

Montfort, a Mystic

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1. Introduction: Mysticism: The term ‘mysticism’ has been defined by many writers with slight variations in emphasis. Mysticism is as old as humanity’s search for an experience of the Absolute. It existed in Judaism as well as in other religions. Christ lived in constant union with His Father and union with God through him became the way of his disciples. In the early Church many progressed towards union with God in Christ and realized it by renunciation of self and in loving service to others. Mysticism means union with the divine and the mystic is the one who attains this union. “Union with God’, especially through identification with Christ is the goal of all authentic Christian mysticism” (Richard Woods, *Mysterion*, p. 36) St. John of the Cross tells us, “The soul cannot come to this union without great detachment from every created thing and sharp mortification.” (*The Dark Night of the Soul*, Bk II, 24,4) St. Montfort says, “It is certain that growth in the holiness of God is your vocation... What a marvelous transformation is possible! Dust into light, uncleanness into purity, sinfulness into holiness, creature into Creator, man into God!” (SM 3) According to him, “all perfection consists in our being formed, united and consecrated to Jesus.” (TD 120)

2. Montfort, a 17c. mystic: “The 14c. is considered the golden age of Christian mysticism, with a deep Christological spirituality. It produced outstanding mystics: in Germany, St. Gertrude and Suso, in Italy, Dante and St. Catherine of Sienna and in England, the author of the *Cloud Unknown* and Dame Juliana Norwich.” (*Mysterion*, p. 265) “The third age of Christian mysticism saw the blossoming in Spain of the great saints and mystics Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.” (*Ibid*, p. 266) At the end of the 16 c. the torch of mysticism was passed to France where it burned brightly for more than 60 years. This was due to the great mystics of the French School of Spirituality, like Card. Berulle, Fr. Olier, Fr. Condren St. John Eudes, St. John Baptist de la Salle, St. Louis Grignion de Montfort and others. Church historian Daniel Rops in his book, ‘*The Mystics of France*’ has included Montfort and quoted extensively from his books. *The True Devotion to Mary*, *the Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, and *the Love of Eternal Wisdom* justify the inclusion. Bremond has called Montfort “the last of the great Berullians”. Richard Woods in his book *Mysterion* has mentioned that Catholicism continued to shape mystics in the womb of monastic silence and in the market place through life and teachings of Bro. Lawrence of the Resurrection, Angelus Silesius, St. Grignion de Montfort, Fr. J.P. de Caussade, and others. Montfort is considered as one of the representatives of the apex of French mysticism. Montfort was essentially a man of God experience and because of that he was able to touch the hearts of his hearers, and that made him a great missionary.

3. Montfort, a youth given to prayer and solitude: All his biographers have pointed out in clear terms Montfort’s love for solitude. Fr. Joseph Grandet, the first biographer, says. “In order to avoid worldly people and their amusements, young Grignion withdrew into some corner of the house to give himself to prayers or recite his rosary in front of a small picture of the Blessed Virgin. He continued this practice when he was more advanced in years.” (p. 4) Fr. John Baptist Blain, his second biographer and classmate, says, “When he was kneeling in front of a picture of Mary, young Grignion appeared to be completely unaware of everyone else. Being as it were, in trance with his senses in some way suspended: he would kneel for hours at the foot of the altars, looking devout and carried away, motionless as if spellbound. The he took me out into the garden where he showed me some secluded spots which he found very suitable for his prayers;

he liked to spend most of his time there praying. He seemed so full of the thought of God, so attentive to Him, so overflowing with love of Him.” (Blain, Biography of Montfort, pp. 13,14,19)

While Louis was a student at Rennes, he grew in his spirit of piety. Fr. Charles Besnard, the third biographer, has noted, “While going to and returning from school, he never failed going to the church of the Carmelites in order to adore Jesus Christ and to render his tender and profound respects to his divine Mother.” (Bk. I, p. 14) “Grignon made use of his good dispositions like, lively and penetrating intelligence, strong will power, creative imagination, well disciplined life and strong character to cultivate a personalized spirituality. As an adolescent, his option was to be for God Alone and before leaving for Paris, his spirituality had already taken a definitive orientation.” (Fr. Jovan Osch, D.S., p. 71)

4. A seminarian with a passion for the science of the saints: When Louis joined the Little Seminary of St. Sulpice in 1695, he gave up his studies at the Sorbonne University, and “thus he had more time to devote to God and could give full play to his dominant inclination for solitude and prayer.” (Blain, p. 70) Grandet has mentioned that his humility and his need for recollection were the reasons for this decision. (Ref. Biography by Grandet, pp. 13,14) Blain has added that Louis was more interested “in the science of the saints” (Blain, 67), than in securing a doctorate in theology. Louis read the book, ‘The Spiritual Letters’ by the mystic Fr. Jean Joseph Surin, s.j. and found in it the ideal of a total renunciation of all earthly reality so as to benefit from the pure love of God and from an intimacy with Him. He read also Blessed Henry Suso’s ‘Little Book of Eternal Wisdom’. He must have read the following works as well: ‘On the love of God, our Lord Jesus Christ’ by Fr. Jean Baptiste Saint Jure, s.j., 2. ‘The Spiritual man, the Spiritual life treated in its principles’ by Fr. Jean Joseph Surin, s.j.. 3. ‘The Little Book of Life, how to live and pray well’ by Fr. Amable Bonnefons, and 4. ‘The Holy Ways of the Cross and the sorrows of the world’ by Fr. Henry Boudon.

