

The Mystery of the Cross in the spiritual experience of St. Louis Grignon of Montfort



Meaning of the word cross:

Propre meaning:

- the ancient instrument of torture for the condemned to which Jesus was subjected...
- crucifixes, calvaries, badges...

Figurative meaning:

- everything that derives from a choice for Christ, for the Gospel or in the service of the Gospel... (cf. Mt 5:11; Phil 1:29; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:8ff). The meaning was extended to the trials, obstacles, and difficulties of life, endured or accepted by the Christian, in union with the sufferings of Christ, in order to prolong in the Church the mission of Jesus the Savior.

I. St. L. M. OF MONTFORT AND THE CROSS IN THE CONTEXT OF 17TH CENTURY

The spiritual physiognomy of a saint is shaped above all by his or her fidelity to the Gospel and to the initiatives of the Holy Spirit. But it is always marked by the tradition of the Church and by the currents of the time and the environment in which he/she moves. Montfort thus liked to confront his deepest aspirations and his life experience with the writings of confirmed spiritual authors. But without renouncing to be himself as God modelled him.

His references on the mystery of the cross

- Henri Boudon: The Holy Ways of the Cross.
- Joseph Surin: the Spiritual Letters.
- M. Olier (Founder of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris) and the Sulpician context where he was formed during eight years.

Montfort will gradually become himself only after his departure from Saint Sulpice. He will continue his own spiritual and apostolic journey, always marked by the cross, as a normal consequence of

his decision to live the demands of the Gospel to the letter.

II. THE CROSS IN MONTFORT'S LIFE

1. His trials

1700: his six-month stay in Saint Clément de Nantes at the end of the seminar, suffers from inaction.

Five years of trial and error to find his way (*from 1706, after a meeting with the Pope in Rome in 1706*).

Rejection of the hospital in Poitiers, then of the hospital in Salpêtrière

Disapproved by his former spiritual directors and abandoned by his old friends. (cf. L.15)

1703: experience of the street Pot-de-Fer in Paris living in a miserable and reduced place. He was "more than ever impoverished, crucified, humiliated" (cf. L. 16).

A humanly terrible experience of rejection and humiliation for this man of thirty years, an extraordinary spiritual experience for one who implored unceasingly for the "infinite treasure" of Wisdom (L.15).

1706: On his return from Rome, as an apostolic missionary, he will have the cross as a companion of life until death. His preaching annoyed and created him enemies. He was criticized by his detractors who called him a "runner", an "adventurer", a "hypocrite", an "antichrist", while the humble people saw in him the "good Father of Montfort". They will try to kill him (Rochelle...). He was forbidden or rejected several times in seven dioceses because of unjust reports or his untimely zeal, even though he always wanted to be faithful to the directives of the bishops. His suffering was all the more intense in these circumstances since Christians were to be deprived of the benefits of the mission. And those who accompanied him were condemned to share his cross.

He testified in a letter to his sister Guyonne Jeanne in 1713: *"If you knew in detail my crosses and humiliations, I doubt that you would be so eager to see me. In fact, I cannot get anywhere without sharing my cross with my best friends, often in spite of myself and in spite of them. Everyone who defends me or declares himself in my favour has to suffer for it [...] Always alert, always on thorns, always on sharp pebbles, I find myself like a ball in play: as soon as it is thrown from one side, it is*

already rejected from the other, hitting it with violence. It's the fate of this poor sinner. This is how I am, without respite or rest, since thirteen years ago, when I left St. Sulpice." (cf. L. 26).

This letter, like those that will follow, bears the words "Long live Jesus, long live his Cross"; until then he had begun them with these words: "The pure love of God reigns in our hearts".

Reviving the baptismal life among Christians through preaching is his goal. He accepts the consequence or the price: *"to fight against the demons of hell, to make war on the world and the worldly"* (cf. L. 24). Thus, he invites his religious sister to pray for him in community *"to obtain from the crucified Jesus the strength to carry the hardest and heaviest crosses as straw, to resist with a bronze front the powers of hell"* (cf. L. 24). He would die prematurely without having completed his work as a founder, a supreme loss for the one who for sixteen years did not stop praying to God with confidence to obtain a company of missionary priests.

