand, I feel a secret attraction for a hidden life in which I can efface myself and combat my natural tendency to show off. On the other hand, I feel a tremendous urge to make our Lord and his Holy Mother loved, to go in a humble and simple way to teach catechism to the poor in country places and to arouse in sinners a devotion to our Blessed Lady… I know very well, my dear father, that I am not worthy to do such honorable work, but when I see the needs of the Church I cannot help pleading continually for a small and poor band of good priests to do this work under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin (L 5).*

This letter indicates the direction in life that will characterize Louis-Marie: an unpretentious lifestyle, solidarity with the poor, a catechetic inclination, and a strong focus on the Blessed Lady. Back in Paris, he is forced into five months of idleness before he happens to come in contact with the bishop of Poitiers who takes to him. When he arrives in this city in 1701, he gets involved in a poorhouse. His own clothes are so shabby that the poor organize

a collection for him. Overjoyed, he writes to Leschassier on May 4th 1701:

> *I blessed God that I had been taken for a poor man wearing the glorious livery of the poor and I thanked my brothers and sisters for their kindness. Since then, they have become so attached to me that they are going about saying openly that I am to be their priest, that is, their director, for there has not been a regular director in the poorhouse for a considerable time, so abandoned has it become (L 6).*

One of the poor sends a request to the bishop to appoint Louis-Marie as their director. Pending the reply, he returns to Nantes where he spends several weeks attempting to boost the religious life of parishioners by means of intensive catechesis and predication. On August 25th 1701, Monsignor Girard invites him to grant the wish of beggars in the poorhouse. The young priest accepts the invitation, but he hopes to be able to spread his wings even further. On September 16, he writes to Leschassier:

> *The only thing that would make me want to go to the poorhouse at all would be the hope of being able to extend my work later into the town and the countryside and so be able to help more people. When I am teaching catechism to the poor in town and country, I am in my element (L 9).*

Undoubtedly, in his view the poor are the privileged friends of Jesus Christ who says, "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Mt 25,40). This becomes abundantly clear the day that Louis-Marie knocks on a door with a poor man on his shoulders saying, "Open up for Jesus Christ". For Louis-Marie, as for Jesus, the poor are the ones with whom God identifies. In the course of this book, it will become apparent that this viewpoint radically changes the ideas about the glory and the magnificence of God and that it entails a plea for a poor and serving Church. However, the zeal and the energy of Louis-Marie exceed the confines of a reasonably small poorhouse.

During this time, he adds 'de Montfort' to his name, out of respect for the village in which he was baptized. Henceforth he goes through life as Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort. He manages to improve life in the poorhouse. On the cross that he installs in the ward of the poorhouse of Poitiers he puts the text, "Deny oneself, carry one's cross to follow Jesus

Christ" (GA 437; cf. Mk 8,34). He takes these words very seriously and his austerity, his asceticism, and his identification with the poor are exceptional. The matron of the poorhouse, the clergy, and the upper middle class believe that he is exaggerating. They are willing to help the poor but do not agree with Montfort's radical identification. In the spring of 1703 the conflict gets out of hand. The bishop forbids him to say Mass and Montfort leaves Poitiers. Before his departure, he becomes acquainted with Marie-Louise Trichet and Catherine Brunet, two young women who, twelve years later, will become the first members of the congregation for women, the Daughters of Wisdom.

Back in Paris, he lives in the Rue du Pot-de-Fer in a small closet underneath a staircase, in which the sunlight barely penetrates. This poverty does not bother him. Because of the way he dresses and behaves, Leschassier refuses to remain his spiritual leader: he is unwilling to compromise his own reputation and that of Saint-Sulpice.

This time of great poverty and disappointment is of immense importance for the development of Montfort. He stands alone and is, from the human point of view, at a dead-end. In the months of forced solitude that follow, he becomes passionately absorbed in the person of Jesus Christ and his way of life. It is probably during this time that he writes *The Love of the Eternal Wisdom*, the first synthesis of his spirituality. This booklet emphasizes that true wisdom finds its deepest expression in the folly of the cross. A person should not seek his own glory, but be there for the poor and the humble – without a trace of superiority and willing to accept setbacks with patience. In imitation of Jesus Christ who washed others' feet as a slave. Later on in his life, in 1708, Montfort will found the Brotherhood of the Cross in La Rochelle. At its members he addresses his long *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*.

In the mean time, the inhabitants of the poorhouse in Poitiers won't leave it alone. In a letter to Leschassier from 1704 they renew their request, "We, four hundred poor, petition you very humbly, for the great love and glory of God to return to us our venerable pastor, him who loves the poor so much." Montfort's second stay among them has an encouraging start. He even becomes the managing director of the poorhouse. Soon, however, the old difficulties return. Montfort starts to doubt himself. In June 1705, he leaves the poorhouse for good.

En route with Mary

While travelling, Montfort has a rosary in his one hand and a walking stick with a figurine of the Holy Virgin in the other; his lips murmuring an Ave Maria. From time to time he makes pilgrimages to Marian sanctuaries, specially to Saumur. In several places he founds brotherhoods in her honor. In agreement with famous writers of his day, the so-called French School, his focus is not on Marian dogmas, but rather on the way Mary approached life. He wants to learn what happened between her and God or between God and her. He probes the intensity with which she experienced God and wonders how this fed her care for those she shared her life with. He also wants to get his listeners and readers to follow her in this respect.

The Blessed Lady is an ever present theme in his writings, his innumerable *Hymns* among others. His ever-clearer view culminates in two texts towards the final years of his life: *The Secret of Mary* and *The True Devotion to the Blessed Mary*. In the latter, Montfort predicts that the manuscript will disappear in a chest by the devil's doing and thus remain unread for a long time. When the text is found in 1842, it starts to play an important role during the height of Marian devotion that starts around 1850 in the Catholic Church and will last for as much as a century. Montfort is then taken for an important, sometimes the exclusive, apostle of Mary. Without wishing to disqualify this, the image of Montfort has changed in the past half century. His devotion to Mary cannot to be isolated from his ideas concerning God, Jesus Christ, and Christian living in a missionary manner.

As Apostolic Missionary

In 1706, Montfort sets out for Rome in order to consult the Pope. Perhaps in the hope that he will be sent to Canada, as yet. However, Clemens XI tells him to dedicate his energies to the huge amount of work that still needs to be done in France. He is not to go elsewhere but work with the bishops to whose dioceses he is called. There God will bless his work. The Pope grants him the title 'Apostolic Missionary' and orders him to restore the spirit of Christian living and urge people to consider and renew their baptismal vows. That will be the goal of his missionary activities from now on.

Back in France, he joins a group of priests who do missionary work in parishes in Dinan. Later, in 1707, he works in the diocese of Saint-Brieuc under Leuduger. The latter is deve-

loping new forms of evangelization in line with the Council of Trent in the hope that these will end the crisis in Christian living. At the end of a mission, the participants renew their baptismal vows by means of a contract. It is Leuduger who makes Montfort recognize the power of this method and objective. When, after a while, he gets in charge of parish missions himself, he invariably works towards a contract in which baptismal vows are officially renewed. In the rule that he writes for the small number of priests that he hopes will join him, he writes:

> *The purpose of these missions is to renew the spirit of Christianity among the faithful. Therefore, the missionaries will see to it that, as the Pope has commanded, the baptismal vows are renewed with the greatest solemnity. They are not to give absolution or communion to any penitent who has not first renewed his baptismal promises with the rest of the parishioners. Only those who have seen the results of this practice can appreciate its value (RM 56).*

The collaboration with Leuduger is short-lived. In August 1707, the colleagues ask Montfort to leave. The reason is a disagreement about the way a mission should be preached. Montfort wants to be a missionary 'in an apostolic manner', in a spirit of unpretentiousness, poverty, and penance. He does not agree that missionaries should be paid by highly placed benefactors, such as bishops, the nobility, or the king. In the *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, he will thus declare that the members of his congregation should live by Providence ('*vivre à la Providence*'), i.e. they should trust that the participants of the mission will provide shelter, food, and the like.

Once again he is out of work. He decides to go into retreat in the Hermitage of Saint-Lazare in his birthplace Montfort, where he sets up a chapel. This attracts quite a bit of attention in the vicinity. It lasts until the spring of 1708, when the bishop of Saint-Malo calls in at the village. The bishop does not like the recluse and forbids him to give sermons in his chapel; he is only allowed to preach in parish churches. From this Montfort concludes that his presence in the diocese is no longer appreciated.

He leaves for the diocese of Nantes. Until the end of 1710 he moves from parish to parish. He preaches, catechizes, and organizes processions and pilgrimages. He is assisted by a number of lay brothers and, from time to time, by other priests as well. Thus he develops

his own style of missionizing. His emphasis is on Mary, and he makes frequent use of religious songs, such as his self-composed *Hymns*. Furthermore, he organizes and leads large processions. In order to consolidate the result of the mission, he founds the Brotherhood of the Rosary.

In 1709 he undertakes a grand project: the Calvary of Pontchâteau, in which thousands of people participate voluntarily. This project is connected with another fascination in his life: the Cross. He wants to bear the misfortunes of life in union with the crucified Christ. Not impassively, but with strength and hope. Right before the consecration of the Calvary in September 1710, a ban is imposed by the bishop. Montfort is at a loss and attempts to change the church leader's point of view. In vain. He is shown the royal injunction and ordered to demolish the Calvary.

From 1711 onwards, Montfort works in the diocese of Luçon and La Rochelle where he is entirely free to improve his missionary method. In the meantime, he has matured and gained more inner peace. Even though he does not give up his evangelical radicalism and yield to the spirit of a bourgeois Christianity, he no longer flaunts his asceticism, which was initially focused on curtailing the importance of the self and its inclinations. Gradually he develops the freedom and the mental flexibility of a true Christian. He still chooses to live without pretentions, shying away from feelings of superiority towards others, but he learns to be cheerful and austere: poor in spirit.

At the same time, the other project that he holds dear still remains, as referred to in the same letter of the 6th of December: "a small and poor band of good priests working under the banner and protection of the Blessed Virgin" (L 5). To this we owe the *Prayer for Missionaries* – a passionate prayer for followers, for a congregation, for priests who take the Gospel utterly seriously. For this reason he writes, probably in the spring, the aforementioned rule. Until that time, he has managed to involve no more than a few lay brothers as his fellow workers. In the beginning of 1716, he sends thirty-three people from Saint-Pompain on a pilgrimage to Notre-Dame-des Ardilliers in Saumur, a distance of eighty kilometers, in order to pray for good missionaries following in the footsteps of the apostles by full submission to Providence and a life of practicing virtues under the protection of Mary. The number of pilgrims reminds of the age of Jesus at his death.

After their return, Montfort goes to Saumur with the same intention. It will be his last

pilgrimage. Physically exhausted, he dies on the 28th of April 1716, immediately after a sermon during a mission in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sêvre. In one hand he clasps the cross that he received from Clemens XI, in the other he holds the figurine of Mary that he always carried about. At the time, only a few lay brothers are members of his congregation. A couple of priests have been working with him, but without any formal bond. On his deathbed, he asks one of these, René Mulot, to take care of what he calls "the community of the Holy Spirit". Mulot makes this promise. For a century and a half, it will not be more than "a small and poor band". That's all Montfort had in mind.

Montfort has combined his own religious experience and his pastoral concern in a profound manner. He did not have an entirely inner religious life while, as a pastor, preaching a simplified version of Christian faith. On the contrary, his own experience and his pastoral approach were a unity. That is why his pastoral activities and his writings should be 'read' together, the one viewed in light of the other. When the subtitle of this publication speaks of spirituality it means: being grounded in the awareness that we – in view of unity and peace – are carried and challenged by a horizon and a depth that reach beyond what can be directly pointed at and easily named. For good reason Montfort's life's motto was "God alone". Spirituality is often a way of life rather than an explicitly justifiable affair. That this horizon and depth involve a fundamental or ultimate unitary ground, as Meister Eckart for example elaborates upon, Montfort took for granted rather than making it the subject of philosophical or theological speculations. He was mainly concerned with those elements that he deemed important for authentic Christian day-to-day living. In this respect he frequently pointed at the baptismal vows and their implicit intention to follow Christ.

CHAPTER 2

GOD ... who, what, where, when?

As a pastor and a writer, Montfort continually speaks of God. 'Dieu seul' is his motto: 'God alone'. What does this entail? In a number of steps, this chapter describes how we view and attempt to experience God. In addition to that, it indicates a few of the subjects that Montfort stresses in his Prayer for Missionaries.

Views of God differ. Some seek God in silence, others in music, and a third group from their "own" seat in church. Abraham, on the other hand, wanders from here to there in the name of God. God is called JHWH or Allah and Jesus says in Mt 28,19 that the apostles should go and baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is not easy to see the multicolored wood for the right trees. Especially nowadays, when we have to explain more than ever what we mean when we say "God". We cannot act as if everybody is sure to know the who and the what, the where and the when of God. Do we know?

God as horizon

We stand in a tradition that maintains that life is carried by a transcendent presence that forms the ground and the horizon of life. This Presence provokes in us the feeling of absolute dependence, *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*, (Friedrich Schleiermacher) or creature consciousness (Rudolf Otto). This is the widest horizon we know of when referring to God. The Old Testament adds that this Presence is concerned with the misfortunes of slaves in Egypt, with people in need, with victims of history, with every person who struggles with questions and ups and downs or with life and death. This particular focus gives the experience of God its own élan that is at odds with a neutral and aloof way of observing all that takes place around us. It creates an atmosphere that differs from the sort of cynicism in which only the facts count.

Even though such a belief in God does not answer all of life's questions, it *does* decide the orientation in our views, and in the way we live our lives. It inspires us to protest against those who despise others or bully them. The meaning of life is to relate to everything and everyone in light of God's presence and solicitude. Even when fully aware of the fact that we are limited in place and time and that our possibilities do not extend infinitely.

How far does this divine Presence reach? Initially, also in Israel it is thought that every people, every nation, and even every dimension of life has its own deity. However, during the Babylonian exile of Israel the awareness or the insight breaks through that the aforementioned Presence is the only true and ultimate horizon of life, everywhere and always. Put differently, there is only one God, only this one decisive factor. Life is in its very depths surrounded by God's longing to create well-being. Reality as a whole and every individual form of it is surrounded and carried by this divine sphere of benevolence, attention, and solicitude. It brings along an atmosphere of security and the call for peace and compassion, the limitations and boundaries that we clash with notwithstanding. It inspires to rise above these limitations and feelings of despondency and to avoid fatal clashes. Not only within our own families or clans, but worldwide. It is this all-encompassing Presence that is meant when God is called "Creator of Heaven and earth". In Israel and the Christian world this is more or less the way this reality is understood.

About the who and the what of God we can only stammer and stutter. Rather in astonished expletives or in exclamations such as 'Oh, God!' than in clear and objective concepts. Gradually, a few specific emotions surface from this ocean of wonder and surround our fragility and impotence with courage and hope. These emotions color our faith. Rather, they accompany this faith. Thus Ex 34,6-7 speaks of "a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth, keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and disobedience and sin, but will not let all sins go unpunished". The latter prevents us from thinking of God as a 'softy'. Psalm 1, the foreword of the Biblical prayer book, portrays God as opposed to those who 'sit in the seat of the scoffers' and look down on the poor. Thus the awareness, the conviction, the belief arises that this Presence, this Nearness, ultimately overcomes war, contempt, and deadly solitude even though these conditions continue to taint life. Those who, in a Biblical perspective, call God 'omnipotent', do not refer to a simple concept of the power of God in terms of "God can do anything", but profess

that ultimately it is not brutal power that reigns but resistance to tyranny, as has been shown by the wise and the prophets of Israel, and by Jesus. Professing the omnipotence of God should go together with an unpretentious life of faithfulness and compassion; otherwise it is on the wrong track.

The Present One who is characterized in Ex 3 as “I’ll be there for you” emanates a creative, delivering, and inspiring power. This Name opens people to each other, draws attention to strangers who wander in fear through parts unknown, to slaves in Egypt, to those who have been marginalized as lepers. From the depths of the earth, high in the heavens, and here in our midst, concern for people wells up, in their good moments, and the bad ones. When the Bible speaks of “God”, it refers to a Voice that asks for compassion and commitment. Whoever believes in this Voice must – if he or she is consistent – also feel solidarity with those around us. Whenever this is the case, the Divine breaks through in people.

This God does not become manifest in a vague, abstract manner, but in relation to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Job and Jeremiah, etc. It concerns a Presence among people who struggle with their past, present, and future. This does not mean that in the Bible no questions, doubts, and uncertainties arise concerning the who and the what of God *and* people. Just consider Job! More questions arise when the nearness of God turns our spontaneous inclinations upside down. After all, in the name of God lords should become servants and no longer behave themselves as lords. The nature of God's commitment is at odds with our tendency to focus on our own lives, if necessary at the cost of others. An outstanding example is Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok River (Gen 32, 22-33); only after a night of wrestling with an angel, with his understanding of God and of himself, he can, crippled at the hip, go to meet his brother Esau and acknowledge that he has ill-treated him. Only then is Jacob able to believe in God with heart and soul.

Believing in God's omnipotence implies believing that creative solicitude and loving commitment constitute the deepest ground and the destination of all that is. Thinking of God means thinking beyond all oppositions. It orients us towards an open and honest communication aimed at reconciliation and peace. That is why from the first commandment – to love and honor God – immediately and inextricably the second results: to love those who are your neighbors as you are loved yourself or as you know yourself to be safe in the hands of God. We can only speak of God truthfully, if we feel invited and challenged to do justice to the defenseless and the orphans, the oppressed and the poor.

Unlike it is often suggested – by us as well –, the Biblical tradition does not look upon God as an entity that majestically towers above our reality, but as a Presence in the middle of life whose benevolence and solidarity want to pervade this reality. In light of the Bible as a whole, the famous opening words of Genesis "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" point to an alternative conviction and an alternative outlook on life: life, contrary to frequent impression, rests on a Presence that is at odds with competition, chaos, and discord and that is intensely and actively concerned with all that is and strives for peacefulness and well-being for all.