In the seminary, “Louis’ meditation became continuous and its spirit he kept up evening during recreations” (Besnard, Bk. 1., p. 23). There he imbibed the Berullian and Suloician spirituality. Fr. Raymond Deville, p.s.s., in his book, ‘The French School of Spirituality’ has quoted the following from the Sulpician Manual of Piety, “The first and last aim of this institute of St. Sulpice is mainly to live for God in our Lord Jesus Christ, in such a way that the interior life of Jesus penetrates deeply in our heart so that each one could say what St. Paul affirmed confidently concerning himself, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives me.’ (Gal 2:20) This should be for all the unique hope and thought and also the only exercise to live interiorly the life of Christ and manifest it in our exterior activities.” (The French School of Spirituality, p. 103)

Initiation to meditation was for the masters of the French School a permanent preoccupation. “The main lines of thought concerning Sulpician meditation were to have Jesus before one’s eyes, in one’s heart and in one’s hands. Bible was not only the principal source of doctrine, but also the source of prayer. A prayerful reading of it was insisted upon.” (Ibid., p.119)

Card. Lercaro, in his book ‘Methods of Mental Prayer’ writing about the Sulpician prayer says, “The word, ‘union’ seems to these masters insufficient to express so great a reality, and they prefer to use the word ‘adherence’. To adhere to Christ still denotes too little, the reality is much greater. Christ spreads himself in us, He instills Himself in us, He embalms our soul and fills it with the inward dispositions of His religious spirit, so that He makes our soul and His, but one

which He animates with the same spirit.” (p. 114) Louis learned this method of prayer and tried to live by the very same feelings and dispositions as those by which Christ was animated in the performance of His mysteries. Union with Christ became the goal of his spiritual life. He prayed and lived in the spirit of the prayer, “Jesus living in Mary, come and live in me.”.

Just before ordination, Louis along with another seminarian was selected to represent the Seminary during the annual pilgrimage to Our Lady of Chartres. “The time he spent there seemed short to him, he was delighted to be there and was reluctant to leave... Then he spent six to eight hours in meditation, that is, from morning till midday, kneeling motionless completely carried away.” (Blain, 184). He was used to spending long time in contemplation.

5. A young priest passionately in love with the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom: Fr. Louis’ study of the books by Fr. Jean Joseph Surin, s.j., introduced him to the theme of Wisdom and the writings of Fr. Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, s.j., proposed the identification of Wisdom with the Second Person of the Trinity. From his seminary days onwards he meditated upon the love of the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom for human beings and what he had done for them. As far as his mystical life is concerned the period from 1701-1704 is an important one, in which he demonstrated an intense desire for Wisdom and to be united with Him.

In the autumn of 1702, Fr. Montfort wrote in a letter to a religious of the Blessed Sacrament, “Enclosed in the beloved cross is true wisdom and that is what I am looking for night and day more eagerly than ever.” (L. 13) During the following year from Paris, he wrote to Sr. Marie Louise Trichet, “Keep on praying, even increase your prayers for me, ask for extreme poverty, the weightiest cross, abjection and humiliations. I accept all of them if only you will beg God to remain with me and not leave me for a moment because I am so weak. What wealth, what glory, what happiness would be mine, if from all this I obtained divine Wisdom, which I long for day and night!” (L. 15) On Oct. 24, 1703, he wrote to the same Sister, “When shall I possess this lovable and mysterious Wisdom? When will Wisdom come to live in me? When shall I be sufficiently equipped to serve as a place of rest for Wisdom in a world, where he is rejected and without a home? Who will give me this bread of understanding with which Wisdom nourishes great souls? Who will give me to drink of the chalice from which Wisdom quenches the thirst of those who serve him? When shall I be crucified and lost to the world? So, pray, entreat God, plead for me to obtain divine Wisdom. You will obtain it completely for me, of this I am quite convinced.” (L. 16)

The above quoted letters have a mystical tone in them. St. John of the Cross tells us, “The fifth step of this ladder of love makes the soul desire and long for God impatiently. On this step the vehemence of the lover to comprehend the Beloved and be united with Him is such that every delay, however brief becomes very long, wearisome and oppressive to it.” (The Dark Night of the Soul, Bk. 2, 19.5) Montfort’s great desire to be united with his Beloved can be seen from the Canticle 126, which he composed during this period and in it he has used the delicate language of courtship. (Ref. Benedetta Papasogli, Montfort, a prophet of our times, p. 230)

“Where do you stop or stay?
O Wisdom, tell me now.
There I’ll fly without delay
’T is love will teach me how.

And if, O gracious Queen
You wound my heart tonight,
That piercing pain, however keen,
Will be my soul's delight." (Canticle 126)

In canticle 103 also Montfort implored Wisdom to come and dwell in him.

All disarmed, your lovers come before you,
Come dwell in me
With tears and crosses they implore you,
Come dwell in me
Forgive the sin my soul deplore
Then cut and shape my heart to yours.

For a home your need is overwhelming,
Come dwell in me
Night and day you seek a worthy dwelling,
Come dwell in me
Oh how delightful it would be
If you would make your home in me. (Canticle 103)

Montfort believed that the only dwelling fit enough for Wisdom was Mary (ref. LEW 203). "Montfort prayed to have the faith of Mary in order to obtain Wisdom (C 124, 7-8) and more precisely for this mystical or theological attitude which permitted one to say 'Yes' to God in complete self-surrender to Him, as what Mary did at the Annunciation (Lk 1:38)." (Fr. Stefano de Fiores, *smm*, D.S., p. 85) Montfort composed and prayed the following Canticle:

Come, O Wisdom, come! Hear this, a beggar's plea
By Mary's womb, by every gush
Of Blood her Jesus shed for me,
Confound me not, nor bid me hush.