2. The crucifix, the calvaries

Montfort, as a student, "always carried a crucifix and an embossed image of the Blessed Virgin. "The crucifix and the image of the Blessed Virgin were, throughout his life [...] his only recourse for everything he undertook. "Pope Clement XI had attached to his ivory crucifix a plenary indulgence for all those who would kiss it at the hour of death. He held it in his right hand during his last hours and thus blessed his last visitors. In Montfort-la-Cane, in 1707, instead of preaching, he took his crucifix out of Rome, looked at it carefully and burst into tears; coming down from the pulpit without saying a word, he presented it to kiss everyone. Everyone was moved and repented. The goal was achieved. He also brandished his crucifix as a peaceful weapon to separate some young people who were fighting a duel, or as a demonstration of protest against debauchery or obscenities: *"Let those who love Jesus Christ join me in worshipping him"*.

In 1713, the superior of the community of the Holy Spirit, who asked him for some sign of his friendship, gave him "a small crucifix the length of a finger, saying: 'this is the most precious thing I have in the world, I give it to you'; [...] this small

crucifix was worn out by Montfort's frequent use of it to kiss it.

During the missions, he distributed small cloth crosses to the participants. But one of the highlights of the mission was the blessing of a Calvary. In a generally high place, a large cross was to remind everyone of God's commitment to save humanity and the commitment of the baptized to carry his cross every day in the footsteps of his Master. It was another way of engraving in hearts, as it was in his, the devotion and love of Jesus Christ Crucified, and a powerful means of celebrating and perpetuating the triumph of Calvary.

Pontchâteau (1708-1710)

[...] For sixteen months, every day, several hundred volunteers worked on this grandiose undertaking: a giant cross more than fifteen meters high, framed by those of the thieves, statues of Mary, John and Magdalene, all of them on top of a hill about thirty meters high, visible from thirty kilometers away; there were also three chapels and a plantation of fir and cypress trees that symbolized the decades of the rosary. The Calvary, whose blessing was forbidden by the Bishop of Nantes, was destroyed a little later.

1712 at Sallertaine, a new (more modest) Calvary project. A few weeks after the blessing, at the instigation of Montfort's enemies, the governor decided to destroy the Calvary.

Each time, the glorious cross deprived of triumph and popular veneration became a painful cross planted in the heart of each person, bearing lasting fruit.

In April 1716 in Saint Laurent-sur-Sèvre, the Calvary of his last mission was erected the day after his death a few hours before his burial.

3. /How Montfort carry his cross

The event of the calvary of Pontchâteau and the weeks that followed allow us to understand first-hand how Montfort faced the test.

With the prior agreement of the Bishop, everything was ready for the blessing on September 13, 1710. At four o'clock in the afternoon, a prohibition to proceed with the blessing: order of the king, notified by the Bishop of Nantes. Montfort walks all night, goes to look for the bishop to clarify. The prohibition is maintained. Without changing anything in his program, he begins the following

Sunday, the mission of Saint Molf in the same diocese. From the first weeks, he is forbidden to preach and hear confessions in the whole diocese. When he reads the Bishop's notice, he cries. And yet, the bearer of the message "did not see him worried or bitter: suffering and silence was the only attitude he took on such occasions". Another visit to the Bishop, "waiting for the ban to be revoked". It was to learn from the Prelate that the Calvary of Pontchâteau would be destroyed. Then he made a retreat (at the Jesuit house in Nantes) with amazing serenity, keeping silent about everything that had happened. To the visitors who approached him, he answered: "I have neither sorrow nor pain, I am happy". Happy and joyful in his apostolic sufferings (L. 26), Montfort invited those around him to thank God with him (L. 24), to recite the Te Deum.

III. THE DOCTRINE OF FATHER OF MONTFORT ON THE CROSS (*Dicc. Croix. p. 334ss*)

In the A.T. and N.T., Montfort re-read in his own way God's plan for humanity, an eternal plan of love, life, and salvation. To realize this plan, God chose the redemptive Incarnation.

1- The cross in the life of Christ

a) The redemptive incarnation.

It is "the first mystery of Jesus Christ, [...] a compendium of all the mysteries, which contains the will and grace of all" (TD 248), it makes all the others possible (Mystery in the sense of the seventeenth century, = the various events in the life of Christ and Mary, which continue to bear fruit inasmuch as they are contemplated, meditated upon and lived).

It is as the Incarnate Word that Christ could be born, teach, suffer, die and rise.

Montfort speaks of this as "the greatest mystery of eternal Wisdom" (LEW 167, LFC 26, C.19,1).

