

## **NEVER THE CROSS WITHOUT JESUS, NOR JESUS WITHOUT THE CROSS**

St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716) is especially known in the Church for his "Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin", a treatise that has over three hundred editions in many languages. In it he expresses his spiritual experience, strongly emphasizing, in line with the Redemptive Incarnation, the Christological orientation of all devotion to Mary. He invites us to make "the perfect consecration of ourselves to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary", and compares it to "a perfect renewal of the vows and promises of Holy Baptism". (TD 120) (1). His "Treatise on True Devotion" is clarified by consulting his other writings, especially "The Love of Eternal Wisdom", and even more so in the light of his whole life.

His life was that of a Christian and a priest passionate about Jesus Christ. Pope Clement XI entrusted him with the evangelization of the people and of children, in perfect submission to the bishops, and he dedicated himself entirely to this task until his death at the age of 43, through parish missions, catechesis, retreats, etc. He paid special attention to the poor, devoted considerable time to prayer and wrote short "treatises" and numerous songs for the use of the believers.

**The cross**, in its many forms, was the inseparable companion of his life. His preaching was disturbing and created enemies for him. His untimely zeal was denounced. As a result of unjust or slanderous reports, he was forbidden or rejected in seven dioceses, although he always wanted to be faithful to the guidelines of the bishops. Three years before his death, he wrote to one of his sisters: "If you only knew my crosses and humiliations in detail... I am never in a country where I do not give an ounce of my cross to be carried by my best friends, often in spite of myself and them. Always on thorns... I am like a ball in a palm game: it is enough for one to push it to one side for another to push it to the other. This is how I have been, relentlessly and without rest, for thirteen years..." (that is, since he became a priest). (L26).

He considered that trials were inherent in every work of God: "An enterprise... glorious to God and... ...and beneficial to others must be sown with thorns and crosses" (L27). He also saw it as a condition for apostolic fruitfulness: "I have never obtained so many conversions as after the most bloody and unjust prohibitions" (L26). Above all, he knew that the disciple of Jesus Christ is called to follow in the footsteps of his only Master, in the same way as He did.

In his "Circular Letter to the Friends of the Cross" (an association founded - among others - to prolong the results of its missions), he reminds us that the title "Friend of the Cross" "is the unequivocal name of a Christian... What a great name it is...! (LFC3). Then he comments at length on Mt 16:24: "All Christian perfection... consists in 1. wanting to become saint: if anyone wants to come after me; 2. abstaining: to renounce oneself; 3. suffering: to carry one's cross; 4. acting: and following me" (LFC13).

For Montfort, trials and sufferings are a sign that the Father thinks of us and that he loves us. As "**pupils of a crucified God**", we must, like Jesus Christ, make our learning complete. Temples of the Holy Spirit, we must let ourselves be sculpted and chiselled to take our rightful place in the building of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. LFC 25, 26, 28).

In whatever form it appears in the life of the Christian, the cross must be accepted as "the great secret of God". "If one were to understand it, he would have Masses, novenas and pilgrimages said to obtain it" (LFC 35).

But understanding it is not easy. It requires a special grace from God and a long practice. Is not the Cross of Christ "the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom"? (LEW 167). Jesus Christ, the Eternal Wisdom, became the Incarnate and Crucified Wisdom. He chose the Cross, married it, identified with it, formed an indissoluble bond with it (cf. LEW 170-172, 190). It is impossible to meet him in any other way from now on. "*Never the cross without Jesus nor Jesus without the cross*" (LEW 172). "True Wisdom (Christ)... dwells so much in the Cross that you will not find her outside of it in this world, and she has even become so

incorporated and united to the Cross that it can truly be said that Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom. The Cross, therefore, is no longer madness, ignominy or scandal, but becomes supreme wisdom by divine choice and definitively condemns false human myopic wisdom (LEW 80-82).

Like St. Paul, Montfort wants "to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). He invites the Christian to live in coherence with his baptism, adhering to the same wisdom of God. Since the promises of baptism are a personal recognition of belonging to Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 6:19) and a conscious and free decision to follow him in his Paschal Mystery, he renews them in these words: "I give myself entirely to Jesus Christ, through the hands of Mary, to carry my cross in his footsteps all the days of my life". It is the "Covenant Contract with God" that he makes the participants sign at the end of the mission. The baptized person is invited to receive communion at the mystical nuptials of Incarnate Wisdom and the Cross. Being himself espoused by Jesus Christ in baptism (C27, 11), the more intimate his union with Christ, the more the Cross is rooted in his heart. Incorporated into Christ, having become one of his members, if he refused to suffer it would be as if he were a denaturalized, "He would be an unheard of monster. (LFC27).

He who has found Mary through true devotion is himself beset by crosses and sufferings, more than any other "because Mary, being the Mother of the living, gives to all her children pieces of the Tree of Life and the Cross of Jesus" (SM 22). In this way, she makes "her greatest favourites" benefit from "the greatest graces and favours from heaven" (TD 155). But, notes Montfort, in sharing her experience and adding a little humor, "by carving them good crosses, she gives them the grace to carry them patiently and even joyfully, so that the crosses she gives to those who belong to her are more like jams or candied crosses than bitter crosses" (SM 22).