Why do you prolong my painful martyrdom?
For you, I languish night and day.
My heart keeps calling to you, "Come!"
My soul grows faint with you away. (Canticle 124, 1-2)

Montfort had to go through the dark night of the spirit (ref. Grandet, p. 53) and the dark night of the sense, before he could get united to Wisdom. He felt rejected by all when he was staying under the staircase of a dilapidated building on the Pot-de-Fer Street, Paris. In pain he cried out, "My only here is God. Those friends I once had in Paris have deserted me." (L. 15) About this period, Blain says, "God made up for his poverty, his humiliations and sufferings by granting him the grace of communicating with Him so intimately and so frequently that the servant of God spent the greater part of his days and nights in prayer." (Blain, 221) During this period, Montfort meditated upon the Salvation History as given in the Book of Wisdom and in the Gospels. He was really enamored of Wisdom – Wisdom which was not merely a truth to be discovered but a Person to be possessed, namely the Son of God seen under the feminine image of Wisdom. He firstly meditated upon the acts of love shown by the Eternal Wisdom towards human beings as described in the Book of Wisdom. He found the book to be like a Love Letter of Eternal Wisdom addressed to men. "This book reads like a letter written by a lover to win the

affection of the beloved.” (LEW 65) Secondly Montfort contemplated Christ the Incarnate Wisdom. He had a prolonged and intense contemplation of Christ on the cross. Cross became for him the highest manifestation of God’s love for human beings and thus he arrived a fusion of Wisdom and Cross and thus he was able to say, “Christ has so truly incorporated and united himself with the Cross that in all truth we can say: Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom.” (LEW 180)

Fr. Poullart des Places, Montfort’s friend, invited him to give conferences to his seminarians in the Holy Spirit Seminary. Montfort gave the conferences of the topic of ‘Detachment and total surrender to God’. He collected together the themes developed in the conferences and wrote his first book, ‘The Love of Eternal Wisdom’. Thus this book was the result not only of the conferences but also of his own personal contemplation. Fr. Perouas, smm, has this to say about this book, “Mr. Grignon is putting down on paper his contemplation, rather than writing a book for others. He finds in the biblical texts what he is looking for. This gives to these pages a personal touch and freshness which will be missing in his other writings.” (Ref. Montfort, the man and the message, p. 17, 38) Fr. Raymond Deville, p.s.s., has commented, “Especially on the topic of Eternal Wisdom, Montfort follows the Berullian thought, enriching it by a long and loving contemplation of that Wisdom of God, who is none other than the Word Incarnate.” (French School of Spirituality, p. 139)

Fr, Maurice Gilbert, s.j., in an article entitled ‘Montfort’s Spiritual Exegesis’ has remarked, “It is truly surprising to observe the impact of the Book of Wisdom on Montfort’s treatise. I do not whether there exists any other spiritual writing of the same importance in which the doctrine is based, as in the case of Montfort, on this little Greek book of the Old Testament. If it may be said that, in general, the wisdom writings of the Old Testament have been little used, it is certain that no patristic commentary of the Book of Wisdom has been preserved, The case of Montfort’s spiritual exegesis of the Book of Wisdom is exceptional.” (New Theological Review, 1982, p. 664) At the request of the Dutch Province of the Daughters of Wisdom, a research was done into the spirituality of The Love of Eternal Wisdom at the Titus Brandsma Institute in Nijmegen, in Netherlands. Based on the research done, Pierre Humblet published a booklet and in it he has remarked: “In our study of The Love of Eternal Wisdom, what struck us most was the fact that its spirituality is highly pervaded by a fundamental mystical undercurrent. It is a mystical work through and through.” (Pierre Humblet, A lover’s letter to her beloved, p. 13)

From Paris, Montfort came to the Poorhouse in Poitiers as its Director and from there on Oct. 28, 1704, he wrote to his mother, “In my new family – the one I belong to now – I have chosen to be wedded to Wisdom and the Cross for in these I find every good, both earthly and heavenly. So precious are these possessions that, if they were but known, Montfort would be the envy of the richest and most powerful kings on earth..” (L. 20) Here it is the question of a spiritual marriage as described by many mystics. He himself has spoken about such a marriage. “It is certain that Eternal Wisdom loves souls so much that he even espouses them, contracting with them a true spiritual marriage which the world cannot understand. History furnishes us with examples of this.” (LEW 54)

6. A mystic and a missionary: While at the Pot-de-Fer Street, Montfort was tempted to give up ministry in order to give himself completely to contemplation. “He even reached the stage where he began to wonder whether he should not discontinue the function of function of the priestly ministry, for a time at least, so that he could give himself to his powerful attraction for

contemplation.” (Blain, pp. 221,222) He sought guidance and continued with his ministry. As months went by, it was no more a question of action or contemplation, but an integration of action and contemplation. Like other great mystics like St. Teresa of Avila, Montfort too became very active still remaining a mystic. Richard Woods says, “There can be no authentic union with God which does not promote a further a further union of human persons. Mysticism is a social process. The mystic who returns to the world that produced him becomes the prophet in action, attempting to translate the solitary vision of illumined compassion into collective fact. Typically, the mystic resumes the history of the unification of humanity by seeking out the most oppressed and forgotten members of society.” (Mysterion, p. 362) This is exactly what Montfort did during his second period as a mystic.

Montfort encountered God in prayer and in nature. But more than that he encountered God in human beings, especially in the poor. “God is present in the social world even more graciously and personally than he is in the world of nature.” (Ibid., p. 62) For Montfort the leper lying by the side of a street in Dinan was Jesus Christ in flesh and blood. He carried him to the missionaries’ house, knocked at the door and cried out, “Open the door to Jesus Christ.” He was always concerned with the poor, materially or spiritually.