In choosing the Incarnation, to share our human condition, Christ chose a state of suffering, he voluntarily established himself in a state of cross.

b) Christ lying on the cross

In LEW Montfort thus shows us that Jesus the Incarnate Wisdom chose the cross from his incarnation to his actual death on the cross (cf. LEW 169, 170). This Montfortian doctrine is the

result of the influence of the spiritual authors of the 17th century. (Cf. above)

(A revealing detail: on the statue of Our Lady of the Way carrying the Child Jesus, which is said to have been sculpted by him, the Child Jesus already has the scar on the pierced side. A reminder of the mystery of the cross at all stages of Jesus' life)

In describing the sufferings endured by Christ (LEW ch. 13), Montfort underlines their cause or meaning: the love of man. It is for him that he walks with the cross, that he marries the cross (LEW 170), that he sticks to the cross (LEW 171), that he identifies with the cross (LEW 172). After having chosen it "in the bosom of the Father" (LEW 190) and after having renewed this choice in the bosom of Mary (LEW 170), "all his seeking, all his desires, tended towards the cross" (LEW 170; cf. C. 19).

c) Mystery of love and wisdom

Eternal Wisdom, Jesus Christ could have won the hearts of men by other means than the cross (charms, pleasures, greatness, without humiliation... (cf. LEW 168), but he did not. Renouncing the joy that would be His due, He endured the cross (cf. Heb. 12:2), cf. also Phil. 2:6-8: "*Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, was not jealous of the rank that made Him equal with God. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, becoming a man. Recognized as a man in his own appearance, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross*". If God has chosen the cross, then it is no longer foolishness, ignominy or scandal, it becomes supreme wisdom, condemning the short-sighted human wisdom, the earthly wisdom of which James speaks, that of the goods of the earth (LEW 80), the carnal wisdom (cf. LEW 80, 81, 82). This is Montfort's reasoning in a nutshell. And God will not change. Eternal Wisdom is united to the cross in an indissoluble bond, in an eternal alliance. Therefore, it is impossible to find it from now on by any other way. "Never the cross without Jesus nor Jesus without the cross" (LEW 172; 180).

d) Mystery of suffering and glory

The indissoluble union of Jesus Christ Wisdom and the cross is made concrete on Calvary, where they give themselves to each other (cf. LEW 170-171). Christ gave himself up, abandoned to the Cross. Deprivation to the extreme, physical and moral

suffering, the presence of his mother at the foot of the Cross, the "abandonment of the Father", are all the torments of suffering man par excellence (cf. LEW 155-162). Montfort speaks little of the resurrection. Would suffering and death be an end point? No, not at all. Like the authors of his time, Montfort celebrates "the triumph of eternal Wisdom on the Cross and through the Cross" (LEW Chapter XV).

Canticle 19 summarizes the triumph of the Cross. Montfort considers the Cross of Christ as a trophy of victory, worthy of adoration (LEW 172). Meanwhile, the Cross is a sign to gather Christ's soldiers to fly from victory to victory (LEW 173), for "Christ crucified ... has become the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). His triumph is manifested here on earth by inner joy, peace and the sweetness of Christ.

2- The Cross in the Christian's life

a) Baptism and its requirements

Don't you know? All of us who are united to Jesus Christ by baptism are united to his death. If, therefore, by the baptism that unites us to his death, we have been buried with him, it is so that we too may lead a new life, like Christ who, through the omnipotence of the Father, has risen from the dead. (Romans 6:3-4)

By immersing himself in the water, symbol of the Spirit, he buried the sinner in the death of Christ, and comes out of it as a new creature (Col 2:12; 2 Cor 5:17). Logically invited to live as a "new man" (Eph 2:15), the Christian remains confronted with sin all his life. The opposition between the "old man" and the "new man", between "flesh and spirit", is a source of renunciation and suffering. ...] "We bear everywhere and always the mortal sufferings of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Montfort does not ignore this Pauline doctrine of baptism, but he will change the emphasis to the mystery of the Incarnation. "God the Son wants to be formed and, so to speak, to become incarnate in his members every day" (TD 31). We are not our own, but Christ's (1 Cor 6:19), "wholly his own as his members" (TD 68) and as such associated in a special way with his cross. In short, the baptized is

placed on the cross with Christ. The promises of baptism are a decision to follow Christ even in his suffering: "I give myself completely to Jesus, to carry my cross in his steps.

b) Perfect consecration to Mary and the cross

The perfect consecration to Jesus Christ by the hands of Mary is "a perfect renewal of the vows and promises of holy baptism" (TD 120). It consists in "giving, consecrating and sacrificing oneself voluntarily and out of love", in renouncing the "right to dispose of oneself" (SM 29), it (the perfect consecration) is not exempt from some interior tear.