In this context, God is called the "Infinite". Not in the sense of far away, at an immense distance, but near and caring in an immeasurable intensity. Whereas "finiteness" is connected with limitation, isolation, and individuality and (because of the urge for self-preser-

vation) easily leads to conflicts with other finite beings, "infinity" refers to a mode of being that is free from such tendencies. We catch a glimpse of it at those moments that we truly love someone, that a bond arises "*Ohne Warum*" – without a why. Such a creative and loving attitude, but with an unimaginable intensity, is the deepest ground and the ultimate horizon of our finite world. Such a God is whom the faithful seek, even when often painfully clashing with limitations and boundaries.

"I believe in one God", the Creed says. Not in a quantitative sense: one at the exclusion of all others. But with a fundamental, qualitative meaning: without one dominating the other and without one nation deeming itself superior to another. This Creed should be viewed in light of the way that has been gone by Abraham, by Moses, by Jesus, by Mary, and by others. Only those who walk with such people can come to an endorsement of this belief. They challenge us to exist and co-exist as the image of this God – however separate, individual we may be. At first sight, this belief in God is based on our search for God, but at a certain point a reversal takes place and we are touched by the experience that God is seeking us and wants us to partake in his Infinity. We will remain conscious of our finiteness, but we will be touched by an infinite light that rises for us and that has come to live with us in Jesus, full of goodness and truth (Jn 1,14).

Jesus' understanding of and belief in God

Jesus and his disciples are children of Israel. The Psalter is their prayer book. When they speak of God, they mean the source of creativity and compassion that is sought in these prayers. It leads to a view of a world in which there is more (possible) between heaven and earth than antagonism, war, and death. Thank God!

In the course of his life, Jesus becomes a pre-eminent protagonist of this understanding of and belief in God. He allows himself to be led by it and does all he can to convince others. In words and deeds he becomes the parable and image of God's solidarity with human beings and of the solidarity of humans with God and with each other. By no means does he keep his relationship with God to himself: he shares it with others. In the line of the old Name "I will be there for you", he shows that and how people can be there for each other. Without disregard for his human fragility and his human freedom. On the contrary, respect for the freedom of others and compassion with their vulnerability are essential components

of his understanding of God. God begs for the free response and participation of people, even if this implies taking risks. In the keen awareness that God is close to him, begging and soliciting, Jesus does not resign himself to *faits accomplis* and immutable states of affairs.

Saint John's Gospel calls Jesus the Word of God that has incarnated. In who he was, in what he did and did not do, God has declared himself emphatically among us and has given us a specific orientation. In his love for humanity, Jesus' disciples sense the nearness of God – professed in the Torah and the Prophets – in a renewed, pure, and powerful manner. This emphasis on God's presence in this or that person can already be found in the Old Testament: God does not come near in a generalized way or everywhere in equal measure, but in a certain ancestor, a prophet, a wise person, a merciful one, a poor one, an unpretentious one, and so forth. Not in the least in Jesus, who has gone his own concrete way and died on the Cross.

That his life has been so intensely marked by God, does not diminish his humanity. On the contrary, precisely his belief in God is what makes him into this specific person 'full of mercy and truth', full of God's creativity, full of dedication and love, and loyal to the very end. He allows himself to be led unconditionally by God's way of 'being there'. After his death, by means of an angel or a sudden memory, he is recognized as such and acknowledged as "truly the Son of God" (Mk 15,39). God's incarnation in Jesus does not imply the denial of God's presence in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in Jews, and in others. Jesus is not unique at the cost of others, no matter how much he disapproves of the way in which some speak of God and behave themselves in the name of God.

The Bible uses all kinds of words and expressions to characterize Jesus. It is said, for example, that he was truly moved by God's Spirit, which spread like a wildfire thanks to him and thus came to live in the souls and hearts of the people around him. God gets involved with people who do not exalt their own interests and self-importance and who do not assume a quasi-divine air at the cost of others. Biblical talk of the Spirit overflows with wonder and gratitude concerning the possibility that we may follow in the footsteps of Jesus and others and participate in the love of God for humanity. The Spirit of God wants to live in people and fill their hearts, as the life of Jesus testifies. The American theologian Catharine LaCugna draws the following far-reaching conclusion:

> *The God who does not need nor care for the creature, or who is immune to our suffering, does not exist. The God too hidden for us to know, or too powerful to evoke anything but fear, does not exist. The God who watches us from a distance as an uninvolved, impartial observer, does not exist. The God conceived as a self-enclosed, exclusively self-related trias of persons does not exist. The God who keeps a ledger of our sins and failings, the divine policeman, does not exist. These are all false gods, fantasies of the imagination that has allowed itself to become detached from the rule of God's life disclosed in Jesus Christ. What we believe about God must match what is revealed of God in Scripture: God watches over the widow and the poor, God makes the rains fall on just and unjust alike, God welcomes the stranger and embraces the enemy.*[2]

In one and the same breath, Jesus puts forward both the majesty and the love of God. He is extreme in that respect: God should never be thought without his (love for) humanity. Whereas we tend to retreat into ourselves and only then think we are "our real selves", from the very beginning God flows towards others hoping to entice them into such God-like way of being. The emphasis on God's majesty or transcendence should not overrule his passionate nearness, his immanence, or – as the title of this book suggests – his humility. The main fascination of the Bible is with God manifesting in history, that is: among us. With a free majesty that keeps surprising us: it not only respects our own freedom but rather evokes it. Jesus declares in the same vein that the Kingdom of God is near: reaching for us and longing to be noticed.

That is why it is dangerous, wrong even, to first take God for a reality in itself and only at a later stage add the relationship to us. We might be greatly tempted to do so, but the consequences are fatal. For fear of absolutization of the connection of God and world (pantheism), the tendency arises to view God as absolute Majesty, the totally Other who is self-sufficient, perfectly holy, and aloof. The wise and the prophets of Israel have left this view behind. To them the close connection between God and world is prominent. Jesus follows the same course and emphasizes the intense intimacy between God and world or between God and human beings. God is essentially 'relationship' and brings about communication. God is inconceivable without notions like relationality and communication. God is an es-

sentially creative nearness, for no other reason than his own dynamics or his yearning to be with the children of man. Precisely in this, God differs from us. We often see ourselves as separate individuals who at a later stage decide to relate or to refrain from relationships. The God of Jesus, on the other hand, incarnates and seeks intimacy. This is the only way He wants to be sought and seen.

Hence, in the view of Jesus, God is a creative Presence who is intimately involved in our reality. This Presence wants to overcome our inclination towards selfishness and self-centeredness and provoke an intense solidarity with others. Hence, not in the least a Presence of the aloof kind, on the contrary! In order to deliver and liberate, the Present One shares our existence. Radically different from the Tempter or the Devil who only thinks in terms of superiority. The Present One wants to become the soul of our souls and the heart of our hearts and raise us above our tendency to seek only ourselves. In Jesus' footsteps, Christians – at their best – view God as concerned with people. Fully aware of the enormous task of believing in and making room for such a God. But also in the hope that the sphere and the space of 'God' will become all in all and that everyone, thank God, will be inspired to treat others with benevolence.

When Christians speak of God, the word 'God' expresses a worldview with all sorts of references and associations. The 'I believe in God' of the Creed is followed by a colon and twelve articles or articulations, grouped according to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Hence when mentioning God, a great number of stories and implicit references to the Bible and its subsequent history of faith immediately follow. All kinds of thoughts and sentiments arise with it. Together they express what we mean by those initial words: 'I believe in God.' Those who do not yet or no longer know this context hardly realize what Christians think of when they say 'God'. Whenever someone declares him- or herself to be a non-believer, the question is what he or she means. In many cases Christians will respond, 'I don't believe in that either; my belief in God is entirely different.' That is why, in many questionnaires the questions concerning the belief in God are far too simplistic; hence the results mean little or nothing.

Personally colored

Can we, in the context of such a belief in God, speak of a personal God? 'Person' and 'personal' are difficult terms. It is revealing that the Christian tradition speaks of a personal God as well as three divine persons. The being-person of God is apparently more complicated than it would seem at first sight.

What 'person' means in this respect becomes clearer in the history of Abraham. He is called, away from the family ties in which he is a part of a larger whole, a cog in the machine. He is approached and told to push aside his *teraphim* (idols), or rather his unquestioned belonging to his clan. He manages with great difficulty. Ultimately he even has to take leave of his nephew Lot. But that is not all. When dividing the wells and the pastures, he has to give Lot first choice. Only then Abraham is able to relate to Lot and others without employing classical patterns of power. And when his wife Sara dies, he has to beg for a piece of land from the inhabitants of Hebron. Thus Abraham becomes a free person, someone who can relate to others without wielding power, without mores and customs that are valid because they have always been that way. All this makes Abraham into a man of faith, someone who knows how to relate to others in freedom and with respect, a 'person'.

Thus the emphasis is no longer on self-will or self-interest. Rather the question is: Can I be mild and merciful with regard to the particular other that I encounter? Can I approach him or her in such a way that not my own cut-and-dried opinions and judgments dominate, but that which arises in an open dialogue and in an atmosphere of mutual concern? The stories of the patriarchs show how hard it is to escape from an attitude of double-crossing, of threat and deceit, from a pre-determined balance of power. What happens between Abraham and Lot, between Jacob and Esau, between Joseph and his brothers, helps us discover what really makes for a good relationship. It means that we do not use others, but keep begging for them to be treated with mercy and patience, as Abraham begged for God's mercy towards the inhabitants of Sodom.

This is also the sphere in which Jesus relates to people and stands up for them. He does not reduce them to their disease, their social position, not even to their sinful past. Someone who is able to relate to others in such a way is no longer a particular individual who has built a wall around him- or herself, but a person. A person is someone who cares for others and treats them respectfully and responsibly, without thinking of himself and his own interests, no matter what.

In Psalms and elsewhere, God is addressed as 'Thou' or 'You'. It indicates that the presence of God is experienced in an atmosphere of freedom, communication, and trustworthiness. In that sense, the creative power of the Father, the liberating deeds of the Son, and the comforting workings of the Spirit are felt. This atmosphere is ruined when someone thinks to be able to tyrannize God or imagines God as a self-centered tyrant. The ban on idols and images blocks this type of thinking: God may not be thought of in any form or shape that manipulates or can be manipulated. Calling God a 'person' is authentic only if there is attention for his word and respect for his deeds. In these God displays respect for human beings. From this point of view calling God 'Thou' or 'You' calls for an intense attention for the way in which God acts and speaks according to the Bible. Without it, no justice can be done to God's personhood.

In the middle of all sorts of arbitrary and self-centered powers and forces without interest in the well-being of others, God constitutes the ground to view life with respect, the Bible says. On closer analysis, God is entitled to be called a 'person', more than anyone else. Compared to God, we are limited and restricted. Therefore, the concept of personhood should not originate from our way of being. On the contrary, it is precisely God who teaches us what being a person entails. The respectful and friendly manner in which God relates to us illuminates our own personhood and makes it clear that we become a person by our respectful and responsible behavior towards each other. Those who manipulate, force, or abuse others simultaneously deny – from God's perspective – their own personhood and that of others. Manipulators might address others as 'you', but they do so in an atmosphere of threat and lack of recognition; a positive relationship cannot arise. Being-person calls for a movement and a being-moved that evokes ever-different attitudes and actions depending on the circumstances of the other. In the Bible, the personhood of God is spoken of in terms of the characteristics or the qualities that are attached to it: mildness, compassion, devotion to justice. A focus on the other and mutuality are not qualities that are added to God's personhood at a later stage. God is 'naturally' or 'essentially' characterized by these. God's personhood is the opposite of self-centered life. His attention for others is fundamental. God evokes freedom, connects, rejects coercion, and so forth.

Once again it turns out that experiencing God and thinking of God are not easy: simplistic images and concepts that God should comply with tend to sneak in. Thus God becomes

someone distant for example, or aloof. If the idea of God's omnipotence is added, the almost automatic assumption arises that 'He will surely do this or that for me.' Whoever thinks of God in this vein, forgets that God is powerful in servitude and unpretentious goodness. Every characteristic or qualification that the Bible attributes to God makes us think and act indefinitely. God's personhood is at odds with the tendency to be preoccupied with one's own singular self. Our inclination to equate personhood with the particular and the individual in which the particular is often obsessed with self-preservation makes this hard to understand. God breaks with the opposition of this over and against that, of this one person over and against another, and does not seek the glorification of self: God opens us for one another.

As Father, Son, and Spirit

There are three moments in God, which interconnect and mutually refer to each other. These are: 1) Creativity that invites a free response, 2) Communication that is based on reciprocity without any form of self-centeredness, 3) A dynamics that is passionate and strong but mild and gentle at the same time. Even though these moments are already present in the Old Testament, they are more prominent in the New Testament where Jesus phrases them as Father, Son, and Spirit. Not once are they thought of as self-sufficient subjects.

In this light, Christians not only exclaim 'Oh God', but also 'Oh Father, oh Son, oh Holy Spirit', which intensifies their 'Oh God'. They are simultaneously aware of a creative Presence, of the memory of Jesus, and of animated inspiration; i.e. they realize that a Presence surrounds them, lives and moves in them. This Presence has become visible and recognizable in Jesus and it wants to fill their hearts ever more intensely with a Spirit of unity and peace. These three names and forms of Presence do not divide up in three separate parts: they merge into one another and should be understood in relation to each other. The nature of their unity will only be fully clarified at the end of times, according to the New Testament. Until then, the idea should be avoided that the Father is the real god: it would diminish the intensity of Gods concern with life and once again suggest a distant God. Jesus does the exact opposite and frankly speaks of and prays to Abba/Father and seeks his Presence during his nightly prayers. He calls himself the Son and declares, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14,11); "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10,30); "All things have been delivered to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is, except the Father, and who the

Father is, except the Son, and he to whomever the Son desires to reveal him" (Lk 10,22).

The name ***Father*** refers to the manner in which the Source of life creates freedom and communication; this goes beyond the compulsive, the systematic, the naturally necessary, and the arbitrary. From his pure benevolence and unceasing faithfulness, God embraces the world with care, attention, compassion, forgiveness, and affection. By starting with the name of the Father, it is prevented that the Son and the Spirit are seen as purely the work of man; God is not a lofty term for human or other creatures. It also implies that human impotence and sinfulness are not first and foremost, neither is the ethos of selfishness. God is a never-ending source of comforting and encouraging creativity. The Bible even declares that nothing is too hard for God (Gen 18,14; Lk 1,37; Mk 10,27). This pronouncement is not an indication of arbitrariness: it rests on the experience of the old and the new Israel that God searches for the lost sheep in all sorts of creative ways.

The name ***Son*** refers to the experiences of the disciples of Jesus whenever their rabbi abides by the way in which God's deeds in history are described in the Torah. At those times, Jesus underlines that the God of Israel, full of promise and concern, requires fundamental choices of himself and of his disciples. God is not creatively present without at the same time begging for a response. Jesus as the Son conforms to God's way of being. The Son is a side of God Himself, which becomes manifest the moment that Jesus (or anyone else in view of him or following him) answers God's call and becomes a faithful covenant partner. The intimacy between Jesus and the Father wants to spread all around and wants to effect solidarity in, with, and among all of reality.

Wherever this faithfulness flourishes, the ***Spirit*** comes alive and God happens in us. We do *not* become God, but we become patient, kind, good, and as gentle as God and we rise above hatred, discord, and envy (cf. Gal 5,22-23). It is Spirit when warmth dispels the chill, when the withered comes to life, when strained relations relax (Cf. the hymn *Veni, sancte Spiritus*).

Christian living is grounded in the fundamental awareness that we only become human in the sphere of Father, Son, Spirit. Full of wonder that we enjoy the attention of a Source of compassion and mercy that is greater than our heart, that has seen us before we were even born, as the poet puts it. God is involved in the striving for unity (peace), truth (communication in freedom and respect), goodness (justice), beauty (the symphony of different

sounds and colors). But also in the protest against exploitation and abuse: *All men shall be free!* (Martin Luther King). This calls for protest against tyranny and the willingness to live for peace and harmony. Jesus, while calling out for God and speaking of Father, Son, and Spirit, does not allow himself to be led to slaughter like a docile lamb.
His charges against those who claim to be in power and his silence when face to face with Pilatus (Mk 15,5) probably say more about his experience of God than the words and the

names that he uses. The names Father-Son-Spirit refer to the creative and merciful process that wants to fill all of life with "I'll be there for you". In this perspective, Christians view the origin, the here and now, and the future of this divine Presence. It goes hand in hand with a critical outlook on those who thrive on the abuse of power. Belief in Father-Son-Spirit does not require us to step outside reality: it entails a specific way of getting mixed up in what is happening around us and inside of us.

We are still in the process of getting out of the dead-end streets of idolatry. Often we cannot think of God in any other way than as an omnipotent majesty, unconcerned about the cries of distress of those who suffer of hunger, violence, exploitation, or abuse. Whereas, according to the Bible, the reality of God has to do with unselfish benevolence that will light up here and there, in one person today and in another tomorrow, and wants to pervade all reality. With God's love for the human race filling the entire world as its hopeful perspective.

This cannot go together with the worship of gods that maintain that everyone is a separate reality in itself, each "locked up in the callus of his own apartheid".[3] Resisting such gods is not an easy feat. The good life does not come all by itself; it requires whole-hearted agreement. Our individuality offers stiff resistance and tempts us to place ourselves above others and regard them as competitors. Thus life turns into war, often in the name of God – even though this god differs from the God of Jesus. Unfortunately, also his disciples were inclined to kneel for gods that promise control over others and that are not into unpretentiousness and helpfulness (Mk 10,35-40).

In Christian liturgy, the opening "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" is immediately followed by the confession that we are unable to go along with this "I'll be there for you" on our own. This is not a depressing confession of sin but rather a state of being that we hope to rise above thanks to the presence of the three Names Father-Son-Spirit that awaken in us a longing for peace and unity among people. This hope and longing are not to be fulfilled at the end of time: we are meant to be touched by the dynamics here and now. Nonetheless, our behavior often contradicts it. The dynamics of God seem to surpass our own capabilities. This experience causes us to call ourselves sinners, not yet person in the image of God. It is quite difficult to neither overestimate nor underestimate ourselves. In the ideal Christian perspective, God's involvement does not lead to an absolute deification of life, of the world, of ourselves. Nevertheless, we have to keep trying to go along with God, grateful for His inspiration and full of wonder at the opportunities that we are given. This wonder is beautifully expressed in Psalm 8,4: "What is man, that you think of him? The son of man, that you care for him?"