After parting company with Fr. Leuduger in October 1707, Montfort spent along with Bros. Mathurin and John some months in the Hermitage of St. Lazare near the town of Montfort. Their days were spent in prayer, manual work and preaching by Montfort. From 1708-1716, i.e., till his death, Montfort was an untiring preacher, writer and organizer. Yet he saw to it that he took time for personal retreat. “During the first six years of his priestly life, he spent nearly two years in personal retreats and during the last ten years, the period of great missionary activity, another two years, thus altogether four years, that is one quarter of his life as a priest.” (Fr. Fabry, smm, D.S., p. 63) The Hermitage of St. Eloi and the grotto of Mervent are standing monuments bearing testimony to Montfort’s love for solitude and prayer.

According to Fr. Blain, even during the days of the mission, “after he had prepared his subject carefully and made a mental note of the points which he wanted to make, he used to warm his heart in contemplation and found in it the fiery darts, the burning words, the God-inspired expressions and movements that one admires in the prophets and the Apostles and which grip the listener, penetrate his heart and achieve his conversion.” (Blain, 248,249) Fr. Bastieres, one of Montfort’s assistants during the missions has borne testimony to Montfort’s habit of meditations. “During the days of the missions he made five meditations per day, might be more on other days.” (Grandet, p. 298) Fr. De la Tour. Montfort’s confessor. Has said that his life was a continuous recollection and that he had the great gift of meditation and contemplation. Montfort taught others meditations and composed a number of hymns on the topic of mental prayer.

During his preaching, Montfort was communicating to the audience an experiential knowledge of God. In his books he has mentioned that he was writing what he had practiced and experienced. In his life he recognized God as a loving Father and the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom’s love for human beings and his desire to be united with them. “Jesus is therefore all love, or rather the very love of the Father and the Holy Spirit.” (LEW 118) “The bond between Eternal Wisdom and man is so close as to be beyond our understanding. Wisdom is for man and man is for Wisdom.” (LEW 64)

7. The mystique of the Cross: Montfort explained everywhere the love that Jesus has shown us by dying on the cross. He had a deep experience of the cross and knew how contributed to the salvation of the world by carrying his own crosses. He considered crosses to be precious and as means to get united to Christ. He erected many calvaries so that people could meditate upon Jesus' love for them. He invited people to carry their own crosses well. "Friends of Jesus Christ, drink of his bitter cup and your friendship with him will increase. Suffer with him and you will be glorified with him. Suffer patiently and the momentary suffering will be changed into an eternity of glory." (LEW 180) "The one among you who knows best how to carry his cross, even though in other things he does not know A from B, is the most learned of all. The great St. Paul returned from the third heaven, where he learned mysteries hidden even from angels, and he proclaimed that he did not know, nor did he want to know anything but Christ crucified." (LFC 26) "You may, and should, pray for the wisdom of the cross, that knowledge of the truth which we experience within ourselves and which by the light of faith deepens our knowledge of the most hidden mysteries, including that of the cross." (LFC 45)

8. Montfort's Marian mysticism: Montfort meditate a lot on the mystery of the Incarnation and thus he understood the unique role of Mary in the life of Jesus and in that of the Church. For him "all perfection consists in our being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus" (TD 120). For Montfort devotion to Mary is only a means to union with Jesus. "The greatest means of all, and the most wonderful of all secrets for obtaining and preserving divine Wisdom is a loving and genuine devotion to the Blessed Virgin." (LEW 203)"The Holy Spirit finding his dear Spouse present again in souls, will come down into them with a great power. He will fill them with his gifts, especially wisdom, by which they will produce wonders of grace." (TD 217) "God the Holy Spirit, who does not produce any divine person, became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. It was with her, in her and of her that he produced his masterpiece, God-made-man, and he produces everyday until the end of the world the members of the body of this adorable Head. For this reason the more he finds Mary his dear and inseparable spouse in a soul the more powerful and effective he becomes in producing Jesus Christ in that soul and that soul in Jesus Christ." (TD 20) "This devotion, if well practiced, not only draws Jesus Christ, Eternal Wisdom, into that soul, but also makes it agreeable to him and he remains there to the end of our life." (LEW 220)

9. The mystique of the permanent presence of Jesus and Mary: Bro. Lawrence of the Resurrection practiced the presence of God and he has told us, It consists in one good act of renunciation of all those things which we recognize do not lead to God, so that we may accustom ourselves to a continual communion with Him, a communion devoid both of vagueness and of artifice. We need only to realize that God is close to us and to turn to Him at every moment, to ask for His help to learn His will... My most usual method is simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon God, to whom I often feel united with more happiness and gratification than those of a baby at its mother's breast." (Practice of the Presence of God, 4th conversation and 5th letter)

Montfort practiced the presence of God and asked others to practice it and he has told us: "This is done easily and quickly by a mere thought, a slight movement of the will or just a few words as – 'I renounce myself and give myself to you, my dear Mother'." (TD 259) He even has gone to the extent of telling us that a soul should breathe Mary as the body breathes air. (Ref. TD 166, 217) His Hymn 24 is on the presence of God. Both Jesus and Mary were present to him all throughout his life. Blain has reported the following: "During the talk I had with him, he told me

that God had granted him a very special grace, which was the continuous presence of Jesus and Mary in the depth of his soul.” (Blain, 340) Thus on his death bed, he was able to tell the evil one, “It is in vain that you attack me! I am between Jesus and Mary.” What Montfort practiced was everyday mysticism. Richard Woods says, “This is everyday mysticism, the common sense of God’s presence in the ordinary human concerns and his passionate involvement with its people.” (Mysterion, p. 60)