The perfect servant of "Jesus in Mary" is inclined towards the fulfilment of the Father's will, like the one who decided to follow Christ (cf. LEW 187).

According to Montfort, those who have encountered Mary out of true devotion are more beset by crosses and sufferings than anyone else, "because Mary, being the mother of the living, gives to all her children pieces of the Tree of Life which is the cross of Jesus" (SM 22). (SM 22) "By carving out good crosses she gives them (also) the grace to carry them patiently and even joyfully, so that the crosses she gives to her own are more like jams or candied crosses than bitter ones (SM 22).

c) The cross, the way of wisdom

The cross is "less an object of contemplation and a sensitive effusion than a mystery to be deepened and lived". It is not enough to proclaim that Wisdom is the Cross and that the Cross is Wisdom. We must put ourselves in the school of the Master: "Only Jesus Christ can teach you and make you taste this mystery by his victorious grace" (LFC 26). He who knows "how to carry his cross better, when he knows neither A nor B, is the most learned of all. LEW 179.

Therefore, it is necessary "to ask for the wisdom of the cross, which is a tasty and experimental science of the truth [...] to ask for it unceasingly and strongly, without hesitation, without fear of not obtaining it", and it is "clear from experience how the cross can be desired, sought and tasted" (LFC 45).

One must be humble, small, mortified and introspective to know the mystery of the Cross (LFC 45). A grace that "must be merited by great fidelity and great deeds" (LEW 174), which God grants only to his "greatest friends, after many prayers, desires and supplications" (LEW 175; 103; 173). It makes the missionary's word fruitful. "I have never made more conversions than after the bloodiest and most unjust prohibitions" (L. 26).

d) The cross as a sign of love

In a letter to Mother St. Joseph, a nun of the Blessed Sacrament, Montfort even wrote: "Your soul carries a great and heavy cross. Oh, what happiness for it! May it have confidence that God, all goodness, will continue to make it suffer [...] is the proof that it is indeed loved. I assure you, because the best sign that one is loved by God is when one is hated by the world and harassed by the crosses" (L. 13).

For sinful man, the cross is a "loving punishment" [...] moreover "accompanied by sweetness and merits" and "followed by rewards in time and eternity" (LFC 21). [...] Montfort insists on the tact and delicacy of God by distributing the crosses "in proportion to our weakness" (LEW 103). Each one receives "his own cross and not that of another".

In return, the Christian who welcomes it and takes charge of it finds in his cross the opportunity to manifest his love for God (cf. LEW 176).

a) Joy in the sufferings of the cross

Through baptism a person becomes a "disciple of Christ" who commits himself to renounce himself, to take up and carry his cross, following in the footsteps of his Master. Thus, the baptized person must expect to wage a battle with Satan and with the world, insofar as he takes seriously and decides to live the baptismal commitment by dedicating himself to Mary (TD 50, 54; PE 18). [...] Little by little Christ associates the Christian with his own cross in many ways: pains, illnesses, spiritual sorrows, droughts, misunderstandings of relatives and friends, hidden sufferings that no one can alleviate (cf. LFC 18). He must "renounce himself, divest himself of the old man (cf. TD 221), in a

word, to die to himself every day (TD 81; cf. universal and continuous mortification LEW 196).

When it is carried well, the cross produces joy in the soul. Montfort lacks words to express this joy of which he speaks as a connoisseur. He writes: "Imagine all the greatest joys of the earth, the joy [...] of a poor man who is filled with all kinds of riches; [...] the joy of a peasant who ascends to the throne; the joy of a merchant who earns millions of gold; the joy of the generals of the army who win victories; the joy of the captives who are freed from their shackles," all these joys are very small! The joy "of a crucified man who suffers well embraces and surpasses them all" (LFC 34). (Cf. the perfect joy of Francis of Assisi, appendix 2).

And who will say the glory achieved for heaven when death has transformed for a moment the weight of suffering into the eternal weight of glory? (LEW 170). (cf. *Beatitudes Mt 5:10*) *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you if they insult you, persecute you, and speak all kinds of evil against you falsely, for my sake.*

3. To understand (and live) Montfort's teaching

a) Christian logic

At first glance, Montfort's behavior and his teachings on the cross seem out of the ordinary. Is there not a masochistic tendency or a morbid attraction to suffering in the young student who regularly wore sackcloth and imposed disciplines on himself, slept very little and enjoyed looking at and contemplating the faces of the dead? Was it normal for the thirty-five year old man to think that Vertou's mission was going badly when, in the opinion of his collaborators, the best in the world was going? How should we interpret the "pas de croix quelle croix" ("no cross, what a cross!") that he threw on this occasion? What feelings animated the "Montfort Founder" a few months before his death, when he wished his community of the Daughters of Wisdom "a year full of struggles and victories, of crosses and poverty and contempt" (L.32)? Without denying a certain disdain for human nature, his deepest motivations lie elsewhere.