The names 'Father, Son, Spirit' open up surprising perspectives in the Bible. God in His unselfishness wants to be all in all and make all into the image of His own compassion and solicitude. When the New Testament speaks of Father, Son, and Spirit, these are the

perspectives that open up. We live by the grace of an inexhaustible, creative Presence that longs to uplift life, to enable solidarity and peace (***Father***). In Israel, in the Church, and also outside the Jewish-Christian horizon this God, who was fully present in Jesus the ***Son***, is reflected in bits and pieces. In the hope that all dimensions of life will be pervaded with the **Spirit**. In this sense the Bible speaks of God's Reign and omnipotence. The way that God wants to become present in our midst is at odds with the attitude of rulers and tyrants. The Reign of God is in line with the love for humanity that inspired Jesus and with the sphere of the Spirit. When what has hardened will soften, when what is frozen starts flowing, when the cold heart warms again, God is ever so close.

This should not be pictured too romantically. After all, in many statues, paintings, and frescoes of the Holy Trinity the Son is emphatically portrayed as the Crucified. The glory of God cannot be conceived without the death of the Son, without the identification with people who are burdened with suffering and powerlessness. The Risen One still bears the stigmata. Once again it turns our thinking about God upside down. But at the same time, it is evident that cynicism, injustice, and death do not have the final word in times of distress: sympathy, compassion, and loyalty do. This spontaneously raises questions such as: When will the earth be renewed? When will the Resurrected Christ return in all His glory? This is already an issue in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, the oldest Christian writing. It continues to be. In the meantime the Son asks us to carry the Cross of history together with him and move towards peace, which often seems so far off. The Crucified One challenges us to go further than we believe we can go. We still do not really understand all that much, often feeling our way like blind people, while praying to become the image of God, the way He is, yearns, and acts. In the image of God who is not a part of our reality, but a Presence in our reality, without ever converging with it. With the characteristics of Father, Son, and Spirit, in other words: creative, delivering, and inspiring. Of this God Saint Paul says, "in Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17,28). To this God we pray when we experience creativity, deliverance, and inspiration to be lacking in ourselves or around us. Fumbling, in the hope that once again we will find God. Convinced that He is not far from any of us (cf. Acts 17,27).

Montfort's *Prayer for Missionaries*

In *The Prayer for Missionaries*, Montfort often speaks of Father, Son, and Spirit. He does so full of ardency, zest, and passion. His attitude indicates how he sees and experiences God. The tone and the atmosphere in which he uses these names express an intuition in the line of Pascal's famous phrase, "Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". We could also say: of Jesus, of Isaiah, of the Psalms. Montfort is touched by the way in which God is named and experienced in the Bible. In what his prayers say about Father-Son-Spirit, his conviction that God is concerned with people is evident. He sees God's presence in the words and deeds of Jesus, in the way in which the angel speaks to Mary, in which Paul writes about the Spirit that wants to come alive in people. This God is the ground that carries him and his perspective for the future. It makes him wonder and keeps surprising him. Not because God is incomprehensible, but because the Name or the Names of God keep occupying his thoughts and actions.

Montfort emphasizes God's glory. The word 'God' almost immediately triggers thoughts of a lofty Majesty, and he feels unworthy and incompetent to say much about God (cf. TD 83). An attitude of humility and reserve is in order here. Nonetheless he immediately adds that God feels pity for us and that God's majesty is characterized by mildness, gentleness, and compassion. It lends a different color and meaning to God's exaltation. God's majesty exalts people without them becoming too big for their boots. His entire life, Montfort has wondered how humility and self-esteem can go together.

The *Prayer for Missionaries* starts with a reference to the passionate Psalm 74, which was written during the exile of Israel in Babylon: When will this sadness end? Montfort reads the psalm in light of the deplorable state of (Christian) living in his days. In the face of God, he comments on life as it is, there and then. He does not pray in an aloof or theoretical manner, but concretely and keenly aware of the actual situation of people, the poor in the first place. With the psalmist he recalls how God is engaged in life. The Psalm ends as follows: "Arise, God! Plead your own cause. Remember how the foolish mock you all day. Don't forget the voice of your adversaries. The tumult of those who rise up against you ascends continually" (Ps 74, 22-23). With the Psalmist, Montfort is convinced that God has been gathering, assembling, uniting from the beginning: not dividing and driving apart. Not individualism and isolation are the ideal. God's intentions become apparent, with ups and downs, in the

history of Israel, which dramatically culminates in the death of Jesus. Within this horizon, Montfort addresses God. He underlines that God means mercy (PM 1-2). What this entails, he specifies in three adjectives that characterize the Father: almighty, good, and just (PM 3-5). Then he addresses Jesus (PM 6-14), the Son who reflects mercy. Finally, he prays to the Holy Spirit (PM 15) who keeps inspiring the history of striving for justice and compassion in our midst. When Montfort speaks of God in a prayerful manner, it is these three names with their Biblical connotations that he has in mind. Likewise, when he sees Providence at work (PM 24), another word that points at God's solicitude. In the final part (PM 30) the "God of might, mercy, and justice" returns. The names Father, Son, Spirit are now filled with new content: in their unity they color Montfort's view of God.

When, in *The Prayer for Missionaries*, Montfort appeals to God's creative and inspiring engagement with life, he thinks of the Baptist who declares that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from stones, i.e.: people who go the Biblical way (in Mt 3,9. In H 96,1 he sings, "I submit entirely to your Providence my soul, my body and my freedom". Convinced of God's presence, not even death can scare Montfort. Hymn 28 about Providence (H 28) emphasizes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in which he points at the total lack of anxiety of the birds and the flowers (Mt 6,25-34). Montfort has a great trust in the active solicitude of God for people. He counts on the silent workings of God in the people he encounters. He trusts that God appeals to them more strongly than they can imagine. From this, he draws the conclusion in the *Rule* that his followers should not strive for a steady income and possessions. They have to believe that God will inspire other people to offer them food and shelter. This is how strong his confidence is in God's presence in and through people.

That God is no distant entity for Montfort also becomes evident in the following passage: "In the pursuit of man, he hastens along the highways, or scales the loftiest mountain peaks, or waits at the city gates, or goes into the public squares, and among the gatherings of people, proclaiming at the top of his voice, '*You children of men, it is you I have been calling so persistently; it is you I am addressing; it is you I desire and seek; it is you I am claiming. Listen, draw close to me, for I want to make you happy*'" (LEW 66). "Nothing gives him [Wisdom] more pleasure than to communicate himself" (LEW 90) and to "give all the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (LEW 99). This happens in particular during Eucharist when the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are celebrated (LEW 70-71). In Montfort's view, God lights up in

a way of life that is free of haste, inconstancy, and the desire for power and prestige. God brings forth other ways of living. Who and what God is for Montfort becomes evident in the way he lives and behaves. His belief in God raises the question who he is as a person and whether he follows the Gospel of Jesus. In his deeds, Montfort wishes to become a real and actual sign of God's wholehearted mercy. In this he feels secure, and this security is the source of his assertiveness. In the name of God he approaches life with wonder, gratitude, and dedication, fighting against anxiety and the megalomania that exerts itself in himself and in those around him.

Montfort is confident that the horizon of life does not start with himself, but with the inexhaustible source of mercy, compassion, sympathy, and pity called God. In order to come close to God he must let go of himself, not trust his own self and its desires. Only then will he become creative and place himself in the service of a Presence that is greater than he is. He entrusts himself to the creativity of the Father, unites with the disposition of Jesus, and allows himself to be moved by the fire of the Spirit. In this sense he prays his *Prayer for Missionaries*. This does not imply that human activity is insignificant. It is just that, "If man is the first to put his hand to the work, nothing will come of it" (PM 26). For Montfort God is the first.

The Christian tradition cherishes a creative Nearness that will point us towards the Kingdom of God as it has become visible in Jesus the Son, and towards the quality of life that is brought forth by the Spirit. Those who are baptized are initiated in Fatherly nearness, as followers of the Son, touched by the Spirit who begs and prays in their hearts. The Bible outlines the ways in which the baptized can become ever more the image of God. The New Testament, especially the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, calls this a mystery.

Not in the sense that it is something entirely incomprehensible. Something only becomes a real mystery if it intrigues us, speaks to us; if the wonder and the admiration keep us moving and thinking, time and again. The Christian mystery appeals to us and our understanding of it should grow from day to day. It is comprehensible in an inexhaustible way. No different than calling another person an inexhaustible mystery: he or she is a source of wonder that never stops intriguing. This is even truer for God! The implication, content, and impact of 'I believe in God: Father, Son, and Spirit' cannot be grasped immediately.

Without the Biblical context in which these words and names were born, their meanings are impossible to capture. They only mean something if someone goes along with the prayers in which they are mentioned, the stories in which they are used, the silence in which they are cherished. In short, for those who are familiar with Scripture and the liturgical atmosphere in which is it read. That is why in the Early Church one was baptized only after a certain level of understanding was achieved of the Bible and the attitude it implies toward life.

Reaching the end of this chapter does not mean that all has been said about God. The following chapters will elaborate. Just as it is with the Creed: only after the last word the groundwork has been laid.

CHAPTER 3

The way of Jezus

What life with God concretely entails, becomes evident when Saint Peter says that one should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2,38). His life is characterized by his baptism in the Jordan River, to which he has remained faithful up through his death. Saint Paul underlines that Jesus' way is one of servitude and – if interpreted the right way – of slavery even.

As stated in Chapter 1, the missionary activities of Montfort are within the framework of the renewal of baptismal vows. He readily agrees with the Council of Trent that through baptism a person is freed from original sin (H 109,8), but he does not elaborate on the theological background and implications. He is mainly concerned with the consequences of baptism in everyday life. These entail briefly and to the point: no longer lending one's ear and heart to the devil, but living life as a follower of Jesus Christ (TD 68, 73, 126, 238). In this context, Montfort concentrates, like Paul in Rom 6, on the death of Jesus and points in connection therewith to the need for self-denial, renunciation of the world and of self (LEW 194). This chapter elaborates on the approach of Montfort. Firstly, it will deal with the baptism of Jesus, which is the start of his public appearance according to the Synoptic Gospels and determines his future path of life up through his death. Thus we hope to present Montfort's intentions by means of Biblical images and terms that better suit the sentiments and the language of our time.

Baptism in the Jordan River

After having reminded us of the activities of the Baptist (Mk 1,4-8) Saint Mark says, "It happened in those days…" (Mk 1,9). That is typically Biblical terminology. The Bible does not depart from abstract universal speculations, but from what is happening here and there, in a concealed or conspicuous manner. Another understanding of life arises, if we allow

ourselves to be led by such noteworthy events instead of general intellectual truths. In Mk 1,9, the attention is drawn to the historical, particular Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee who is baptized by the equally historical, particular John. In a specific location: the Jordan, the river that Joshua crossed to enter the Promised Land, the river that Elijah passed on his way to heaven and also the river in which Naaman was cleansed. One has to be rooted firmly in the Old Testament to note these kinds of connections.

The Baptist declares in Mk 1,8, "I baptized you in water, he [Jesus] will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." In the Old Testament reference to the Spirit means that it is not just business as usual. It implies something new and important: to fulfillment or to fullness will come what the name God as given to Moses, "I will be there for you", entails. With eschatological intensity, since it concerns the Holy Spirit that will be given in the fullness of times. Jesus' coming up out of the water (Mk 1,10) literally reminds of the people that came up out of the water (Josh 4,19), after the priests carrying the ark of the Covenant had stepped down into the water (Josh 3,15). 'Coming up out of' is a technical term for entering the Promised Land. The term arouses Messianic hope. The Messianic prospects of the prophets wish to suffuse the land like morning dew. There can, will, and must be made room for justice and compassion in the name of the Present One. According to Lk 3,21, Jesus prays during baptism; most likely with the intensity and the deep hope of the Lord's Prayer.

In order to understand what happens during Jesus' baptism, we should be attentive to the many details in the texts. First of all, Jesus solidarizes with the wretched situation of Israel; like the prophets before him, he stands up for people in distress. He joins those who are baptized in order to be granted forgiveness of sins (Mk 1,4) or to be raised above their powerlessness. "Tax collectors and soldiers" for example, as Luke (3,12-14) clarifies. In response to the Baptist's call for renewal. According to Mt 3,15, Jesus is baptized "to fulfill all righteousness", in the line of the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5,17). It is what God's forgiveness and human repentance are aimed at: doing justice in all dimensions of life. Without reserve, Jesus agrees with God's desire for Israel to start this new way of life. But that is not all. Mt 12,17-21 says, by means of a quote from Isaiah 42, that the fulfillment of justice will extend to all peoples. That is why the disciples are sent to the end of the earth at the end of the Gospel (Mt 28,18-20).

As soon as Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens parting (Mk 1,10). Mt 3,16

adds, “He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him.” Lk 3,22 has the dove descend “in bodily form”, in order to emphasize that the Spirit comes down into the unruliness of life on earth. Hence, not an esoteric, other-worldly sentiment is concerned, but an actual liberating nearness to those who are imprisoned in their fears, worries, and imperfections.

Then comes a voice from heaven that says, “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mk 1,11). This Voice will continue to accompany Jesus from then on. It gives him courage and strength. He is supported by a melody that sings to him, ‘I will take you by the hand, make you a man after my heart, you are important to me, I am glad that you are here.’ Like a declaration of love, these words resonate in Jesus for a long time. They will stay with him in an encouraging, confirming, and consoling way. The words are joyous as well since his own name and those of his disciples are noted in heaven and since all sorts of ordinary people open up for his preaching (Lk 10,20-21).

Jesus is proclaimed as the protagonist of the repentance that the Baptist demands, as the one in whom the new times commence. The meaning and the scope of this proclamation becomes evident, when Jesus rejects the Tempter in the desert immediately after. It sharply distinguishes his appointment as Messiah, Son of Man, or Son of God from miracle workers, religious fools, and the power-mad. The aforementioned proclamation, together with the descending of the Spirit, goes beyond John’s baptism. The repentance does not rest on the will or the effort of human beings or on their fear of God’s judgment, but on the Father’s loving promise and the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

When the Voice calls Jesus “the Son”, its being the voice of the Father is suggested. Therefore the scene of his baptism is surrounded by the presence of Father, Son, and Spirit. This presence comes “from heaven”, i.e. thanks to the grace of God. ‘Heaven’ should not be taken as a space beyond the earth. It is precisely on earth that something is happening, in this world, at the Jordan River. Intending to touch all of life and change it for the better. In the way that Jesus approaches life and people: as the Son of the Father thanks to the Spirit that touches and fulfills him. ‘Father, Son, and Spirit’ in the New Testament refers to the nearness of a divine Voice, to a divine person, and a divine attitude towards life.

The presence of Father, Son, and Spirit results in a new proclamation, from the mouth of Jesus this time: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, and

believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1,15). According to Lk 4,18, Jesus refers to Isaiah 61 in the synagogue of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me… to preach good tidings to the poor". Thus justice is fulfilled: this is what the baptism of Jesus intends. This is how he experiences his baptism, according to the Synoptics. From that moment in the Jordan onwards, he is supposed to help others leave their chaotic and hopeless situations behind, turn to the Kingdom of God, and take its yoke upon them. In Saint John's Gospel, which does not explicitly discuss Jesus' baptism, the Baptist calls him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From then on, without ever writing off someone in advance, Jesus sides with those who suffer from the fact that they are considered nobodies. Not to help them take power, but to never forget that they are worth the attention in God's eyes. In the hope that it will encourage them, without turning them into new potentates. Thus the Son represents the Father and the Spirit: with the humility of an unpretentious lamb that carries the burden of the world.

In the scene of the baptism of Jesus, it is not hindsight that he is concerned with, the sins of the Fathers or their failures and flaws. Without denying the miserable situation and the need for repentance, heaven opens. Life can start anew, without anyone lording it over others anymore. This is the way that everyone should undergo baptism. Jesus' instatement during baptism as protagonist of a new way of living is not exclusively his. Like Adam and Abraham he is the beginning of something new, a new humanity. He shows the way to the Kingdom of God. His words are called "the beginning" in Mk 1,1, the beginning of a new movement in Israel and elsewhere in the world.

At the moment of his contact with the Baptist, Jesus is found by God's promise, by the Spirit, and the dynamics of Messianic existence. From that day on, he steps forward with a prophetic attitude. He notices the sharp contrast between life in his days and how it is envisioned by God, according to the old prophets. In line with the Baptist, but with different emphasis, he does not resign himself to the existing situation. He not only calls for repentance, but emphatically shows what repentance entails: joyously doing justice, no matter what it takes. This new life can begin and tolerates no delay; the Kingdom of God is at hand.
Jesus solidarizes with those who are burdened with powerlessness, who lack courage, who are weighed down with prejudice, who deem themselves unimportant and worthless, who are caught in torrents of misery and threaten to drown in despair. He sides with those who

– actively or passively – yearn for a turn for the better. He becomes the minister of those who pray and beg for the strength to shake off of despondency, who long for a new life, and who no longer want to allow themselves to be weighed down by the burden, the despair, the defeats of the past.

He notices this yearning and hope in people, and he chooses their side. His solidarity stands in the tradition of the Voice in the Burning Bush that tells Moses that It is touched by the misery of slaves in Egypt. God – the creative ground and the luring horizon of life – is not high above people and their failures and distress. He knows how hard a time people can have with themselves and each other, with their mortality, their inertia, their fear, and their grief.

"I won't let you down, no matter what," God says (in my words – WL). "I will not stay on the sidelines or in heaven when you moan and sigh. I care about you. You are my creatures, after all. I have not given life for you to be all alone like an orphan, while I remain in high heaven. You are my children, my sons, my daughters. How could I ever forget you?" How far does this go?