"Only Jesus Christ can teach you and make you taste this mystery by his victorious grace" (LFC 26). We must therefore ask for this grace, "ask for the Wisdom of the Cross, which is a tasty and experimental science of truth..., ask for it unceasingly and strongly, without hesitation, without fear of not obtaining it". Then one obtains it "inevitably" and sees "clearly, from experience, how it is possible for one to desire, seek and taste the Cross" (LFC 45).

In the end, it is not the cross that we seek for itself, but Jesus crucified, who "renounced the joy that was his due... and endured the cross" (Heb 12:2), who took upon himself all human suffering (cf. Is 53:4) physical, moral, spiritual, adding "to all his torments the most cruel and terrible of all, which was his abandonment on the cross, when he cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you left me, why have you forsaken me?'" (ASE 162; cf. Mt 27:46).

If God chose the way of the cross to save men, it was to "give them ... a testimony of greater love" (LEW 164). "Jesus Christ showed his love for us by dying for us when we were still sinners and therefore his enemies" (LEW 156; Rom 5:8-9). "**What an excess of charity** makes us see in this mystery" of his suffering (LEW 155). If there is an excess, it is first of all on God's part...

It is also the witness that God expects from us to show him that we love him. "The cross is good and precious... because it makes us like Jesus Christ..., because it is, when it is carried well, **the cause, the food and the witness of love**. It kindles the fire of divine love in the heart by separating it from the creatures. It maintains and increases this love; and, as wood is the food of fire, so the cross is the food of love". (LEW 176).

Writing to a nun of the Blessed Sacrament, Montfort encouraged her with these words: "Your soul bears a great cross, wide and heavy. Oh, what happiness for it! May it have confidence that if God continues to make it suffer... It is the proof that it is truly loved. I say with certainty, because the best sign that one is loved by God is when one is hated by the world and besieged by the crosses" (L 13).

He also insists on the tact and delicacy of God in providing the crosses according to our weakness (LEW 103). Each one receives "his cross and not someone else's, his cross which I have carved for him from a part of the cross I carried on Calvary, because of the infinite goodness I have for him" (LFC 18).

Crosses well carried produce joy in the soul, a joy that surpasses all others. They are "a delicate piece of Paradise" (LEW 177) because "through them we are united to God alone, our centre and our end" (2). The triumph of the Cross is not purely eschatological; it is manifested here on earth through inner peace and the intimate experience of Christ's sweetness.

This is how we can understand the vows Montfort made on December 31st, 1715 for the Wisdom Community of La Rochelle: "I wish you a year full of struggles and victories, of crosses and poverty and contempt" (L 32).

In solemnly erecting a Calvary at the end of each mission, as in having Christians venerate the crucifix, Montfort had no other objective than to awaken or maintain a great love for Jesus crucified. In recalling God's commitment to man's salvation and his immense love, he manifested the evident need for the baptized to carry their cross every day, following Jesus.

One day, in his home parish, where his reputation as a preacher had preceded him, Montfort went up to the pulpit, knelt down and, without saying a word, took his crucifix, looked at it carefully and burst into tears. He came down from the pulpit, still without saying a word, and presented it to everyone to be kissed. All were moved and repented; the goal was achieved. (3).

At the beginning of his ministry, planning to found a congregation of nuns, he himself placed a cross, almost two meters high, in a hospital ward where the first candidates were admitted, and wrote a whole program of life and formation for them.

Three weeks before his death, to those in charge of a hospice who wanted to broaden the scope of their work, he wrote: The people "who must take care of the incurable poor... must be prepared, if the work is God's, to suffer with joy all kinds of crosses...; the first thing to be done in this house will be to plant a cross there. It is the first piece of furniture to be placed there" (L 33).

Montfort was not content with contemplating himself or making people love Jesus crucified through the veneration of the Mission Cross or the crucifix. First and foremost, he saw in each suffering person and in each poor person "the living image of Jesus Christ" (C 17, 14). (C 17, 14). The poor, he said, "are Jesus Christ himself" (id). All his life he gave them special affection and attention. One night, during a mission, when he met a leper in the street covered with sores, he took the first step towards him, he spoke to him. Then he picked him up, put him on his shoulders and walked to the mission house. As he found the door closed, because it was late, he called out, shouting several times: "Open to Jesus Christ, open to Jesus Christ!" (4)

In the end, Montfort took to heart and lived Jesus' word: "If anyone wants to follow me..." As a missionary, he invited Christians to do the same. He did not leave out any of the more bitter aspects of the Gospel, because he constantly kept his eyes fixed on the one who had dictated them, **Jesus crucified**, his only love.

This path of wisdom and love, of the cross and joy, of holiness and apostolic fruitfulness has lost none of its relevance.

Jean BULTEAU fsg

## Notes

(1) References to Montfort's writings are taken from "OEUVRES COMPLETES, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, using the following abbreviations:

L: Letters

LEW: Love of Eternal Wisdom

LAC: Circular Letter to the Friends of the Cross

SM: Mary's secret

TD: Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

C: Chants.

(2) H. BOUDON: Les Saintes Voyes de la Croix, Paris, 1769, p. 66.

(3) Cf. Documents and Research, IV, Charles BESNARD: Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, International Montfortian Centre, Rome, 1981, p. 147.

(4) Ibid., p. 114