10. Faith in the Providence of God: As a youth, after crossing the Cesson Bridge in Rennes, Montfort the vow never to possess anything. He wanted to depend upon God alone. When his Director Fr. Barmondier died he wrote to his uncle, “I do not know yet how things will go, whether I shall stay or leave, as his Will has not yet been made known. Whatever happens I shall not be worried. I have a Father in heaven who will never fail me.” (L. 2) He constantly believed in the Providence of God. His mystical life helped him to grow still further in his faith in Providence. In the Rules he wrote for his congregations, he has come several times on this theme of providence. Around Easter 1716, he wrote to Sr. Marie Louise, “How pleasant and safe is this sacred refuge for a soul truly possessing Wisdom!... If I were to look at all these setbacks from a human standpoint, I would be tempted, like the foolish people of this corrupt world, to complain and to be anxious and worried, but that is not how I look at things. Let me tell you that I expect more serious setbacks, more painful ones to test your faith and confidence. We will then found our community of the Daughters of Wisdom, not on quick sands of gold and silver which the devil is always using to adorn his house, nor indeed on the strength and influence of any human being, for no matter how holy or powerful man may be, he will always be no more than a wisp of straw. We want to found our Congregation of the Wisdom of the Cross of Calvary.” (L. 34) His faith in Providence was born of his prayer experience and communion with God, whom he considered his father. The inevitable development in mystical teachings in the West and the East is an abandonment to divine providence.

11. Montfort’s expectations from his disciples: Montfort expected his disciples to be men and women of prayer. Article 60 of Rule for the Missionaries reads, “The missionaries will, therefore, study and pray unceasingly that they may obtain from God the gift of wisdom so necessary to a preacher for knowing and relishing the truth and getting others to relish it,” (RM 60) He wanted them to relish the truth before preaching it to others. He wanted them to contemplate the truth or mystery and be “filled with the dew from heaven” (PM 9). They need to be “true children of Mary whom she has conceived and begotten by her love, nursed and reared, upheld by her and enriched with her graces.” (PM 21) Montfort was a man of action and contemplation and this is exactly what he expects from his disciples.

12. Conclusion: Montfort had a multi-faceted personality. We often think of him as a great preacher, a great devotee of Mary and a great lover of the poor. We often tend to ignore the fact that he was a mystic. If we want to know him well, then we need to have a holistic approach concerning him. Definitely mysticism is an undeniable facet of his life and personality. Sometimes we find it difficult to combine in the same person mysticism and dynamism. But the great mystics of the world have proved that it is possible and needed. We have examples of Saints Bernard, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Sales and others. Even modern mystics have been great prophets and reformers. We have examples of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Gandhiji, and others. Montfort was another example to the point.

We have looked into the mystical itinerary of Montfort from birth to death. He allotted much time for contemplation. He often recited the Rosary and meditated upon its mysteries. All throughout his life he sought after Wisdom and felt that he was united to Him. Though mysticism loomed large in his life, he was yet a great missionary. He preached a large number of missions, organized many processions, built chapels, calvaries and schools, founded congregations, wrote books, composed many hymns, helped many poor people and fed them, etc. Sometimes we wonder how he managed to do all these. Yet he had much time for prayer. He knew how to manage time well and today we know that time management is an important factor for accomplishing great things.

In Montfort we notice a beautiful integration of action and contemplation. These two enriched each other. In prayer he planned his activities and he brought his activities into prayer. The scriptural injunction, 'pray always', was fully adhered to by Montfort. His life and apostolic works and initiatives were very much inspired by his God experience. "With Montfort, we are in a spiritual order, which is profound, very subtle but not obscure. He pursued a total union with God Alone, for which Mary was a means, because it was through her God became man." (Fr. René Laurentin, Dieu est ma tendresse, p. 212)

Montfort was united to Jesus and Mary and spent all his forces so through Mary, Jesus could reign in the world. His motto was 'God Alone' and he lived and worked for Him alone. "Like every good servant and slave we must not remain idle, but, relying on Mary's protection, we should undertake and carry out great things for our noble Queen." (TD 265) He took risks and he wants his disciples to take risks, and he has told us, "If you don't take risks for God, you won't give anything worthwhile." (L. 27) In his description of the Apostles of the latter times, (ref. TD 55-59), we can understand how a missionary should integrate action and contemplation in his life and mission.

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LOVE OF ETERNAL WISDOM

I. REDISCOVERY OF A FUNDAMENTAL WORK

Of all the works of Montfort, LEW can certainly lay claim to being the least known by people at large. We have lost count of the number of editions published of TD, SM, SR, and FC. But in the case of LEW, we had to wait until 1929 for a definitive edition, and translations into other languages had also to wait a long time and are still far less numerous than those of TD.

Nevertheless a number of those who know Montfort spirituality well have not failed to note the great doctrinal value of LEW and its fundamental importance for an understanding of Montfort's work as a whole. Besides considering it "an academic treatise" and a "great work" equal to the TD, "the second being only a magnificent commentary on chapter 16 of the first and its indispensable complement. The Love of Eternal Wisdom is a fundamental book. It is this book alone which gives us the overall view of Montfort spirituality."¹ J.-M. Dayet expresses a similar opinion: "Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort appears here, then, . . . as an undoubted

contemplative and lover of Eternal Wisdom. This point of view is fundamental for a full understanding of his spirituality."² For his part, M. Quéméneur underlines the missionary dimension of the book: "While it is true that the last work of a writer expresses a more developed stage of his thinking, yet his first work, even if it is imperfect in its construction, is often the one that best reveals his interior strength and the direction he is taking. . . . This secret [the contemplation of Wisdom in search of humanity] was for Montfort the revelation of God's missionary dynamism and therefore of all missionary dynamism."³