> *Jesus takes the decision to receive the baptism by John. A decision out of humility… One distorts the scope of this deed and weakens it, if one sees it as an act of condescension: the person without sin mingling with the crowd of sinners in the water of the river, even though he definitely does not belong there. His real place is up above: benevolently he descends. If such were the nature of Jesus' humility, so would be God's. And so would Incarnation be: a 'virtuous' decision of the Almighty… Such a notion of humility is problematic. Humility is only pure, if not sought and desired as such. God's humility is God's way of being, and that of Jesus. God is in the sense of 'being with'. There is an abyss between 'being-with' and 'condescending'. Jesus does not condescend: he is with sinners. He does not leave his own position: he shows it to all. Precisely because he is without sin, his solidarity with sinful humanity is without a trace of condescension; it is total and true. There is no make-belief.*[4]

In this way Jesus solidarizes with those who turn to the Baptist in their distress. It demonstrates his deep understanding of the way people are. We might well be the most unstable of all creatures. No other creature is born as unstable and vulnerable as a human baby; it is premature, as it were. And during all of its life, it can suddenly be overcome by fear, desperation, dismay. In the name of God, as the Son, Jesus desires to be baptized with the children of man. They can count on him. He will not let them down. The power of the Spirit must become manifest by mercy, compassion, and solidarity.

Jesus does not cherish the Voice's declaration of solidarity as a privilege that only he enjoys. During the rest of his life, he will pass God's promise to him during baptism on to others. He believes that God is involved with every human being and every human being can be involved with God, listen to God, and go with God. Put differently: everyone can and may live in and out of a sphere of mercy, forgiveness, compassion, affection, loyalty, so-

lidarity. This is what Jesus has in mind when he speaks of God: an atmosphere, a climate, a space that is free of fear. In his opinion, God has to do with light, breath, space to live. What is most valuable for people is the fact that they may live in this atmosphere, even if they are ugly, wrinkled, not intelligent, poor, unemployed, of humble origin, a stranger. Every person can be involved with God, with this space of affection and this atmosphere of compassion.

It constitutes the meaning of life: being allowed to participate in loving, forgiving, uplifting, comforting. The appeal "try to be rich toward God" (Lk 12,21) concerns this world of magnanimity and mildness, a world in which one carries the other, a space in which giving and receiving becomes possible. Jesus is concerned that we start too low, that our horizon does not extend beyond food and drink, riches and possessions, career and power. This danger threatens all, both the poor and the rich. The rich tend to believe they amount to something on the basis of their possessions. The poor believe themselves to be equal to their bank balance: a zero. Jesus wants to liberate the rich whose view is blocked by their large bellies, and he wants to liberate the poor whose mirrors reflect mere good-for-nothings. True life, or the Kingdom of God, starts as soon as we discover our own dignity and that of others, as soon as we start to realize that deep joy in living only arises in a space of mercy and gentleness.

Jesus is not an apocalyptic who has given up hope in the world and is pessimistically waiting for the end of times. Whereas the Baptist speaks of God's wrath, Jesus preaches that God sees the affliction of his people (Ex 3,7-8). Whereas John baptizes in water to avert the oncoming wrath, Jesus baptizes in the Holy Spirit. Driven by the Spirit, he develops justice in a joyful manner. Thanks to the Voice and the Spirit, he feels free to make the most of the time he has been given, without worrying about the question where it will all end. His life is in the hands of God, and it is fine there. Because it takes the burden off his shoulders, he can devote his energies to what needs to be done here and now. He can concern himself with the distress of other people. With this life force that he has been given, he tries to go beyond boundaries. He walks, as it were, seven times around Jericho, that its walls of conceit and pettiness may fall down.

By being baptized, Jesus presents his State of the Union, as it were. He makes known what can be expected of him: solidarity, companionship, care, attention, encouragement, friendship in the name of God. Not only for the faithful, but for everybody: for tax collectors

or sinners, for Gentiles, for the diseased, the lepers, the deaf, the crippled, or the blind; in short: all the lost sheep. He takes the good-for-nothings by the hand, those from whom all work, care, and responsibility have been taken away. He wants to enable all to join in the care for life. Certainly, not everyone is able to contribute the same amount, but anyone can, like the poor widow, "cast in all the living that she has" (Lk 21,4). Jesus wants us all to come alive, to not just breathe, but to get plenty of room to do so, to not just vegetate but live with a joyful heart. He does not resign himself to the fact that lepers are excluded and that the blind and the crippled are considered second class. Disease is not a punishment: it is intimately connected with the frailty of the human condition and with all sorts of natural processes, and, unfortunately, with negligence from time to time. Jesus believes in better quality of life and increased solidarity: this is what he aims at when moving through the towns, villages, and hamlets of Galilee, crossing the Jordan River to the land of the Gerasenes (Mk 5,1), going to Tyre, Sidon, and Decapolis (Mk 7,31). And eventually he will go to Jerusalem, the city in which prophets are murdered.

To the very end

That the time of salvation has now come, as is Jesus' message in the New Testament, a newly baptized person can and dare not say on his or her own. This life task that comes with baptism, or the ethics of this new life, seems too much to ask for. Who dares to believe that he or she can live like this? Jesus raises us to a level that is beyond our reach as far as our self-knowledge goes. That is why the ground and the possibility of such a life is announced and promised in baptism. From then onwards, we live from the strength of the Spirit that originates in the Father and becomes visible in the Son. On this "alien" basis – it is God's and not our own – we can live with all our strength and with total abandon, even though the old Adam and the old days still remain. The latter still causes quite a number of questions, doubts, and trouble. A person who is baptized prays and begs, "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Please come quickly to my aid!" (Rev 22,20). Baptism is an "act in which we publicly declare that from now on we will ground our life in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. In other words: that we will not leave it at one singular symbolic moment, but that we will continue to be a sign of it and act on the basis of it."[5]

Life as a Christian is dangerous. Mk 1,14a alludes to this, saying, "After John was taken into

custody…" Such risks cannot be ruled out. On the contrary: it becomes worse when Mark says at the end of his first sketch of Jesus' actions in Galilee, "The Pharisees went out, and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him" (Mk 3,6). Whoever is baptized could end up in a situation that is serious and (life) threatening. It is Saint Paul, in particular, who emphasizes the risks involved. He emphatically relates baptism to the death and the resurrection of Christ and states that Christians should not avoid difficulties in life, and ultimately even confront death. This theology of martyrdom, however, should not 'get out of hand'; it should remain in line with the way in which Jesus wanted to do justice. The conclusion that Jesus draws from his baptism does not turn him into a zealous Utopian, but into a practical man, in touch with real life. Only if push comes to shove and a crisis seems inevitable, one who is baptized should, like Jesus, not be afraid to die. It is in such circumstances, that Paul says to the Sanhedrin, with Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's visions of the end of time and the resurrection of Jesus in mind, "Concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" (Acts 23,6) or to Agrippa, "Now I stand here to be judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers" (Acts 26,6-7).

Things will not be easy for the baptized, but the passion for justice will not leave them in peace. Their situation will resemble that of Jesus who says, "I came to set the earth on fire,

and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over! Do you suppose that I came to bring peace to the world? No, not peace, but division" (Lk 12, 49-51). Baptism is not something that you receive and then leave behind. No, it is something you have to live up to for the rest of your life. "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Lk 9,23). From the day of his baptism, Jesus goes in a direction, the consequences of which will become ever more manifest. It forms the start of a new stage in his life. Gone are the quiet days in Nazareth. He is thrown in the middle of turbulent, merciless, rough life. He is confronted with the misfortunes of many who are looked down upon, suffer from inferiority complexes, or cannot find a way out of life's hunger and poverty. He concerns himself with the situation of people with downcast eyes and sagging shoulders. He cannot just shrug and pass them as if he does not see, as if there is nothing he can do. The immersion in the Jordan River implies that he has to side with the poor with all his heart, all his soul, and all his strength. Their fate becomes his; their worries concerning their daily bread become his. However… *he* may not despair.

Even so, Jesus says, "I have a baptism to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over". The Greek '*sunechomai*' refers to a sense of being shut in and unable to breathe. He feels tied down; it is hard to walk; he is burdened. Can his shoulders handle this? He feels driven into a corner. He does not receive baptism somewhere in a secluded place, but right in the middle of real life. He is suffering. However, he is haunted by the memory of that moment with John the Baptist. He calls out, "I came to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Baptism turns him into a prophet who does not avoid injustice, a wise man who unrelentingly uncovers the cowardice of people, a lawyer who defends the poor man in court, a health worker who objects when his coworkers send the patients home at five.

In Mk 10,37, James and John ask the favor of sharing in Jesus' glory. He answers, "You don't really know what you're asking! Are you able to drink from the cup that I must soon drink from or be baptized as I must be baptized?" (Mk 10,38). In Jerusalem he has to testify to peace and justice and break the cycle of oppression, violence, and discord. Not by threatening with more violence or shouting down zealots and fundamentalists, but by opening his heart for the word of the prophets as an unpretentious, poor man, who has understood that injustice and violence ruin life. Without harboring illusions, he goes to Jerusalem. He will not shy away from the consequences but sing his song, even when they will try to silence

him. Jesus is no fool, no other-worldly romantic without common sense. He knows that those who welcome him with Hosannas today may well betray him tomorrow. Nonetheless, he does not choose the safe position of those who keep quiet. Thus it is obvious once more what his baptism really means to him: a radical choice for another way of life, going the way of peace and justice every day even when life is rough, when people laugh at you, and even if they may crucify you for it.

Whoever is baptized together with Jesus should live the way he has: without feeling superior, without hiding in self-pity, without violence, hatred, and racism. Whoever is baptized should become a servant or helper and take up the yoke of peace and justice, each and every morning. Baptism is a radical event, full of consequences. The baptized will not have an easy time of it. Being baptized in the Name of the Father, the Spirit, and the Son implies being reminded of Jesus' path of life to the very end. At the same time, one testifies of great trust in the power of the Messianic Spirit that wants to suffuse the entire world. Being baptized implies "no longer being someone who acts the way everyone else does; no, becoming someone who stands up for others".[6] In his nearness to sinners, Jesus has shown us how to live His way of life.

In the life orientation that baptism initiates the baptized are not alone. Whoever is baptized and placed within the horizon of the merciful and forgiving God enjoys the company of Jesus who does not abandon people even when they cannot live up to expectations. This becomes evident at Easter, when he wishes peace to disciples who have failed. The space of compassion and forgiveness is already there before anything is even expected of the baptized. It should also come to meet them in other baptized persons who all together form the *familia Dei*.

As a slave

Whereas the Gospels start their theologies of baptism at the Jordan River and end with the death and the resurrection of Jesus, Saint Paul starts with Jesus' death and resurrection. From the very onset, he lets there be no mistake about the meaning of baptism. Perhaps this has to do with his personal history. After all, close to Damascus the persecutor of Christians hears, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" A little later, he is told by Ananias how much he will have to suffer for Christ's sake (Acts 9,14-16). His fate will be identical to that of

Christ: as soon as he starts to proclaim Him, the Jews immediately conspire to kill him (Acts 9,23). Paul is convinced that he shares in the suffering and dying Christ and in his resurrection. And as such he characterizes the existence of every Christian, "Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death? When we were baptized, we died and were buried with Christ. We were baptized, so that we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father" (Rom 6,3-4). How radical this is, becomes evident in his subsequent words, "For though at one time you were slaves to sin, you have obeyed with all your heart the truths found in the teaching you received. You were set free from sin and became the slaves of righteousness" (Rom 6, 17-18).

How far this goes is testified in the song that Paul quotes in Phil 2,5-11 in support of his explanation of the right way of life and the correct behavior for Christians:

> *Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider it robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, yes, the death of the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (World English Bible, version 16-2-2002)*

This text has always caused much discussion among exegetes. The translation usually gives away the translator's interpretation. Based on the approach of Heiko Wojtkowiak[7] on the one hand and Montfort's use of this text in some of his writings (*Letter to the Friends of the Cross* 16 and 38, LEW 223, and TD 72) on the other, it can be paraphrased as follows:

> *Jesus was convinced that he was created in the image of God and that he proclaimed the Word of God. However, his attitude differed from the Roman rulers who imagined themselves God's equals, who robbed the being of God and demanded to be honored and worshipped as God. Jesus resolutely distanced himself from their theology and the accompanying overestimation of self. He became a poor man who did not put himself above others. He became as humble as a slave. Even the*

death on the Cross – for the mocking Romans a sign of his foolishness – he has suffered of his own free will, in order to bear witness to God's solidarity with all those who are banished and murdered, for whatever reason. Jesus was appointed as the Son, and exalted by the right hand of God, and thus God expressed his approval. Whoever wants to be somebody must follow Jesus' example and consider him "Dominus" (the Roman title for the emperor). Only thus can a person honor God and be the image of God.

The point is that Jesus does not depart from the characteristics that we spontaneously attribute to God: power and glory. He has radically broken with such a concept of God. In the school of Israel he has learned that God associates and identifies with the poor. This is what Jesus has done by means of his sympathy and compassion. He has shifted his focus away from himself and has concentrated instead on identification with those who had become the slaves of others against their will. That Judas has sold him for thirty pieces of silver – as a slave – is telling. In a humble manner he has descended into a state of slavery that robs people of their dignity. By means of this solidarity, he proves to be *Dominus*/Lord and gives a new definition of Lord-ship. In the hope that life will become truly Messianic, full of the Spirit of God, without one 'lording it over' the other.

The exaltation of Jesus is not the reward for his servitude, after which he is allowed to ascend the throne as an emperor: it is rather the confirmation and perpetuation of his willingness to sacrifice his life for others. In 1Cor 1,18-25 this is called 'the folly of the Cross', in which the wisdom and the power of God are revealed. In Jesus' humble servitude unto death, God's love of humanity and the human experience of God based on it culminate in an unexpected manner: God is humility, and so is an authentic human being. Not once does Jesus have the desire to have power over others. With confidence, God can entrust him with His Kingdom.

This theology and anthropology only remain valid, if God is not interested in domination. Its ultimate basis or ground is that God is not interested in exerting power, but shows himself to be the servant or the slave of others. Christians should think of God in terms of Jesus who has served others as a slave. According to Gerhard Ebeling, the song of Paul says:

> *At first sight, Jesus' looks have nothing to do with the way we imagine God… All the same, solidarity with people originating from love or the willingness to take their situation upon oneself without being hindered by self-love is no indication that the Divine is given up or that God is entirely absent. On the contrary, God's presence as love can be experienced here – in a way that invites us to start thinking differently.*[8]

This calls for a radical change in perception, judgment, and action. Only then, the appearing *Umwertung* (revaluation) of all values makes it possible to "be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Phil 2,2). A fundamental change in the understanding of God and life is concerned. The servitude of the slave resembles God's nature and His way of being. At the center is the provocative insight that God and his Messiah identify with the poor and the suffering. This has consequences for the ideas about the who, the what, the where, and the when of God. In Saint Paul's opinion, the death of Jesus on the Cross expresses the heart of God – a folly in our eyes. But only thus, and in no other way, becomes manifest how we should understand the power of God: being present in the most impossible situations, to ensure that no one in such situations will feel abandoned by God. The ostensibly weak presence of God, sitting with the humiliated and despondent human being, is a sign of a very peculiar kind of strength. Those who want to reflect upon strength and power should start here.

The Christian tradition maintains that it is not the Father or the Spirit, but rather the Son who has taken the suffering upon himself and has died as a slave. In order to prevent the death of Jesus from becoming the end of God's history with humanity, or even the death of God. After all, there is an unimaginable creativity in the solidarity of Jesus, grounded in his trust in the Father and in his faith in the power of the Spirit. Wherever such trust and faith are present, weakness becomes power, and folly becomes strength. But we have to be careful here: it does not imply that God should be sought somewhere far beyond human distress. Precisely in the most profound distress, God's solidary presence is stronger than the death that can be brought upon others by tyrants and potentates. But this power of God is of an entirely different nature than that of those in (worldly) power. Since our thinking often starts with this worldly type of power, we have a hard time understanding the power of God.

That is why the death of Jesus is followed by Silent Saturday. A day of silence, of holding back, of meditating on the question, 'Do you understand what has happened?' Only on the third day do the words return that were heard during Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved Son". God identifies with the suffering and dying Jesus – against those powers that want to silence him forever and want to crush his Good News. Easter does not put an end to God's descending and humble movement. On the contrary, it is made permanent. The theology that arises does not triumphantly avert its eyes from human distress. How we should think the weakness and the strength of God, we realize at those times that "the courage to be a humble servant" is stronger in and among us – to our amazement and thanks be to God – than brute force and the desperation that is caused by it.

While dying, Jesus definitively lets go of the God of the powers and abandons himself entirely to "I will be there for you". In anticipation of this and as a sign, he has washed the feet of his disciples. He 'emptied himself' (*'kenosis'*) in order to deliver us from the temptation to deny our own frailty and that of others and seek safety in the will to lord it over others and glorify ourselves. While dying, Jesus gives testimony to a God for whom life is not based on controlling anything or anyone, but on respect and solicitude. The other is approached in an attitude of benevolence that has left all sense of superiority behind. In the awareness that not possessing and ruling, but attentive presence and 'letting be' are the deepest core of life. Such an art of living does not come easy, but it will fill those who are open to it with joy, hope, and gratitude. In the line of postmodern philosophers such as Gianni Vattimo, Mark C. Taylor, Jacques Derrida, and John Caputo, such an art of living has been called an "impossible possibility".[9] Hence not self-evident. But can there be another pathway to the future?

CHAPTER 4

The way of Mary

While dying, Jesus draws the beloved disciple's attention to his mother. Who is this woman? In the Gospel of Luke she is emphatically involved in his birth and youth. According to John, she is present at the wedding in Cana and underneath the Cross. Later she awaits the Spirit in the company of the apostles. The end of this chapter discusses the resemblance between her way and the way Jesus has gone during and after his baptism. Hence, it is not surprising that after the ritual of baptism someone is dedicated to Mary.

Mary is mentioned in the New Testament because of the intense way in which she experiences God and looks at the world and at people around her. Not strictly historical facts are concerned, but her faithful attitude towards life. The texts reflect the remembrance of her life and the encounters with her in the Early Church. It is in light of her life in the footsteps of Jesus ending underneath the Cross and of her position in the circle of his disciples that she is spoken of. Luke's words about the Annunciation, Visitation, and Magnificat (Lk 1,26-56) show us his perspective on her attitude towards life. To her, as the culmination of faith in Israel, he draws attention in the first chapter of the Gospel, which Jesus has embodied with great public impact. This chapter seeks to unfold the diaconal picture that the Bible draws of Mary. This approach differs considerably from the one that started a century ago and that has focused mainly on Mary's glory and privileges.