"God alone", Jesus Christ Incarnate and Crucified Wisdom, his Gospel, are his only references. Through spiritual intuition and grace, he understood that God himself, in order to save man, chose the path of suffering and Calvary. As a baptized person and a missionary, he must take the same path. Walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ forces you to choose an art of living that is the opposite of that of the world. The struggle against worldly wisdom generates trials that are a source of life and a guarantee of fruitfulness. ...] Montfort invites all the "friends" of Jesus Christ to understand the need for this and to commit themselves without concessions. And he can promise them spiritual joy, the joy of the Beatitudes, the fruit of the Spirit in the faithful soul, for having personally tasted his sweetness in the depths of his abandonment. From there to desiring crosses for himself and for others, there is only one step that he happily takes.

a) Wisdom or madness?

Certain statements or shortcuts in Montfort's language can give rise to false interpretations of his spiritual doctrine, especially when he speaks of the cross. Example in LEW ch. XIV: "Wisdom is pleased with it, she values it among all that is great and bright in heaven and on earth (LEW 168) etc. (LEW 170, 177, 180) .] To take these abrupt expressions simply, or to take them out of their context, would lead us to consider God as a perverse being who takes pleasure in human suffering. They are partially enlightened when we see in them the extreme manifestation of God's love and friendship for man (cf. LEW Chapter VI): "There is a bond of friendship so great between eternal Wisdom and man that it is incomprehensible". It is because of "the excess of love she gave him" that "she gave herself to death to save him" (LEW 64) (cf. her reference to Rom. 5:8-9 in LEW 156: "Jesus Christ showed the love he has for us by dying for us, etc.").

But the mystery of the cross like all suffering is not dispelled by all that. Rather, it thickens when God makes the choice. Because suffering is an evil that man faces, which philosophers and religions have

tried to find an explanation for without ever succeeding - for there is none - against which the only attitude worthy of man is rebellion to call it, and the struggle to diminish or abolish it, rebellion and struggle through which freedom continues to give meaning to life.

God never wants evil and suffering since he made man for happiness. But, apparently powerless in the face of evil, he wanted to be in solidarity with men and women in their suffering. This extreme solidarity opens a breach, allows "hope against all hope" (Rom 4:18). On the cross, God became credible, in his apparent powerlessness, becoming man's Good Samaritan in his misery, taking on all suffering (Is 53:4; cf. Is 53:3.10). From now on nothing can separate man from the love of God thus manifested in Jesus crucified.

...] God, by uniting in Jesus Christ every man who suffers and carries his cross, offers him the possibility of facing the trial, of humanizing his life in the depths of his suffering, and thus of continuing to open up the future until the end of his earthly existence.

"God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us" (Rom 8:32-39) .] "It is through Christ and in Christ that the enigma of pain and death that, outside of his Gospel, crushes us is illuminated" (Second Vatican Council, GS 22). Jesus Christ proposes to his disciples a new form of life, a wisdom according to God.

"Crazy for Christ" (1 Cor 5:10). Like Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Teresa of Jesus... like so many others, Montfort's choice is unequivocal. To suffer and be despised for Christ, to value only the cross, to implore God for it urgently (Cf. LEW 177), to live it day by day.

Montfort certainly lived what St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "I live, but it is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). The saints understand the cross. Following in the footsteps of the man God, they accept the daily cross as the most precious good. They love it all their lives... The

cross is the indispensable tool through which the divine penetrates the human being".

Conclusion

All church members are called to holiness (cf. I Thess. 4:3; cf. Eph. 1:4), in different ways and in different positions. Under the guidance of the Spirit and in obedience to the Father, all walk in the footsteps of Christ, poor, humble and burdened by his cross, to deserve to be partakers of His glory (cf. LG 39:41). The more the crucified Christ takes a place in their hearts and lives, the more His holiness will be manifested. Throughout history, such examples of holiness abound. St. Louis Marie de Montfort is one of them. ...] Through his disciples, they continue to remind other Christians of the reality of Christ's saving suffering.

Brother Maurice Hérault

*From the article "CROIX", Morfortian Spirituality
Dictionary, Brother Jean Bulteau, p. 327-345.*