If popular opinion has come down in favor of TD, is it because Montfort was less successful in popularizing his views on Wisdom? Or, rather, was this book less in touch with the tastes of the Christian public? Whatever the case, LEW deserves to be known widely today, especially in a period that is particularly restless and searching for a Wisdom that can give meaning to life and to the unfolding of history, and at a time when believers, to their great good fortune, have made renewed contact with a theology and a spirituality nourished primarily on the Bible.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

1. The manuscript The manuscript, which is kept today at the General House of the Company of Mary in Rome, is in a remarkable state of preservation. It is easily legible and is, in the opinion of the editors of OC, in the handwriting of Montfort himself.⁴ More recent and deeper studies of the handwriting of the manuscript, carried out by H. Frehen⁵ and R. Paceri,⁶ come to a different conclusion, however, and find in the manuscript the traces of four different copyists, among them Mulo, Vatel, and Besnard.

2. The title The title can be read quite distinctly at the beginning of the manuscript. There is, however, a question about the use of the genitive "of Eternal Wisdom." Does this have a subjective or an objective meaning? In other words, did Montfort intend to give us his understanding of the love that Eternal Wisdom has for humanity, or was he more concerned with inspiring his readers to love Eternal Wisdom? The lengthy development of the theme of the first part of the work inclines us to opt for the objective interpretation, though the second can certainly not be excluded. Besides, the ambiguity in the title could well be deliberate and might be part of the richness of the work.

3. Date of composition According to general opinion, LEW is a work of Montfort's youth, dating from the first years of his priestly ministry, perhaps during his stay in Paris (1703-1704) near the community founded by Poullart des Places. Montfort was one of the "poor scholars" whom this community welcomed and whose theological and spiritual formation it looked after. In the fifth book of his *Vie de Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort* (Life of St. Louis de Montfort), Besnard tells us: "I have it on the authority of the one who was superior of the house after M. Desplaces, and who had been his student, that one day M. Grignon preached to them on wisdom and gave a very beautiful paraphrase of the book of the Bible that bears this name."⁷ The main theme of this preaching by Montfort and the explicit reference to Wis naturally make us think of LEW. Picot de Clorivière's reference to the same event is no less significant: "This conversation was like a paraphrase of those magnificent praises Solomon addresses to wisdom; but in examining this wisdom, he was at pains to point out that he was speaking not only of this wisdom given to Solomon, and still less of the wisdom of the wise men of the age, but also of the wisdom of the Gospel, of that wisdom Jesus Christ taught us by his example and by his words."⁸

Among those favoring a later date of composition are Dayet, who would place the preaching in Paris on Wisdom at the end of Montfort's life (for example, in 1713), and Frehen, who was led by a comparative study of the manuscripts of H 46 and H 100-102 and LEW and SR, to propose

as the date of the writing or at least the copying of all of these works, "the last two years of Fr. de Montfort's life."⁹

The question of an earlier or a later date leads us to the following question: did LEW serve as the basis for these conferences on Wisdom, or was it the other way round? We have no proof either way, although it was Montfort's usual practice to present in writing what he had first of all taught and passed on in his preaching. But that does not imply a date for the written text much later than the events of 1703-1704.

To sum up, the reasons that favor dating the work around 1703-1704 are: 1. the appearance of both the vocabulary and the theme of Wisdom in the letters dating from this period (L 14-17, 20); 2. the evidence of Besnard on the conversations Montfort had with the seminarians gathered by Poullart des Places, whose content was close to the matter dealt with in LEW; 3. the more scholarly and theoretical character of the work, compared with the popular character of TD, where Montfort shows himself to be an accomplished popularizer with the benefit of lengthy missionary and pastoral experience. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that Montfort may have had his work transcribed during the last two years of his life.

4. For whom was it written? Who is the "dear reader" whom Montfort addresses (LEW 5)? We have just seen that a first audience might well be those who benefited from Montfort's preaching in Paris on Wisdom, namely, young seminarians in formation. This would explain the rather theoretical and scholarly nature of the work.

Another possibility is that he wrote LEW originally for the religious communities that he had founded and to which he was now offering a sort of "book of life." The correspondence he conducted with Marie Louise and the first moves he made to found the Daughters of Wisdom speak of the importance of the theme of the acquisition of Wisdom in Montfort's own spiritual journey and in that of the woman who joined him in his apostolic work. But there are absolutely no indications from Montfort himself or from the first Daughters of Wisdom to show that LEW was either written or received as a work primarily destined for the community of the Daughters of Wisdom.

The same must be said of A. Balmforth's position; he believes he can pick out "some interesting and positive signs to suggest that he was writing especially, if not exclusively, for the future Company of Mary."¹⁰ He rightly recalls the missionary dimension of LEW and its many

affinities with the ideal Montfort holds out to his future missionaries, and we cannot but agree with the general judgment expressed by Balmforth when he says: "Montfort wished this work to serve as an inspiration and guide for those whom he might gather around him to share his life and missionary activity."¹¹ We can scarcely go further than this, and there is nothing in Montfort's text (not even the Latin quotations) that allows us to restrict his intended audience to the disciples of Montfort alone. Above all, the distinction sometimes made between "missionary priests" and "ordinary lay folk" cannot be sustained; it is not only unthinkable today it was so even then in the idea of popular evangelization, which was so dear to Montfort. Montfort is clearly writing for a much larger audience, whom he describes as "chosen souls seeking perfection" (LEW 14), which should not be interpreted here in an elitist or restrictive sense (as opposed, perhaps, to SM 1) but in the Pauline sense of those who have made an option for Jesus Christ and his Gospel (1 Cor 2:6), in other words, all Christians. Indeed, this is the most obvious sense in the light of the Beatitudes, which are quoted every so often in the text (LEW 10, 51, 153) and which remind us of those who hear the Word: "Rather blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11:28). Similarly, we could note how Montfort loves to

emphasize the universal character of the audience that Wisdom looks for: "What man would not love him and search for him with all his strength. All the more so since he is an inexhaustible source of riches for man who was made for him and infinitely eager to give himself to man" (LEW 63; see also LEW 30).