Annunciation – Visitation – Magnificat

During the **Annunciation**, God takes the initiative. Gabriel is His spokesman, and his name indicates that God is a friend who stands by you in good times and in bad times. In this sense the angel greets Mary, "The Lord is with you" (Lk 1,28). Mary is startled: in light of Scripture, she knows this will not be without implication. Isaiah, for example, cries

out during the story of his calling, "Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Armies!" (Isa 6,5). Uncleanliness does not refer to sin, but it recognizes the fact that a human being is only human. How can a human being become bearer of God's presence? Jeremiah reacts in the same vein in the story of his calling, "Ah, Lord Yahweh! Behold, I don't know how to speak; for I am a child", and the Lord answers, "Don't be afraid because of them; for I am with you to deliver you" (Jer 1,6.8). Also Mary responds that she is only human. The angel reassures her, "The Lord will be with you".

The meaning of the calling of Mary becomes evident in the name that she is supposed to give to her child: "Jesus", which means "God saves." This name indicates a life assignment: he needs to become king in the line of David, i.e. on behalf of others. This is how she should view her child and stay near to it. When she shies away and objects that she has not had intercourse with a man or that she is still too young, Gabriel brings up the Holy Spirit, i.e. the possibilities of God. Mary should not side with the pessimists who say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off" (Ez 37,11). She must take the creativity that emanates from God seriously. She consents, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to your word" (Lk 1,38). This agreement or promise is in the line of the response of Abigail when David proposes to her, "Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord" (1 Sam 25,41). Mary declares that in such an attitude of servitude she will receive, carry, and stand by her child. Not purely on her own: she would not get far. But because she trusts in God for whom nothing is impossible (Lk 1,37).

Luke puts the dialogue with the angel in a revealing context. It is the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elisabeth who says about her own situation, "Now at last the Lord has helped me. He has taken away my public disgrace!" (1,25). Her disgrace resembles the situation of many in Israel at the beginning of the first century. Mary also makes this connection towards the end of the Magnificat, "He (God) has come to the help of his servant Israel" (1,54). God does not let down the ones that are disgraced.

'Eliseba' is the name of Mary's relative, which means "God is my fullness." This name indicates how Elisabeth has to live: full of God, moved by God's compassion. What this means, becomes clear the moment that the child in her womb leaps for Messianic joy and jubilant delight (44; cf. Jesus' rejoicing in Lk 10,21). Despite the name that she has been

given, Elisabeth is astonished that the mother of the Lord or of the Messiah comes to care for her. Is she worth it? Mary sees and feels that she is. In everyone she encounters, she wants to bring about a Messianic jubilant joy in which suffering and sadness are not denied, but – as in the Magnificat – interpreted as the labor pains of Messianic times. Elisabeth says that Mary's greeting has reached her ears (cf. Rom 10,17: "Faith comes from hearing") and caused movement in her womb. She is truly deeply touched. The **Visitation** concerns a real meeting. Not just a chance and fleeting encounter. For three months Mary stays with and takes care of her relative. As long as in 2 Sam 6,11: "The ark of Yahweh remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months: and Yahweh blessed Obed-edom, and all his house". As the Ark of the Covenant, Mary carries the presence of the Lord with her. More than ever before, Elisabeth now understands her own name.

Mary, in turn, explains the purport of the fullness of God in the **Magnificat**. In this song she also communicates the source of the disposition she will pass on to Jesus: God and His promise to side with the poor, with those who pine after peace, in Israel and to the very ends of the earth. The Magnificat forms a backdrop and a perspective full of Old Testament reminiscence of "this world turned upside down, in which will laugh those who cry" (Huub Oosterhuis). It corresponds with Jesus' solidarity with those who hunger and thirst after justice, of whom he speaks in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5; Lk 6) and in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4,14ff).

The Magnificat depicts this fundamental context during the meeting of these two mothers in Israel. It is also telling that the Visitation is located between the Annunciation and the Magnificat. When Mary says that she wants to make God great in her life, these words can only be authentic, if helpfulness becomes the leaven of who she is and what she does. The first and the second commandment – the orientation towards God and helpfulness towards one's neighbor – go together and merge. As soon as Mary hears from the angel that God is with her and that she has found favor with God, she immediately becomes an "I'll be there for you" for Elisabeth. An encounter with God brings about the praxis of meeting and helping each other. It creates Messianic joy. In her song, Mary adds the spiritual strength that she was given and its accompanying joy to the great story of God and Israel. Thus she shows what "believing the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1,45) means: to refuse to collaborate with rulers who despise others, but to stand by those who are

humiliated and oppressed, with unpretentious and vulnerable tenacity. In this sense Mary is greeted by Elisabeth, "Blessed are you among women". In other words: 'you are a blessing, you bring blessings'. This Presence full of blessing, we also encountered in connection with the house of Obed-Edom. Mary is as full of blessing as the Ark of the Covenant. Similar words are spoken regarding the assertive Judith (13,23): "Blessed are you, O daughter, by the Lord the most high God, above all women upon the earth". Lk 1,45 makes a connection with Jesus' words in Lk 11,28, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it." Mary's background position in the New Testament does not imply that she is devoid of actual passion and compassion. She stands in the tradition of the strong women of Israel who uninhibitedly speak their minds whenever life is threatened and the poor are trampled.

In Lk 1,26-56, the Trinitarian nature of God is evident: the Father initiates a movement that becomes fully visible in the Son, also due to the Spirit that inspires Mary and Elisabeth, John, and Jesus. Mary is open to this movement because she has been disciplined in the prophetic attitude, the wisdom, and the piety of Israel. She does not turn God into an idol to be used in favor of her own selfish and petty sentiments. She goes along with God's liberating dynamics that make Jesus into a whirlwind, and allow her to be led by the blowing of the Spirit. At its basis lies God's yearning to be with people. Mary opens herself and allows herself to be touched by this. This is how she experiences God. From the hiddenness and the silence of Nazareth, she goes her way without losing sight of the consequences of her belief in God. Everything that is happening around her and to her, "she keeps in her heart" (Lk 2,19.51).

Believing in the God of Israel is something of a struggle for Mary as well as Jacob. This becomes apparent, the moment Jesus' relatives worry about his behavior. According to them, "he has gone mad," because he is so engrossed in the care of the crowd that he no longer gets around to eating (MK 3,21-22). His family is wondering whether this is intended (by God). When subsequently the scribes from Jerusalem declare that he is under the power of a demon (Mk 3,30), it is suggested that his family fears the same. From this episode, with parallels in Mt 12,46-50 and Lk 8,19-21, we learn that being called by God and baptized does not entail that we can immediately assess and appreciate what is happening around us. The same holds true for Mary. Whereas in later centuries one has tried to safeguard her against all doubt, it is more in the line of the Bible to say that also for her believing has been

a real struggle at times and that also for her it came down to paying attention to what is said and done here and there, not in the least by Jesus.

Till under the Cross

Thanks to the Old Testament (her Bible) and the encounter with Gabriel, Mary comes to her view and space of life, and her conduct. In this Spirit she wishes to raise her son and stand by him. When suffering and pain fall to his lot, she does not run away. For good reason, she keeps Simeon's sayings about a sword and Jesus' behavior at the threshold of adulthood "in her heart". His behavior makes her wonder from time to time, but she grows with him and stands under his Cross. She also prays among his disciples (Acts 1,14), that she may receive the Spirit as well and bear witness to Jesus and his *Euangelion* in word and in deed.

How much the Early Church believes Mary to be touched by God's love for humanity is shown in Saint John's Gospel.[10] In Cana (Jn 2,1-12) she is closely involved in Jesus' first sign and the beginning belief of his disciples. Thanks to her quiet solicitude for what is happening around her, she alerts Jesus to the precarious position of the young bridal couple: "They are out of wine." And to the servants she says, "Whatever he says to you, do it". Subsequently, Jesus does his first sign of Messianic activity, which is the start of his public ministry and of the real flow of the best wine. That Jesus addresses her with "Woman" indicates that kinship is not the most important here, but her involvement in his Messianic life's task.

The moment that Jesus dies on the Cross, the disposition that she has displayed in the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Magnificat is fulfilled. She thus becomes the New Eve who stands by the New Adam, and Jesus can entrust her to his disciple (Jn 19). He recommends that the way in which his mother has followed him under the Cross be included in the latter's spiritual horizon and his approach to life. The disciple should be thoroughly aware of what Jesus' deed implies. After all, "whoever receives anyone I send receives me also; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (Jn 13,20). Montfort appears to have understood this when he says that St. John should take her (Mary) as his total good (SM 66). Just like the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn 1,36), Jesus now points to Mary as the mother of the faithful. "Dying on the cross, he reveals that his mother – as the 'Woman', with all its Biblical resonance – will also be the mother of the disciple from now on, and that he in turn, as representative of all disciples of Jesus, will be the son of Jesus' mo-

ther from now on."[11] With her presence she agrees with Jesus' humble servitude, as shown in the washing of his disciples' feet. Together Mary and the beloved disciple "look on whom they pierced" (Jn 19,37). It is her duty to keep alive after his death the expectantly looking out for the Messiah of the church. Furthermore, it is suggested that the beloved disciple embodies the authentic Church that, with Mary, follows Jesus into his death and is willing to testify of Jesus unto death. The quiet, modest, caring presence of Mary and her compassion are important for the faithful spirituality of the disciple. Provided that this modesty is not misunderstood. Mind you, according to John 19,25-26, Mary and the beloved disciple are **standing** at the foot of the Cross. Not triumphantly, but deliberately and willing to testify with the Crucified of God's solicitude for those whose life is a misery. In the many depictions of Mary standing (or sitting) with Jesus in her arms and her eyes trained on him, he is the center and she points at him, not just as a child but during his entire life.

Christian art depicts this in the Pieta, among others: the mother holding the deceased Jesus in her lap, close to the womb that once held him. It completes Mary's motherhood of Jesus. It is her latest and final answer to the angel's request to carry the Son of the Highest. After he has gone through all the stages of being-human and has testified of his conviction that 'giving one's life for others' is the utmost that a person can do in the name of God. More than ever before, Mary feels the sword of which Simeon has spoken. She has to let go of her son completely and give him away. With this gesture she accepts her calling to be a mother to the very end, for him and for his disciples. It is a hopeful gesture as well: "I will not abandon you", or better perhaps: "You have touched me once and for all." In light of Easter, when the Father says to Jesus once again that he is the beloved Son, this is a telling scene.

As masterpiece of the Highest

In the chapel of the Seminary of Oirschot, Netherlands, Jaap Min has painted a diptych in 1953: to the left is the Annunciation, and to the right Montfort who is drawing Mary with ink from her heart while, at the same time, looking at the Annunciation (see p.60). Her heart sings in tune with her conversation with Gabriel. "The Angelic Salutation is the most concise summary of all that Catholic theology teaches about the Blessed Virgin," Montfort maintains in his booklet about the rosary (GA 305). Whenever he thinks of Mary, he has the text of Luke in mind. He remembers her receptivity for God's longing to be with people,

her subsequent care for Elisabeth, and the song that wells up in her heart. "So powerful was the effect of this [the angel's] greeting upon her, that despite her great humility, she gave her consent to the incarnation of the Word" (TD 252). In this case, humility not only refers to the modest and respectful attitude towards others and the Other, but also to the willingness to help others and be there for them without a hint of showing off. Humility ultimately means: going along with the way in which God is a servant of humankind.

The same holds true for Montfort. Hymn 8 is explicitly about humility. In the beginning (1-7), the emphasis is on the humble attitude that befits the human being as sinner towards God. 8-10 talks about the humility of Jesus as servant of humankind and 12 elaborates on the humble manner in which Mary behaves as the mother of all people. It is how the apostles should become the servants of others (11); this is not easy. According to 26, some hide in their shell of false or cowardly humility, and others become proud. In both cases, nothing comes of the "gentle, attractive, and tender sincerity of Wisdom" (cf. LEW 59). For humility to stay in the right track, we have to look, time and again, at the way in which Jesus and Mary have given expression to this fundamental virtue. Their humility has nothing to do with underestimation of self, feelings of inferiority, lack of courage, subservience, negative self-image. Humility that does not lead to subdued self-esteem is wrong. Likewise, self-esteem without humility will become excessive and slip into haughtiness and the belittling of others.

According to Montfort, the Annunciation is about "the great mystery of the Incarnation of the Word" (TD 243-246). This expression comes closer to John 1,14 ("The Word became a human being and lives among us") than to Luke who emphasizes Mary's receptive and actual spirituality. Gabriel's request to Mary implies that God makes Himself dependent upon her, or: brings out her most authentic self. In this dependency, it turns out that God is not a reality that focuses on itself; God makes room for others and thereby He makes himself dependent upon them. Mary, in turn, opens herself for God's plan. The one dependency is not unrelated to the other. Thus a surprising view of the secret of life arises: mutual dependency where the one is not dominating but rather helping the other. This is "the mystery proper to this devotion" that Montfort advocates (243). The Son, in whom God becomes involved in our lives, becomes dependent on Mary. Montfort speaks of "the dependence which the eternal Word accepted on this day" (SM 63), which means: "in his conception,

his birth, his presentation in the temple, and in the thirty years of his hidden life; even at his death she had to be present" (TD 18). The general rule that God asks for the response of the human being takes visible shape in God's appeal to Mary and the subsequent dependency of Jesus on her. She has to say "Yes" to him, whereas He is willing to depend on her "Yes" that concisely sums up the spirituality of the Bible. Thus her obedience or openness towards God becomes the mold in which her Son learns obedience, "by the things he suffered" (cf. Hebr 5,8). Its nature and purpose become evident in the dialogue during the Annunciation and subsequently in the Visitation and the Magnificat.

Whoever wants to understand the Magnificat, which Montfort has put to verse and music in H 85, must know the entire Gospel, in his opinion. It is "the only prayer we have which was composed by our Lady, or rather, composed by Jesus in her" (TD 225). In it, she speaks, in her own words and by way of the Old Testament, of his Gospel and his Messianic passion. "Between them, everything is shared; for the Son is completely in his Mother. In the Mother, one can only perceive her dear Son, her love: Jesus" (H 134,8). "So closely are they united that one is wholly in the other. Jesus is all in Mary, and Mary is all in Jesus. Or rather, it is no longer she who lives, but Jesus alone who lives in her (cf. Gal 2,20). "It would be easier to separate light from the sun than Mary from Jesus. So united are they that our Lord may be called 'Jesus of Mary' and his Mother 'Mary of Jesus'" (TD 247). Provided that we keep in mind, that not the biological mother-son relationship is decisive, but the Messianic spirit that inspires them both.

> *According to the ideal of nineteenth century science of history, one person is put next to the other, and we distinguish one individual from the other as sharply as possible. In the Bible, on the other hand, people are described in such a way that they reflect each other's traits. Without losing their individuality, they become interwoven. The strictly individual ("you versus me") is no longer particularly interesting. That is why the Bible is, as are later hagiographies, a difficult source for those who want to reconstruct exactly who someone was as an individual. In spirituality on the other hand, one strives to silence the self-satisfied I and to have the 'I' start to reflect the life of God, of Jesus, of Mary.*

According to TD 248, Jesus works miracles in Mary during his dependency on her. He is not a passive guest in her womb, her home, her life: he forms her with his spirit and his attitude towards life. In order to reflect their unity, Montfort uses very sensitive expressions. In H 41,7, Jesus says, "My mother, most dear to me, I am filling you with gifts so that you may be the mother and the refuge of sinners". H 87,4-5 adds, "He bestows on her virginal womb his grace without limit… He painted there with no restraint his own authentic image". During the Annunciation she is "completely full with the unction of Wisdom" (H 90,12). Montfort is lyrical about that moment: "She was full of grace when she was greeted by the Archangel Gabriel and was filled with grace to overflowing by the Holy Spirit when he so mysteriously overshadowed her" (TD 44). What this really means, becomes clear when she goes to help Elisabeth, when she sings her Magnificat, and during her presence under the Cross. At first glance, Montfort seems to go along with his contemporaries' view of: in the context of the classical virtue theory and consistent with the erstwhile ideal of perfection. In TD 34, he refers to her deep-seated faith, her great humility, total abnegation, lofty prayer praxis, her passionate love, firm hope, and fidelity. According to TD 258 she was "gentle yet strong, zealous yet prudent, humble yet courageous, pure yet fruitful". Those are not exactly the same words as are used by Luke 1 or John 2 and 19, but they are not at odds with the Gospel either.

But Montfort goes further. At the beginning of the *True Devotion*, he probes the nature and the depth of Mary's virtues when he places her in a Trinitarian horizon, five times. He thus attempts to discover what God's presence does to her and in her. TD 1-93 is much like a commentary to the conversation between Gabriel and Mary. Montfort describes what happens between the lines. His words correspond to what is said in Chapter 2: the Father engages creatively in the world, that it may resemble the Son and agree to be led by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is one long and multicolored story about those moments in which this succeeds and fails. Mary, according to Montfort, responds with a heartfelt 'yes' to God's desire to be with people. She opens ears and heart for God's Word and thus comes to concrete deeds. Her intimacy with the Son is strongly emphasized.

First of all (TD 2-13), she is not in the least inclined to boast. She is humble and hidden and does not flaunt herself. By not begging for miracles, she testifies to her experience

of the Father. By not causing a commotion, she manifests the disposition of the Son. By not showing off, she complies with the working of the Spirit. Thus she shows how God as creator (Father), as savior (Son), and as inspirator (Spirit) relates to people. In her the ideal contact returns between God and human being from Paradise on Earth, to which the world is blind. Whoever wants to talk about her needs to be aware of God's unfathomable height, width, and magnitude (cf. Rom 11,33). Only then does it become clear how impressive she is. It would be hard to exaggerate the esteem in which she needs to be held, i.e.: for her inner self that reflects the attitude of her son. That is why this approach can be reversed: "Do you wish to fathom the mother, fathom the Son" (12). Her spirituality helps us to get the right perspective on the Son, and vice versa.

Secondly (TD 14-16), Montfort points to the inconceivability of God's choice for Mary, and he underlines that God stays true to the choice he has made. Mary does indeed deserve to be chosen by the Father because of her prayer and virtue, but God's choice is pure grace, and her attitude is formed completely by God's Word in her. 'Deserving' means in this context: she allows herself to be determined so intensely by the humility of the pious of the Old Testament, that she reacts properly to the invitation to become the carrier of the Messiah. God's choice is not based on her merit, but it cannot be taken for granted that a person allows such a choice to become effective. The Son has not become man thanks to Mary, but in and through her. Not she, but God alone is the source of the Incarnation. Nonetheless, only with her consent the Spirit can be effective in her.

Thirdly (TD 17-21) Montfort remarks that the Father provokes her creativity; only because of God's activity in her is she able to agree to become the mother of the Son. The Son chooses her as his mother and makes himself dependent upon her. As is true for Mary, his own behavior is not accompanied by spectacular miracles: he follows the same humble path. Apparently Montfort thinks it is dangerous to surround faith with an atmosphere of spectacular miracles and sensational achievements. He reminds us of the like-mindedness of Jesus and Mary during the sanctification of John the Baptist in the womb of Elisabeth and their mutual involvement in the miracle in Cana. Thus Mary serves as a model for what the Spirit tries to effect in people, and how this can work out: her spirituality serves as the substratum in which Jesus and his disciples are conceived and formed.

Fourthly (TD 22-28), he states that the Father has brought Mary's virtuousness into

being through her schooling in the Old Testament and by following Jesus. That is what has made her who she is, i.e. her spirituality, the channel through which the Son's mercy flows to all his members. In her deep humility, she made "herself poor and lowly, and hid herself in the depths of nothingness during her whole life" (25). She did not act according to her own preference or to give herself an ego-boost. "She is completely transformed in God by that grace and glory which transforms all the saints in Him; she does not ask or wish to do anything which is contrary to the eternal and unchangeable will of God" (27). This will of God should be interpreted in view of Scripture: it chooses the path of humility. Time and again we encounter this word 'humility'; we will get back to it in Chapter 5.

Fifthly (TD 29-36), Montfort repeats God's faithfulness to what he has started in Mary, who, in turn, has "always remained faithful and fruitful" (36). In other words, she has not violated the covenant and its obligations. Thanks be to God, "thanks to a special grace from the Most High" (TD 37) who always seeks our free consent.

Towards the end of *The True Devotion*, the Trinitarian approach returns. Montfort recommends that we say "Lord, I am not worthy" three times during Holy Communion. To the Father to be freed from "evil thoughts and ingratitude" (267), to the Son in order to avoid "useless and evil words" (268; cf. Psalm 1), and to the Spirit "because of the lukewarmness, wickedness, and resistance to his inspirations" (269). Or more positively: during Holy Communion, it befits us to be grateful to the Father, to search for the right attitude towards the Son (serving humility), to open up for the disposition that the Spirit wants to inspire in us. The Father gives life, freely and for free, the Son teaches us to speak and act in the right way, the Spirit fills our heart and spirit. Again it turns out that with respect to all that happens in and among us, God wants to be the source of life, the liberating word, and the inspiring strength.

The Trinitarian horizon is also present in SM 9-15. The Father refers to God's creative activity in the history of Israel, in the life of the individual, and in Mary. SM 10 once again underlines the need for free co-operation. According to SM 11, if we note what God has done in and with Mary, we will become aware of His creativity. God's activity is not vague; Montfort notices it in concrete individuals. This concreteness is accentuated in SM 12 in

a discussion concerning Jesus Christ (the Son). Mary is not his mother in a vague sense: she goes along with him and notices the doings of the doubtful and fearful disciples. This is how the Spirit works in her. Again it is obvious that not a purely individual relationship between Mary and the Spirit is concerned: in the relationship she is focused on Christ and those dear to him. Otherwise it would not be about the Spirit of the Father and the Son. This removes Marian devotion from the sphere of purely private experience and gives it a diaconal dimension. Likewise, Jesus is not a vague promise of salvation, but he is there for people as a concrete presence in their social and religious context.

What Montfort says about the attitude of Mary towards Father, Son, and Spirit shows what God wants to bring about in our midst and how He goes about it. As becomes evident in Jesus' rejection of the Tempter, He does not want to surround us with spectacular miracles, to entertain us with bread and circuses, and to fascinate with amazing daredevilry. He wants to free us to such an extent that we are able live unselfishly with and for others. Not in unfree subservience, but freely, upright, and in honest solicitude and attention. It is a sphere that differs altogether from that of having and possessing. Can people be like that? Doesn't it make us unhappy because the ideal is beyond our reach? Mary agrees wholeheartedly with this ideal of God. She enters into the covenant with God in an atmosphere of total freedom.

In the eyes of Montfort, Mary is not in relationship with a vague, unworldly God, but with the Biblical God who gets involved with the real life of real people (See Chapter 2). Whenever he talks about Mary, he has God's relationship with her and hers with God in mind. "You never think of Mary without Mary thinking of God for you. You never praise or honor Mary without Mary joining you in praising and honoring God. Mary is entirely relative to God. Indeed I would say that she was relative only to God, because she exists uniquely in reference to him. She is an echo of God, speaking and repeating only God. If you say 'Mary', she says 'God'. When Elisabeth praised Mary calling her blessed because she had believed, Mary, the faithful echo of God, responded with her Canticle, 'My soul glorifies the Lord'. What Mary did on that day, she does every day. When we praise her, when we love and honor her, when we present anything to her, then God is praised, honored, and loved and receives our gift through Mary and in Mary" (TD 225). In the opinion of Montfort, Mary is aware of her being a creature of God and sharing in the life of which

the Father is the source, the Son the pre-eminent embodiment, and the Spirit the unfolding strength. With Jesus she shares the attachment to the Father and the devotion to the Kingdom of God. And thanks to the dynamic of the Spirit, she lets her being be completely filled with the unity or the mutual involvement of Father and Son, with the manner in which the Bible traces out the ideal covenant of God with Israel and with all of humanity. She goes along with this so intensely that the paradisiacal existence "in the face of God" returns. In this sense she is the New Eve and the Bride of the Holy Spirit.

An alternative story of baptism

At the origins of the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary lies, according to Montfort, the longing of God "to become what we are, making us become what He is" (H 64,1). The angel prays and begs that Mary will say "yes" to this longing of God (TD 157). This means that she should not be led by self-satisfaction and self-conceit, but by the Word of God (TD 82). In her care for Elisabeth, she concerns herself with the distressful situation of Israel. This corresponds to the way in which Jesus says "yes" during baptism, becomes full of God's longing, and subsequently, driven by the Spirit, goes to Galilee in order to testify to the proximity of the Kingdom of God and the possibility to enter it. Being baptized means – as Jesus shows – becoming full of God, being filled with God's yearning to be with people. Mary's "yes" or her devotion to God's longing to become human serves as a model for the disciples who follow Jesus in baptism. Her "yes" is her baptismal vow, as it were. What this vow entails, she experiences when she follows Jesus in Galilee and in Jerusalem. That is where she must live up to her vows. When she sings her agreement with the content, the dynamics, and the scope of God's promise in the Magnificat, she implicitly declares what baptismal vows amount to. God will not be magnified in a person who refuses to put his or her signature underneath this song. Just as Jesus' baptism is incomprehensible if we do not take into account his further life up until his death, we will not understand the Annunciation if we do not notice how Mary becomes a helper, sings the Magnificat, stands under the Cross, and prays among the disciples. But neither do we understand the words and the deeds of Jesus and Mary, if we do not see them in the light of the fundamental "Amen" or consent during baptism and Annunciation.

The New Testament does not mention anywhere that Mary has been baptized, but Luke's account of the Annunciation bears a strong resemblance to the baptism of Jesus. He, as well, hears a heavenly voice and is confronted with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Annunciation might be called the story of the baptism of Mary. When God addresses her through the angel, she consents to Him wholeheartedly. Not talking hot air and demanding that no strings be attached, but in accordance with Gods profound longing to start a new movement around Jesus whose work will continue after his death through the testimony of the apostles. The New Testament keeps that moment alive in memory and is deeply inspired by it. So is Mary.

Whereas Jesus is called the "Son", Mary is the "highly favored" or "the most blessed of all women" (Lk 1,42) and "mother of the Lord" (Lk 1,43). "Highly favored" refers to what God brings about in her, in view of her task: being mother of the Lord. This calls for virginal receptivity for what God brings about in and among people. In other words, God asks her to become a believer: someone who does not claim life with power and violence, but who cherishes and carries life with the help of "the power of the Most High". This is similar to what Elisabeth says about Mary, "Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord!" (Lk 1,45). Her motherhood is not colored by the heathen way of power and privileges, but by the Biblical attitude that she puts into words in the Magnificat. Her virginal receptivity corresponds to her humility: she does not inflate herself and does not consider herself too grand to feel compassion for those in need. She allows herself, after all, to be fully determined by "the infinitely holy and exalted God (who) is at the same time infinitely solicitous for humankind and understands his weaknesses" (SM 20).

Jesus' baptism receives its ultimate form during his death on the cross; this is paralleled by the scene of Mary standing underneath the Cross. At that moment, her calling or her "baptism" is radicalized, and Simeon's prophecy finds its fulfillment. Her submersion in God's presence takes place by means of a confrontation with the deterioration of life, which often leads to a bitter death.

After being baptized, Jesus retreats in the silence of the desert, and also during his public appearance he often withdraws from the crowd and goes to the mountain, whereas Mary quietly remains in the background after the Annunciation. Doubtlessly also Jesus has sought

peace and quiet, but his public appearance tends to makes us forget. François Varillon remarks that people listen to him precisely because he does not speak like the scribes (Mk 1,11), but from the silence, from a deep concentration and receptivity. "When speaking of God is not experienced as born out of silence, and when it cannot hold its own in the silence while developing itself further, nobody will listen."[12] In the silence one's own weight becomes weightless.[13] Also Mary gives testimony to this. She does not push herself into prominence with a lot of clamor, but keeps in her heart what is happening to her and around her. Montfort says in H 23,10, "The man who is wise according to God, and filled with God's wisdom speaks little or not at all. The fool speaks incessantly; the wise man is silent. His silence edifies; a chatterer is often scandalous, and always so boring". Put differently: "Her speech is not frivolous; what she says is without question" (H 75,22). "In silence, in shade and shadow, Mary has hidden her beauty" (H 155,14).

Here misunderstanding might arise. Mary's inner piety does not make her forget the world around her. Neither does Jesus forget. The Magnificat shows her involvement with what happens around her and with the things that God wants to bring about. Therefore, Montfort does not withdraw into a corner with his devotion and forget about the world. He does not view faith as a means to piously and esthetically remain untouched in a dream world, far from the plodding, moaning, and sighing of real life. Undoubtedly, he turns to Mary, her spirituality, and her intimate relationship with God for comfort in times of despondency. He seeks her closeness when his life is in a fix, and he no longer knows how to be involved as a missionary. She puts him right back on his feet. United with her, "the roots of every virtue, but especially deep humility and ardent charity" (SM 15) arise. In his devotion for Mary is room for personal intimacy, but if one leaves it at that, something is thoroughly wrong.

CHAPTER 5

The way of Montfort

"Of Mary, never enough: We have still not praised, exalted, honored, loved, and served Mary adequately. She is worthy of even more praise, respect, love, and service" (TD 10). Montfort does not wish for an ever-increasing number of types of devotion, but for a type of Marian devotion that draws attention to the humility of God and Jesus.

Montfort was not pleased with all forms of Marian devotion that he observed around him (TD 90-104). When describing the devotional practices that he comes across in churches, chapels, places of pilgrimage, and Marian associations, he complains of people who rattle off their prayers or who believe in the salutary effects of certain rituals per se. He does not want anything to do with critical scholars who deem themselves above unpretentiousness, humility, and compassion, and who prefer to ignore their own "pride, avarice, lust, drunkenness, anger, swearing, slandering" (TD 97). And he scorns those whose devotion is aimed at extraordinary miracles, or who go from one sanctuary to another for a while, and then fall back in their same old life style. Even worse are those "who hide their sins and evil habits under the mantle of the Blessed Virgin so as to appear to their fellow-men different from what they are" (TD 102). Not to mention those "who turn to her only to win a court-case, to escape some danger" (TD 103). They want God to fulfill their own desires and refuse to go the way of God, Jesus, or Mary. They determine their own path in life and make use of everything and everyone to reach their goal.

Of his own devotion to Mary, Montfort says, "I have never known or heard of any devotion to our Lady that is comparable to the one I am going to speak of" (TD 118). This might be exaggerated, given the many references to authors of the past and of his own time. More important is what he declares regarding the essence of his approach, "No other devotion empties us more completely of self and self-love, unites us more perfectly and more easily

to Jesus, or is more helpful to our neighbor" (TD 118). Here three elements come up that form a fundamental process of transformation: 1) being freed of the concentration on self, 2) becoming one with Jesus Christ, and 3) focusing on one's neighbor. It is striking that Montfort's devotion to Mary is clearly situated within a Christological horizon. We will look at these three aspects first; next will be the eschatological gravity with which he talks about it; and finally the place of Mary in this process of transformation.

Beyond the love of self

Man is a mystery to himself (Gabriël Marcel). On the one hand we need to develop ourselves; on the other hand we should not make ourselves the center. This makes for quite a lot of ambiguity. In any case, we should relativize our own importance. For years, Montfort struggles with the question how to go about this. According to many, he exaggerates his efforts to restrain the excesses of self; he is too negative about people in general and himself in particular; and goes too far in penance and asceticism.

According to the *Letter to the Friends of the Cross* (FC 4), the Gospel of Jesus orders not to be haughty, greedy, and exceedingly sensual. Only in the final years of his life does Montfort succeed to get across that restraining self-love is aimed at a higher goal, and that it is this higher goal in particular that he wants to serve: living gratefully and joyfully in solidarity with others, especially the poor. Also in this respect, he is extremely serious and does not take halfway measures. But thanks to an ever greater inner peace he experiences, his behavior becomes less extreme and repulsive to others. It becomes ever more evident that he is not led by masochistic motives, but only wants to share in the freedom of Jesus and Mary, for the sake of God and neighbor. To the Friends of the Cross he writes, that they should not emphatically seek crosses, for these will come their way anyhow, if they take the Gospel seriously (FC 41). It is difficult to authentically follow Jesus in humility (FC 45).

Perhaps Montfort has never become entirely balanced with respect to his asceticism. However, it is evident that he was never interested in seeking himself, but in opening up for the (mis)fortune of others. He was keenly aware of the cunning of the self in achieving self-aggrandizing and self-empowerment. Being allowed to share in the servitude of God, Jesus, and Mary makes him a joyful person. The impression that he is a tormented ascetic gradually decreases. Sure, he is still a poor man, but he no longer radiates gloom. With

Mary, he sings the Magnificat with a joyful undertone. It pleases him that the humility of God becomes great in the way in which he – in the footsteps of Jesus and Mary – may live. In this sphere, he starts to experience God. Contrary to what the devil maintains: God does not have a big ego.

What life "beyond self-love" entails, becomes clear in PM 6-12 where Montfort states that the members of his congregation should possess inner freedom, free according to God's freedom, willing to be there for others, without seeking self-honor or advantage, free to blow every which way on the breath of the Holy Spirit.

In accordance with the humble Jesus

Being a Christian means going along with a specific story that spreads like wildfire in the Bible. On the one hand, there is the promise that God does not let people down and will remain faithful in the middle of the chaos that life often becomes. On the other hand, there is the challenge to follow the Son and be inspired by the Spirit. All this makes a new person out of someone; a new outlook on self and others arises. In LaCugna's view, this is what occurs in baptism:

> *Baptism is the sacramental and ontological act that transforms solitariness and separateness into communion. The 'ontological change' of baptism is radical: We claim to live now not from ourselves but from God, not for ourselves but for others. Moreover, baptism into the saving name of God makes it possible for those who would not otherwise congregate with each other to live together in genuine, real communion with one another: the Jewish-male-non-slave with the Gentile-female-slave… To live in the name of another means to appropriate their personal history and relational identity; our identity is now linked intimately with theirs. In baptism the Christian takes on the name of Jesus Christ as her or his own, and undertakes to live in persona Christi.*[14]

Unfortunately, Montfort observes an alarming lack of understanding concerning the meaning of being a Christian, or of being baptized: one does not endorse baptism "personally, freely, and fully aware" (TD 126). With pathos he cries, "Does anyone keep this great vow? Does anyone fulfill the promises of baptism faithfully? Is it not true nearly all Christians

prove unfaithful to the promises made to Jesus in baptism? Where does the universal failure come from, if not from man's habitual forgetfulness of the promises and responsibilities of baptism?" (TD 127). In his view, the hopeless situation of Christianity in his days is the result of the lack of understanding of the promise of God during baptism and the subsequent vow of the person baptized. He notices that also spiritual leaders and devout people "lack knowledge and experience of the person of Jesus" (TD 220). He wants to convince his listeners and readers "that they are bound and consecrated as slaves to Jesus" (TD 129). Hence, he does not beat about the bush. Elsewhere, he characterizes a Christian as "one chosen by God, from among thousands who live only according to their reason and senses, to be wholly divine, raised above mere reason and completely opposed to material things, living in the light of pure Faith, and inspired by a deep love of the Cross. In short,… a true Christ-bearer, or rather another Christ, so that he can truly say, 'I live not now with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2,20)" (FC 4). Montfort uses different words. The contract at the end of the mission in the village Vouvant in 1715 describes the vows and promises of baptism as follows:

> *I firmly believe all the truths contained in het Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ. I renounce forever the devil, the world, sin, and myself. With the help of God's grace, which will never be wanting, I promise to keep faithfully all the commandments of God and of the Church, and to avoid mortal sin and the occasions of mortal sin, especially bad company (GA 502-503).*

The dedication prayer toward the end of *The Love towards the Eternal Wisdom* runs as follows:

> *I, an unfaithful sinner, renew and ratify today my baptismal vows. I renounce forever Satan, his empty promises, and his evil designs, and I give myself completely to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Wisdom, to carry my cross after him for the rest of my life, and to be more faithful to him than I have been till now (LEW 225).*

And in *The True Devotion* it says:

> *Before baptism, we belonged to the devil as slaves, but baptism made us in very truth slaves of Jesus. We must therefore live, work an die for the sole purpose of*

bringing forth fruit for him, glorifying him in our body and letting him reign in our soul. We are this conquest, the people he won, his heritage (TD 68; cf. 73).