III. SOURCES

In contrast to what he did in TD, where he claims to have "read nearly all the books which treat of devotion to the Blessed Virgin" (TD 118) and gives us a list of the writers who encouraged such a devotion (TD 159-163), Montfort shows himself in LEW to be in some ways more eclectic. Even though the allusions are sometimes brief, we can count about fifteen authors whom he quotes or saints whose testimony he cites: Gregory, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Rupert, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, Henry Suso, Mary Magdalene de Pazzi, Teresa, John of the Cross, etc. There is nothing surprising in the breadth of his documentation. What is surprising is the fact that he makes no mention of his masters in the French school of spirituality, who nevertheless supplied him with a great deal of his material.

1. Spiritual writers Among the spiritual writers who influenced Montfort's writing of LEW, three names stand out: Henry Suso, Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, and Amable Bonnefons. Of these three, only the first is explicitly quoted by Montfort (LEW 101-102, 132). Nevertheless his dependence on the other two is just as sure, as is shown by the countless similarities in wording and in the themes.¹² Still, there are also important differences in each instance. Montfort may well have taken his basic inspiration and part of the title of LEW from the book by Henry Suso, a Dominican religious, since the French translation of the *Horologium Sapientiae* of Blessed Suso was called *Livre de la Sagesse Eternelle* (The Book of Eternal Wisdom). It first appeared in a French version in 1392 and rapidly became very popular among spiritual people, second only to *The Imitation of Christ*. But the similarities between Montfort's text and that of Suso are, taken together, fairly slight, while the differences between the two are much more noteworthy.

The first important difference lies in the biblical character of Montfort's work. Suso, in a book which is about the same length as Montfort's, quotes exactly three verses of Scripture: Wis 8:2 (chap. 1) and Sir 24:19-20 (chap. 7), and it seems that for him Wis is in fact Sir (chap. 7). In this respect, Montfort is clearly different from his predecessor, as we will see later. A second significant difference lies in the place given to the mystery of the Cross. In Montfort, this theme is extremely important (parts of chap. 9-10 and the whole of chap. 13-14), but it is seen in a wider and more global view, which includes Creation, the history of salvation, and the Incarnation. In Suso, attention is focused entirely on the mystery of the Passion, and nothing is said of Creation or the other phases of the history of salvation. Three other works are worthy of note. First of all, there is the monumental work of the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure (1588-1657), *De la connaissance et de l'amour du Fils de Dieu Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (On the Knowledge and Love of the Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ), the first edition of which appeared in 1634. This volume would have had a particularly important influence, given that Montfort copies or makes a summary of whole passages of it (for example, in LEW 8-12, 66-67, 69, 154-166).

We should notice, once again, two significant differences. And again, the first concerns the biblical sources. The whole of Saint-Jure's book is deeply scriptural, and there are abundant quotations. But even here Montfort shows a clearly more systematic use of the Wisdom theme. While it is true that Saint-Jure gives a well-developed commentary, he limits himself to "two truly remarkable passages of Sacred Scripture that contain several motives to bring us to the love

of our Lord Jesus Christ." These two passages are Prov 8 and Wis 6-8. This is certainly an important subject for him, but it is much less than the use Montfort will make of the Wisdom theme. The second difference is of a Christological nature. Both books are from the French school of spirituality, and their authors speak extensively of the same person, Jesus Christ. But among all the titles Saint-Jure gives to him, Wisdom is lacking. On this point Montfort is much closer to Suso.

We should add another book by Saint-Jure, which was certainly known to Montfort, since he borrows several passages from it in N 308. This is *The Spiritual Man*, where the Spiritual Life is Treated in its Principles (Marbre-Cramoisy, Paris 1685), from which Montfort takes the idea of Wisdom (pp. 392-393), the application of the Wisdom literature to the gift of Wisdom in imitation of Salazar (p. 392), and the first three means for acquiring Wisdom (pp. 403-407).¹³ We note also the more immediate influence of *The Little book of Life Which Teaches How to Live and Pray Well* (1st ed. 1650), by the Jesuit Amable Bonnefons (1618-1653), on chapter 12 of LEW. Indeed, the first forty-nine "Oracles of Incarnate Wisdom" are a copy of the complete list of "general rules for good living, found in the sacred words of our Lord Jesus Christ," that Bonnefons quotes. Montfort copied this list as a whole, but then added another thirteen, the last of which (Matt 11:25-26) has a very strong sapiential flavor and all of which are in line with the evangelical radicalism lived out by Montfort.

2. Biblical Wisdom But the basic inspiration for Montfort comes first of all from the Bible. Certainly, his choice of Biblical sources and his interpretation of them owe a great deal to the exegesis of his day, notably to the translation and commentary of Le Maître de Sacy. But Montfort cannot be reduced to his sources, and we must recognize, with M. Gilbert, that none of his predecessors among the spiritual writers accorded quite so much importance to Wis (cf. below).