'Devil' and 'Satan' are mythological words that are used to describe the fact that life is rather often dominated by anonymous powers that choke us, and make us lose heart. Sometimes this seems just the way it is; it can't be changed. The temptations of Jesus (Mt 4,1-11) show how hard it is to keep away from the pursuit of power, how tempting it is to reduce life to bread and circuses, how much we are carried away by the desire to play the chosen One, how often we carry on like irresponsible fools in the name of God, and how much we seek excitement. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus engages in a fight with voices that try to keep him away from the Voice that he heard at the Jordan River, and from the Spirit that filled his heart from that moment on. Whether we do or do not call these voices 'devil' or 'Satan' is not important. As long as we are aware of the fact that it is no sinecure to follow Jesus, while listening to the Voice and being driven by the Spirit of the Kingdom of God.

When referring to the following of Jesus Christ, Montfort uses all kinds of terms alongside each other: 'perfect devotion', 'dedication', 'sacrificing oneself', 'giving oneself', 'entrusting oneself'. In TD 179, he speaks of becoming all yours ("*totus tuus*"– the motto of Pope John Paul II). Montfort does not cling to specific words; he can vary, as long as the gravity of the situation and the challenging provocation of the Gospel do not get lost. It is always clear what he wants to get across: whoever is baptized needs to accept Jesus as Lord and Master, follow in his tracks, and remain faithful to him. That is quite different from being tied to the devil's apron strings. In either case, Montfort speaks of slavery, even though it is evident that the devil tries to take people's freedom away, whereas Jesus makes an appeal to our freedom and conscious choice. The bond with the devil leads to haughtiness, blinding, inconstancy, envy, inertia, rebellion (TD 79), to self-conceit, and self-satisfaction (TD 88). The bond with Jesus Christ, on the other hand, leads to concern for others, unpretentiousness, loyalty, etc. (cf. LEW 62). A baptized person should follow the cross-bearing Christ and be aware of its impact. He or she does not add a new detail to his or her life, but choses an entirely new way of living.

In this context the term 'slavery of love' ('esclavage d'amour') is used. This term came into fashion in sixteenth century Spain and travelled from there to France. Meant is the act of pledging oneself to another of one's own free will, by means of a vow. From that moment on, the person is obliged to be there for the other. The terms are reminiscent of the rhetoric of the medieval troubadours. In this style, Montfort writes among others, "I surrender and consecrate myself to you, body and soul, as your slave, with all that I possess, both spiritual and material, even including the value of all my good actions, past, present, and to come. I give you the full right to dispose of me and all that belongs to me, without any reservations, in whatever way you please, for the greater glory of God in time and throughout eternity" (LEW 225).

Theologically speaking, the slavery of love is a combination of what Jesus means to express by washing the feet of his disciples and the word 'slave' ('doulos') in the song of Paul in Phil 2. The symbolic deed and the theological use of the term 'slave' are linked. During life and death, Jesus radically places himself in the service of others, and he never seeks his own fame or glory. To show his disciples that he loves them to the very end (Jn 13,1) he washes their feet after taking off his outer garment, as the slaves from ancient times used to do while at work. Jesus does so from his own free will, without cheap sentiments, out of respect, unconditionally solicitous about those in his care. In total subservient attachment and affection. This is in marked contrast with the robbery that characterized the behavior of the kings of Israel, who subjected people by means of violence and contempt (2 Kings 17,7-23). "You know that they who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them" (Mk 10,42). Isn't this the case to this very day? Jesus asks from his disciples to consciously and freely decide to do as he has done. They should become free of selfishness, self-love, and self-will, and allow themselves to be led by the humility of God (TD 79-82).

The term 'slavery of love' annoys and provokes misunderstanding. At the

> same time, however, it brings back important memories: of the distress of the Israelites in Egypt; of God who went in front of them towards the new land in a pillar of fire, like slaves who were forced to walk in front in order to receive the enemy's first blows, which often turned into slaughter; of Jesus who washes his disciples' feet to urge them to avoid anything that smacks of heathen power. In the Christian idiom, terms like 'slave' and 'love' remind of the way of God, Jesus, and Mary. Montfort has not circumvented these terms, neither in his writings nor in the way he lived.

He regards the Incarnation of God in the life of Jesus as the moment that it becomes clear that we should not deem ourselves superior to others. God Himself becomes a servant in Jesus. It is what we should all become: servants of others. This is not self-evident, but it is what Jesus does. We encounter it again in the life of Montfort: he is concerned about the poor and the diseased, without behaving like a well-off cleric or like a friend of the rich and famous. On the one hand, he finds it hard to understand that this art of living causes him to be marginalized: it is God's way that he is going! On the other hand, he understands the lack of recognition all too well: it also happened to the Son. It brings him to revaluate all values. He lets go of an understanding of God, Messiah, and Mary in terms of an all too simple and cheap desire for bliss and glory.

For the sake of others

Those who are free of self-centeredness and false illusions concerning God can really be there for others. According to the Bible, it is no longer self-interest that dominates but rather the desire to go along with God's interest in people, in the entire world even. This requires of a Christian to show that not riches and status count in life, but living as a poor person in service of the poor. In these poor the vulnerability of all humankind is displayed. Montfort identifies himself with the poor Jesus. He wants the social exclusion that is a consequence of the economic poverty in the French rural areas to be abolished and everyone to be treated as a valuable person. This is an essential element of the Gospel that Jesus preached and lived in the name of God.

The aim is not for the poor to become rich in the manner of the rich: they should become

rich toward God (Lk 12,21). What this entails is explained in the Lord's prayer: "Give us day by day our daily bread" (Lk 11,3). This is at odds with the tendency to accumulate more and more out of fear to be wanting one day. This is how the rich live and indoctrinate the poor in order that all may think and live their way. The rich enact the role of the devil in the temptation of Jesus: they suggest that only those who can make bread out of stones are worthwhile. And many a poor person is fascinated by this view.

Liberation theologians from developing countries have pointed out that not all poor can be fooled. Just as in Old Testament times, also nowadays there are poor who choose to derive their happiness from mutual solidarity. They are inspired by the unpretentiousness and the humility of God, and they are fascinated by Jesus' conviction that the poor are closer to the Kingdom than the rich are. Hence, a new view arises of what Christian living is, or should be. Aloysius Pieris from Sri Lanka thus says, "By choosing to be born poor in Jesus, His Son, (2Cor 8,9; Phil 2,6-8) God has gathered a new people that consists of two categories of poor: those who choose to follow the poor Jesus (Mt 19,21) and those who were born or made poor and in this poverty represent Jesus (Mt 25,31-46)".[15] The former category needs to be concerned with the latter, but it should also be willing to learn from them, as Jesus learns from the poor widow who casts a few pennies into the treasury (Mk 12, 41-43). He does not deem himself superior to the poor, but identifies with them and as a consequence becomes the victim of repression and injustice himself. He turns against ways of life in which inequality, fear, and competition predominate. True Christian living is based in the trustful attitude of the birds in the sky and everything that grows in the field (Mt 6,24-34). Living (together) should not be controlled by the mammon. Whoever chooses to be baptized chooses to learn from the poor and become poor with them in the name of God, if necessary to the detriment of one's own life.

The end times

The humility of God is like a vision for Montfort that urgently needs to come true. All around him he sees how much life can get out of balance when other points of departure and other motives predominate. Then not only the poor fare badly: so do the rich. People will only find the meaning of life, if they choose to be humble.

Montfort experiences life as if the last days have begun. Without calculating the exact apo-

calyptic moment, he takes the situation of life in his days very seriously. It is high time to convert and to really start believing in the Good News that God has become a serving human being in order to turn us into divine, i.e. serving, people. Only then will the Kingdom of God become an overriding reality, will the authentic glory of God be recognized, will there be peace on earth and a future for people. The Gospel does not go together with bourgeois Christian living, with lethargic religiosity. But neither does it invite a religious fanaticism that does not shun violence. Montfort does not turn people into fanatics, but he asks them to follow the mild spirit and the servitude of Jesus and Mary as he himself has done during the many difficult periods in his own life.

Montfort looks at life around him with prophetic-apocalyptic eyes. He believes that the devil is doubling his attacks with the help of his followers (TD 54; 50; 51). This is nothing new: it has always been this way. Also this time, God will – thus he believes and hopes – wake apostles of the last days who differ from most ecclesiastics and clerics (TD 58). In the course of time, he understands ever more keenly that idolatry is not only a matter of theory: it exists in the fact that men and women end up in new forms of slavery because leaders in society and Church treat them as worthless. Jesus, on the other hand, approaches them with respect. He tries to convince them that they are called to live as the image of God, no more and no less. The presence of God or Christ in the poor demands that an end be put to all ideological constructions and all practices that are not in the service of the children of God.

Especially in "the end times", Mary should become known in "her humble servants and her poor children" that are oppressed and trampled but that are grand and sublime in holiness (TD 54). Those who worship Mary should join her in her choice for Jesus Christ in his poverty, humility, contempt for the world, and love, and reflect the simplicity and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ (TD 59). Marian devotion is imperative in the last days, in order to fully find Jesus Christ and love Him intimately, and serve Him faithfully (TD 60-62). For she is transformed into Jesus by grace (TD 63), she is one with Him: she loves him more passionately and more perfectly than anyone else. Jesus Christ is the fruit and the glory of Mary (TD 77). In them the covenant of God with people has finally become mutually endorsed.

Marian devotion aids in resolutely choosing the side of God in the end times. Montfort emphatically views her as part of the hope that the world of slavery and misery will soon

come to an end. Then the servants, the slaves, and the children of Mary will be "the sweet fragrance of Jesus" for others. For the great, the rich, and the haughty, on the other hand, they are a deadly stench (TD 56; cf. 2Cor 2,15-16). For Montfort Marian devotion is right in the middle of the enmity between the woman and the snake of Gen 3,15 (TD 51; TD 54; PM 12; RM 61). Marian devotion is needed more than ever. Christ and Mary lead the way; there is no time to lose (TD 55; 90; 114). Montfort is keenly aware of the miserable situation that the poor are in: the famine, the high infant mortality rates, the diseases. In the meantime, the rich are rolling in wealth and are unable to see further than the end of their noses; after all, they are doing well! In his view, the loss of the Christian attitude towards life of the clergy and the rich is the cause. But so are the poor themselves: they are lost because no one takes them by the hand. It is not simple to turn the tide. Whereas contemporary historians assess the situation of Church and society in seventeenth century France as reasonable, Montfort is of a different opinion.[16] In PM 5 he prays with the passion of Jeremiah: "The whole land is desolate, ungodliness reigns supreme, your sanctuary is desecrated, and the abomination of desolation has even contaminated the holy place". The apostles of the last days should take into account that their mission will meet with resistance. "It is a result of the enmities which God himself has established between the blessed children of his Mother and the accursed issue of the serpent" (RM 61, cf. Rev 12). "The children of Belial, the slaves of Satan, the friends of the world – for they are all one and the same – have always persecuted and will persecute more than ever in the future those who belong to the Blessed Virgin" (TD 54). Montfort prays for "a mighty legion of brave and valiant soldiers of Jesus and Mary, both men and women, who will fight the devil, the world, and corrupt nature in the perilous times that are sure to come" (TD 114). "The end times bring the full revelation of Mary, not in the sense of a deeper abstract knowledge, but insofar as we will experience her presence. She will be revealed in her merciful love towards sinners, in her battle against the enemies of God, and in her support of the faithful disciples of Christ."[17] Montfort cannot believe that Mary is not hurt by life in his days. "The apostles of latter times will be exceptionally devoted to the Blessed Virgin, illuminated by her light and guided by her spirit" (TD 48).

Montfort does not talk about a new, third period in history, a period of the Spirit after that of the Father and the Son. His thinking remains Christocentric and he holds on to the

unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. According to PM 16, in the different stages of the history of salvation it will not be other aspects that become visible, but the same will unfold further accompanied by bitter fight. He does, however, maintain that more should learn about the mercy, strength, and benevolence of Mary that are based on her humility (TD 50). In her company, people will become really free and develop love of neighbor without becoming self-satisfied or self-willed or congratulating themselves (TD 169-181). During the end times, these virtues should stand out. At the return of Christ, it will become apparent that real grandeur is the modesty and the servitude of Mary (TD 158).

With Mary, the humble servant

The spirituality of Montfort is characterized by Mary's response to the angel: "Here I am, the servant ('*doulè*') of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word" (Lk 1,38). In contrast with Lucifer (TD 53) and the children of the world (TD 54), she remained the "singularly faithful Virgin over whom Satan never had any power" (TD 89.) She allowed herself to be led entirely by God's desire to be a helper of humankind. Montfort states that we should do everything with, in, through, and for this Mary (SM 28) who really went along with Jesus, Wisdom incarnate who does the will of the Father that no one will be lost (Jn 6,38-39). It is on purpose that Luke points at this Mary at the start of his Gospel. Who – opposed to her – refuses to agree with the humility of God cannot understand the Gospel and will not be able to wash the feet of others with respect, reverence, and affection. The work of a slave, but of one's own free will, moved and inspired by the way that Jesus and Mary have gone. Mary's humility is authentic because it goes together with other virtues. Mary thus shows the intent and the dynamics of life as intended by God: to make the best in others thrive, to not be carried away by temper or contempt, to not allow one's actions to be defined by an atmosphere of violence, envy, or betrayal. Humility or poverty of spirit calls for sympathy, love of peace, helpfulness, unpretentiousness, moderation, pureness of heart. Raised in the school of the Old Testament poor, Mary realizes that people can only become themselves, if they are able to be humbly solicitous towards others. Her humility culminates beneath the Cross, where she gives her consent for Jesus' death for the sake of others. Because of this God-given unconcern for self, she lives gracefully: following Christ, the pre-eminently poor in Spirit, the new man who invites us to empty ourselves of self-love, to fill ourselves with

God, and to attain perfection (TD 82). This is the woman whom Jesus gives to his disciples as a mother.

The New Eve does not reach for the apple that – as the devil claims – will make her the equal of a self-centered God (Gen 3,5). On the contrary, she follows her son who frees himself of all devilish dreams of the loftiness, the grandeur, and the omnipotence of God (TD 72). She was without "pride, blindness of spirit, and inconstancy of soul" (TD 79), not full of self-satisfaction and conceit. The essence of the devotion for which Montfort makes a plea is that Mary – in the footsteps of Jesus – enables true love of neighbor (TD 171). The reason is "her humility, deep as an abyss" (LEW 107): humility jusqu'au néant in which she gives herself completely. In TD 25 it is said that Mary has hidden herself "in the depths of nothingness" (jusqu'au fond du néant). This reminds us of Jesus who has "humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, yes, the death on the cross" (Phil 2,8). This combination of humility and nothingness can also be found in H 41,12-13.

She has not prided herself on any particular virtue or beauty, but she has become a servant who honors God and is there for others, in all respects. She has allowed herself to be determined by the humility of God who merely wants people to come to authentic life. In this sense Montfort frequently mentions her humility, which reflects the essence of the Son: the one who is his deepest self by serving others.

Those who truly worship this Mary do not keep anything to themselves and do not seek riches. In eighteenth century legal terminology: they do not appeal to "their satisfactory or prayer value and their meritorious value" (TD 122) nor to what they "will acquire in the future in the order of nature, of grace, and of glory in heaven" (TD 121). There is no trace of parading one's merits. Those who authentically worship Mary do not live for their own honor and glory. They want to approach life in the spirituality of the woman who keeps nothing for herself and is completely focused on God's love for humanity. Like Mary, they want to be there for others: without selfishness and calculation and without ever exalting themselves. Mary has completely conformed to God's desire to be a helper. It is only after someone's conceit has been eradicated that all selfishness is gone and he or she can really be there for others.

Because of this emphasis, Montfort calls his devotion unique. The result is a growth in hu-

mility in accordance with Phil 2 (TD 213-223). "The humble Virgin Mary will share her humility with you so that, although you regard yourself with distaste and desire to be disregarded by others, you will not look down slightly upon anyone" (TD 213). Thus all fear of death will disappear and an intimate relationship with God ensues. Only those who become humble and simple at heart worship God in a perfect manner. The silent, unpretentious, and humble presence of Mary from the beginning of Jesus' life up through his death and among his disciples after his death, without boastfulness and without sensationalism, is the criterion for distinction between real and fake devotion.

An authentic worshipper of Mary will follow her virtues, steadfast, persevering, and without selfishness (TD 105-110). In order to remain genuine, those who look at her should always keep one eye on Jesus. After all, Mary is not only the mother, but also the daughter of her own son (Dante, Paradise 33,1). She allows herself to be determined by his Messianic humility. For Montfort, devotion to Mary is ultimately "preparation for the reign of Jesus Christ" (TD 227). This means that it neither starts nor ends with Mary. Only from a focus on God and in light of Christ, her person stands out authentically. Whoever wants to get to know her has to go back and forth between son and mother. Once again: "if you wish to understand the mother, then understand the Son" (TD 12). They reflect one another without being identical and without being opposed. In this respect, Montfort warns us for an interiority that does not result in actual deeds, and deeds that remain merely external. He emphasizes that a Mary-like process of transformation is quite a struggle. No one is born perfect. Also with a proclivity for piety, one is threatened by all kinds of dangers. It is not simple to become a servant by God's standards.

How the transformation should proceed becomes apparent in the way Montfort designs his month-long retreats (TD 227-233). The participants are supposed "to imbue themselves with the spirit of Jesus through the most blessed Virgin" (TD 227). For twelve days, they first have to become aware of the difference between the spirit of the world and of Jesus Christ. In the week following, they have "to acquire knowledge of themselves and sorrow for their sins", all this "in a spirit of humility" (TD 228). It is self-knowledge that is involved, knowledge of God, and understanding of the Spirit – these cannot be separated. During the subsequent week, "they should endeavor in all their prayers and works to acquire an understanding of the Blessed Virgin and ask the Holy Spirit for this grace" (TD 229). The

last week is about knowledge of Jesus Christ; one should constantly pray, "Lord, that I may know you" (TD 230). Finally the dedication follows, which is signed and sealed by alms or lighting a candle. Every year, every month, or better even: every day, one should repeat, "I am all yours and all I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through your holy Mother" (TD 233).

Hence without a clear notion of God and Christ, worship of Mary gets out of hand. This is the reason why the chapters two and three have drawn attention to the characteristics of the Christian experience of God and to the way that Jesus has gone. If devotion to Mary follows in these tracks, she can have a powerful impact: the New Eve will intensify the Gospel of the New Adam. Also with regard to Mary, Montfort speaks of slavery of love, of a radical unification based on the awareness of one's own nothingness and of Mary's humble willingness to serve. Mary and Jesus are one in this respect, but not identical. In the Bible no two persons are the same: the same holds true for the patriarchs, the wise, and the prophets. They do, however, follow in each other's footsteps, without becoming doubles or stereotypes. They increase each other's joy because each follows his or her own calling, in the company of the others. And each continues to thank, to honor, and to remember the others. That is why we should not say "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", but "the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob". God starts a brand new story with every person, even if it cannot be entirely separated from others. Who we are and how we develop is linked, positively and negatively, with people of the past and of the present. Nobody is entirely unconnected, not even Jesus. Without the Old Testament texts, his existence is unthinkable and incomprehensible. Without the Old Testament or the schooling and the neighborship of Israel, we will not encounter the real Jesus. Nor will we without the mother, Montfort states.

> Montfort calls the dedication to Mary "hypothetically necessary" (TD 39;63). Sensitive to the freedom of God and amazed at God's ways, he seems to shy away from theological speculations based on stringent logic. He is too close to concrete life with its uncertainties and its curiosities, and above all he is too keenly aware of God's inconceivability to claim that all sorts of things 'have to be like this and no other way!' With regard to the fundamental articles of faith (Trinity, Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection), he shows great respects and obedience. Concerning others he is

> more careful and reserved, without, however, becoming scrupulous to a degree that he can only keep silent altogether. He really ponders the height and the depth of God's actions and reactions without trying to capture it in a strict system. When reading the Bible, he is touched by the way in which Mary is called by God. It is just as surprising as the calling of Abraham, Jacob or Israel, Moses, and others who show us the way. He cannot and will not remain deaf to it. Whereas the Word of Jesus Christ and the Fire of the Spirit are indispensable for life in the fullness of God as a Christian, Mary helps him recognize what it is that moves Jesus and how the Spirit is effective.

Mary does not come out of the blue in the Bible. Gen 3,15 already mentions the enmity between the snake and the woman. Even earlier, in Gen 2,20, God makes Adam a woman who is suitable for him. And later in Genesis, there are several matriarchs next to the patriarchs. In this tradition, the New Adam and the New Eve appear on stage. Whereas the first Eve and the first Adam lend an ear to the snake, the New Eve and the Second Adam listen to the Voice from heaven, and together they show the art of living in simplicity and subservience. Whoever develops an eye for these patterns becomes captivated and feels challenged to interpret them: carefully and with reserve, in order to prevent exaggeration of the frail lines, but without being blind to clues and views that light up in the Bible.

In the unity of Mary and Jesus, as said, their spiritual relationship dominates and not their biological ties. The biological connection is not denied, but it is permeated with the spiritual, and therefore not the point of departure of reflection and experience. Mary surrounds Jesus with her spirituality, and vice versa. Without becoming identical, they are not separate either. Both are rooted in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament characteristics of his can be found in her, and of hers in him. Her place in the circle of his disciples is an indication of the intensity of their connection. Just like Jesus, "Mary was always led by the Spirit of God" (TD 258), by the Spirit of the Triune God who is solicitously present with his creativity and dynamics in our confused and confusing world. They have the same orientation and the same focus, and both are concerned with the (mis)fortunes of life.
In this, Jesus goes provocatively far. It takes a lot of (Biblical) disciplining to understand

him. This is why the New Testament falls back, time and again, on Old Testament figures, texts, and prayers. Montfort does not doubt that we become identical to Jesus Christ (TD 120), if we lean against Mary. He does not think in terms of competition between them. God wishes for us to benefit from his presence that is entirely free and full of grace. The chorus of patriarchs, wise, and prophets sings this for our sake, with star parts for Jesus and Mary who do not wish to outdo but complement and strengthen each other *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (to the greater glory of God). The Bible goes about this in such a way that one person is sometimes drawn by means of another. The intention is not to reconstruct the precise historical who and what of each individual figure separately but to testify to the separate and yet related ways in which God speaks to us (cf. Hebr 1,1).

This merging of persons who sing God's praise together and color the Gospel differs from the model in which the distance between God and humans needs to be bridged by this or that particular individual. Sometimes Montfort reasons like this as well, for example in TD 83-86. However, in the context of Incarnation and *kenosis* it is God Himself who bridges the gap in many different ways. This pedagogy of God goes together with the conviction and the experience of Montfort that Jesus and Mary point to the path of faith that we have to go, each in their own way. Theological constructs about connection and distinction are fine, but his approach is characterized above all by an atmosphere of deep gratitude. It sometimes brings us to logical constructs: 'this was the only way things could have gone!' But these are merely the fragile vessels (2 Cor 4,7 quoted in TD 87) in which we express our gratitude. They should not be allowed to stand between the grace of God and our gratitude.

The dependencies and attachments of Jesus with respect to Mary are part of God's pedagogy. Jesus' calling and mission is preceded by a long covenant history. He is not an entirely new beginning: he stands in a tradition that starts with the creation of heaven and earth. What we call creation is referred to in Gen 1 as the process of separation and definition, of ordering and structuring, of conquering chaos and making peace. The context of Gen 1 is not that there is nothing there yet: but that there is chaos. In this chaos God wants to create order. What this chaos entails and where it comes from, but also how God counteracts it becomes concrete in the texts that follow. Jesus is born in this tradition which he learns, not in the last place, from Mary, according to Luke. "Incarnated Wisdom did not choose to give himself in a direct manner to the human race though he could easily have done so. He

chose to come through the Virgin Mary. Thus he did not come into the world independently of others in the flower of his manhood, but he came as a frail little child dependent on the care and attention of his Mother" (TD 139). "Jesus took life in her most virtuous heart" (H 40,35). Not only through the mother's milk, but mainly through her life of faith. The latter is what the portrayal of the *Madonna Lactans*, the nursing mother with child, intends to suggest above all. Whether we pay attention to Mary's directedness towards God and world or ignore it makes for a different perspective on Jesus. As a figure of faith she is the best commentary to and the best guidance for his speaking and acting. When Montfort speaks of Jesus' dependency on and obedience towards his mother, this is what he refers to. Likewise when he maintains that the risen Christ in heaven still depends on her (LEW 205). This should not be misunderstood: "She does not command him in the same way as an earthly mother would command her child who is beneath her" (TD 27).

According to Montfort, we can barely or not at all achieve the compassion of Christ on or own. This is why Christ at the Cross points at his mother; we should seek her company and allow her to help us. She will lead us to Christ. If we are looking for the company of Jesus, he will point at her. Only hand in hand with the New Adam and the New Eve will we find the way to the Kingdom of God. For Montfort it is no problem to put Mary right next to Jesus since he is certain that Mary is infinitely far beneath her Son who is God (TD 27). In a context of *kenosis*, this does not lead to feelings of superiority. In no way whatsoever is Mary ever seen as superior to Jesus.

In 1964, our confrere Bas van Iersel wrote that Mary is never mentioned in the New Testament in the earliest predication about the public dimensions in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2-13), but only in texts concerning the inner piety that is needed to follow Jesus. In the Magnificat becomes apparent that she is the personification of Israel as one of the poor of Yahweh who – without status in leading circles – led their simple lives departing from their trust in God and that precisely this trust is rewarded with God's grace." This fits in completely with the dialogue with the angel who calls Mary blessed and adds, 'You have found favor with God'".[18] This corresponds to Montfort's emphasis on the inner character of the devotion to Mary. He deems it "necessary" in order to become a truthful disciple of Jesus and come to an authentic experience of God. Without this innerness leading to unworldliness or an aversion to the world. In the Magnificat innerness goes together

with a positively critical attitude towards society and politics. Likewise, in the baptism of Jesus his relationship to God, and God's relationship to him, has an express inner component but immediately results in a strong involvement in the tough life in Galilee, Judah, and Jerusalem. Later on, especially in John 19 and Acts 1, Mary receives a marked position in the life of the Early Church: radically following Jesus is best accomplished when the disciple obeys the spirituality of Mary who followed Jesus to the very end.

This demands that we leave our regular patterns of values and our regular ways of reasoning and arguing behind. After all, we all too easily depart from oppositions and competition. Jesus and Mary do not get in each other's way! The main reason for Montfort's specific devotion to Mary is that she, in her own way, together with Jesus, wholeheartedly, consciously, and freely endorses the Incarnation and the *kenosis* of God. In addition to that, Jesus has also learned this from her, and therefore he gives her to the beloved disciple as his mother. "So we must let ourselves be perfectly contained and led by the humble Virgin without any reserve on our part" (TD 157). Provided that we do not confuse this humility with diffidence or unworldliness. Mary sings her Magnificat with a great amount of courage, and her position under the Cross is a sign of her radical choice for the way that Jesus has gone, in the name of God and for the sake of others. In light of God's humility, she decides to live in actual solidarity without threatening or betraying.

In authentic humility

Montfort places his apostolate and spirituality in the context of the renewal of the baptismal vows. In this respect, he keeps reminding of the way of Jesus and Mary with which Christians as individuals and as a group have agreed. Whoever is baptized in the footsteps of Jesus should follow him, as Mary has. A baptized person should not be led by the whims and the inclinations of his or her petty I, but should become the image of the humility of God. "For the forgiveness of sins", the Creed says: without lending an ear to the devil, and by making discord, envy, and antagonism disappear. With the self-esteem of which the Magnificat speaks: not by belittling others or burdening them with an inferiority complex, but by treating them with respect, with honest concern for the life of the individual and of society.

In a world where violence is becoming ever more destructive by technological *tours de force*, attention for the typical self-esteem of Jesus and Mary are more indispensable than

ever before. “In God is no violence,” an unknown Christian wrote to a certain Diognetus in the second century. The author maintains that Christ has not come to rule like a tyrant who scares others, but to mildly and mercifully save by persuasion, like God who is patient, benevolent, and good, free of wrath. In his view the Christian joy is not in “dominion of neighbor or in wanting to possess more than the weak, nor in riches or violence against the needy… Whoever takes the burden of the neighbor upon himself, shares his own talents with one who has less, who by passing on what he has received from God becomes like God for the needy is a follower of God”.[19] This is in the spirit of Montfort. He rarely explicitly expresses himself in such words, but in LEW 53 he says that God’s Wisdom is “gracious in conduct, never showing violence”. This is a fine description of the humility of God.

Epilogue

We are spontaneously inclined to connect God with magnificence, majesty, and power. It is often said that God has to do with the power over all reality. Others claim, "We cannot think anything greater than God because otherwise it would not be God; that's only logical!" Hence, it is not strange that we tend to make Jesus into a grand figure, pre-eminently wise, a miracle worker, omniscient, and omnipotent. He is God, after all! Or could it be that this type of reasoning and such interpretations are wrong?

This book has gradually distanced itself from this logic that wrong-foots us since it does not give us anything to hold on to when confronted with our fragility, brittleness, vulnerability, and mortality. We use God for the desire to think of ourselves as greater, stronger, and immortal. The consequence of this desire is that we do not rest until at least one person is subservient to us, preferably an entire crowd. The culture of continual progress and ever more growth at the expense of everything and everyone fits this mentality. Even the fearful suspicion that this growth might stagnate and that we might have to take several steps down is unable to put an end to the megalomania. Alas, we seem unable to abandon the dream of grandeur!

Yet, already in ancient times, the hunger for ever more, ever larger, and ever more powerful has been labeled as the source of all misery. "Pride is the beginning of sin" (Sir 10,15); it makes us lose our heads and hearts. The Tower of Babel was never high enough. In the long tradition of the Seven Cardinal Sins, *superbia* (the striving to be superb) is called the original sin. Up through contemporary art.[20] A seventeenth century copperplate of Lucas Vorsterman shows Lucifer, God's most beautiful angel, becoming more and more devilish in looks while falling from heaven. The cause of this deterioration is his refusal to go along with God's solicitude towards people, a solicitude that culminates during the hour that the Son gives his life for the children of Adam. The humility of God is intolerable for Lucifer: he wants to rip the cross off the wall: God can and should not be like that! In *The antichrist*, Nietzsche says is as follows, "Deus qualem Paulus creavit, Dei negatio – the way in which Paul has created God is the negation of God".

In the past centuries, the contrast between the pride of Lucifer and the humility of God has been pushed into the background. The cause of all misery is sought in hubris (Icarus), egocentric vanity (Narcissus), in grotesque excesses of body culture, or in loss of the human measure, in the excessive glamour of the Upper Ten. Pride is still in charge, there seems no remedy for it, no presence of God that points in a different direction. "Let's eat and drink. God is dead – and so will we be tomorrow!" Many an artist mainly portrays emptiness: it seems to be the only perspective left. Or will the yearning for a Presence that leads towards other ways ultimately dawn in this terrifying void?

This is the Presence that Paul Tillich referred to when he spoke of the courage to be. And Peter Wust, who characterized human existence as "Ungewissheit und Wagnis" (Uncertainty and Venture) hoped, as it were, that we would recover the art of simplicity and gratitude in this precarious situation, and with it a joy of life as experienced by Saint Francis or Clare. Without the awareness of the ever-present nearness of God's humble love for humanity this seems impossible. In that sense Louis Grignion (again: in our words) has found the possibility and an art of life that made him grow into "le bon père de Montfort". This possibility did not simply fall into his lap. He has struggled with God, with himself, and with the clergy surrounding him. He longed to give a different testimony of God, of Jesus, and of Mary, and in the process he learned to see the humility of God ever more clearly. Its breakthrough in Jesus and Mary inspired him with hope and gave him a "fighting" spirit; not with swords and guns, but with a cross in the one hand and a figurine of Mary in the other. That was where he found God, a humble God.

The actual situation of Christian living and the Church is not encouraging. Not because of the decrease in membership or because more and more churches are closed. The fundamental difficulty is that we do not succeed in taking of the emperor's clothes and in living like the humble Jesus, the unpretentious Mary, and the poor apostles. There are few real witnesses of the humility of God. Alas, the same holds true for Montfortian circles. For good reason it is sometimes suggested that Montfort might not feel at ease with the Montfortians. The fundamental question is whether we are willing to live in accordance with the poor Jesus and Mary, whether we follow them in their refusal to go along with the megalomania that we all too often attribute to God and fall victim to ourselves.

A humble God is no guarantee for a life without unrest and misfortune. Such a God is, however, a source of courage to live with a positive attitude towards life. Humility does not imply subservience or submission; it refers to modesty, to letting others be, to simplicity, to meekness, and to unpretentiousness. These qualities of life do not arise spontaneously when we hear or think of God. Yet, the Bible points in that direction: from the womb of Israel, Jesus and Mary have revealed this horizon. Montfort has underlined this.

From his conduct in Saint-Sulpice and as a young priest many get the impression that he is burdened by a rather nagative self-image. Without losing his seriousness, however, he gradually matures into a hopeful figure - touched by the love of Eternal Wisdom, by the virtues of Mary, and by the humility of God.

Notes

1 Pierre Humblet has pointed out that Montfort had a mystical side (*Het omvormingsproces in Grignion de Montfort's l'Amour de la Sagesse éternelle,* Nijmegen 1993, The process of transformation in Grignion de Montfort's l'Amour de la Sagesse éternelle*)*. See also J.R.R. Thelagathoti, *The mystical experience and doctrine of St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort*, Rome 2005. This mystical side is important to understand Montfort's emphasis on human sinfulness in the perspective of his yearning for unification with God. In this book the focus is above all on viewpoints that, according to Montfort, are important for the renewal of Christian living in his days – and perhaps also in ours.

2 C. LaCugna, *God for us. The Trinity & Christian life*, San Francisco 1973, 397.

3 Jo van Osch, 'Voor het aanschijn van de drieëne God', in: *God alleen – God ontmoeten met Montfort*, Oirschot-Leuven 1981, deel 2, 25.

4 F. Varillon, *God is nederigheid* (God is humility), Tielt 1986, 139-140.

5 F.-W. Marquardt, *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden. Eine Christologie I*, München 1990, 236.

6 C. Gestrich, *Christentum und Stellvertretung*, Tübingen 2001, 65.

7 H. Wojtkowiak, *Christologie und Ethik im Philipperbrief. Studien zur Handlungsorientierung einer frühchristlichen Gemeinde in paganer Umwelt*, Göttingen 2012.

8 G. Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens II*, Tübingen 1979, 89.

9 H. van den Bosch, *Een apologie van het onmogelijke*, Zoetermeer 2002.

10 These reflections are based on a.o. I. De la Potterie, *Maria in het mysterie van het verbond*, Bonheiden 1990, 185-260.

11 Ibid.244.

12 Varillon 23.

13 Varillon 78.

14 LaCugna 404.

15 A. Pieris, *Theologie der Befreiung in Asien. Christentum im Kontext der Armut und der Religionen*, Freiburg 1986, 38.

16 Stefano de Fiores, *Last Things*, in: JLM 351.

17 Ibid. 353.

18 B. van Iersel, *De plaats van Maria in de boodschap van het Nieuwe Testament*, in: De Standaard van Maria 40 (1964), 23-24.

19 As cited in A. Houtepen, *In God is geen geweld*, Vught 1985, 24-25.

20 See for example *Lust und Laster. Die 7 Todsünden von Dürer bis Nauman,* Ostfildern 2010. Famous is *Die sieben Todsünden* (Text: Berthold Brecht, Music: Kurt Weill) from 1933.

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