This biblical character of Montfort's little treatise did not escape the notice, as we shall see, of a first generation of interpreters of LEW (Huré, Dayet, Bombardier). But the most rigorous and complete study of this aspect remains that of M. Gilbert, SJ, a specialist on Wis and the other biblical Wisdom writings. In a well-argued study,¹⁴ he shows Montfort's originality and the validity of his "spiritual exegesis." The publication of this article in a theological review of very high international standing must surely have made LEW better known in circles that have not always been reached by recent Montfort studies. Several years later, the author of this present article took up again the question of the biblical sources of LEW.¹⁵ Here we need not go into all the detail found in these two studies. But let us recall briefly the main lines.

a. The Wisdom theme. LEW displays an unusual characteristic, not only among the works of Montfort but within the whole corpus of Christian spiritual writing, in making systematic use of the Wisdom theme. Certainly, his other writings are also full of biblical quotations, but never before had he made a systematic effort to explore a complete theme in the Bible, including fulfillment and its echoes in the NT as in LEW. That is what is so impressive. It presupposes clearly a remarkable mastery of the Bible as a whole, and a deliberate effort at synthesis. What is so striking here is not the detail of interpretation of some isolated verse or other but the fact that a vast network of texts is used: a large part of the Wis, some major chapters from Prov and Sir, the Prologue of Jn (filled with references to Wisdom), Jas (the only real Wisdom writing in the NT), and the passages that relate to the Wisdom of Jesus.

b. The Book of Wisdom. It is, nevertheless, as we might expect, Wis that claims the major share of attention in Montfort's reflection. No less than 140 verses (out of a total of 435 verses in Wis,

or about one-third of the book) are cited by him, and are often quoted and commented upon. We should note, too, that Montfort used the central section of Wis, chapters 7-9: 65. Most of the verses quoted by Montfort in fact come from this section. Taken all in all, Montfort truly made Wis his own and used it as the basic framework of his own book, so much so that this can be seen as a veritable "paraphrase" (Besnard and Picot de Clorivière) of the biblical book. So we can validly ask, with M. Gilbert,¹⁶ whether there is any other work in the Christian spiritual tradition that owes so much to Wis.

3. Montfort and Scripture Over and above the interpretation of individual verses, the number of scriptural quotations and their importance in the whole structure of LEW lead us to take a wider look at the use Montfort makes here of Scripture.

a. Montfort shows a great respect for the text. Thus, for example, he presents us with long passages, while assuring us that he will add nothing to them (LEW 5, 20, 52). He sends his reader, as it were, back to the biblical text itself so that he may draw his own conclusions from it.

b. But at the same time, Montfort is unable to resist making his own commentaries. In the three numbers of LEW that we have just mentioned and in those that follow them, we can see how Montfort, far from treating Scripture in a static way, as something untouchable in itself, feels the need to move on to an application of the biblical text. So, in dealing with Sir 24, he adds, "I make bold to offer a few comments . . ." (LEW 5); or again, in the case of Wis 8, he introduces the sacred text with an indication that he wishes to "quote them here, adding a few reflections" (LEW 52). For him, it is clear that Scripture needs to be interpreted and applied to the present circumstances. Thus we find in his work a kind of Scripture reading quite opposed to fundamentalism or a magical use of the Bible.

c. Here Montfort appeals to a vast network of scriptural quotations and takes abundant material from a whole set of texts. His view of Scripture is global, and he sees a kind of dialogue between OT and NT. This has the advantage of putting things in perspective and ensuring a greater depth in one's spiritual progress.

d. For all that, Montfort is indebted to the exegesis of his own day. His allegorical reading of Sir 24 (LEW 20-30) is evidence of this, as is his acceptance of a time scale for the universe derived from the Bible—"the 4,000 years since the creation of the world" (LEW 104)—and of the calendar of the Incarnation (LEW 109-116), with the precise years, months, days, and even hours of the life of Jesus. We could not pretend, therefore, that Montfort's exegesis and modern exegesis agree on all points. But the basic agreement between them is so deep that, where Montfort's exegesis appears out-of-date or insufficient, we need have no fear about completing it or adapting it with the aid of the resources of modern exegesis.

IV. PROFILE OF THE BOOK

1. Literary profile: structure and division The structure of LEW is apparently not difficult to establish, since Montfort twice tells us of the plan he intends to follow. First of all, he bases himself on Solomon's idea to give "a faithful and exact description of Wisdom"; he will follow this through by his own attempt "in my simple way, to portray eternal Wisdom before, during and after his Incarnation and show by what means we can possess and keep him" (LEW 7; see also LEW 12). Thus the two major divisions of his book are: a long discourse on "what Wisdom is" (chap. 1-14), and a more succinct reflection on "the means to acquire Wisdom" (chap. 15-17). We see immediately the disproportion between the two parts.¹⁷ Montfort takes a long time to describe for us what Wisdom is, while the last part of the work is more in the style of an

exhortation and comes from Montfort's pastoral concern. We are not dealing here with theory but, rather, with the spiritual path that will ultimately result in the acquisition and putting into practice of Wisdom. Montfort does not simply take quotations from Wis but also, especially in the first part of his book, makes his own the literary structure announced in Wis 6:24[22]. In fact, like Solomon, he does all he can to show the excellence of Wisdom, by contemplating his "origin, his nature, and his works in the course of history" (cf. LEW, chap. 2-5).

Another point on the structure that cannot be accidental is that LEW begins and ends with a prayer. Such a bracketing serves the same purpose as Solomon's prayer, which comes at the apex of the central section of Wis (Wis 9). The first prayer, which reminds us somewhat of what Solomon says of the limitations of his mortal condition (Wis 7-8), is Montfort's own prayer as he writes his book, and it embodies the respect he has for the mystery he is about to explore. The second prayer, the Consecration prayer (LEW 223-225), is clearly intended for his readers and gives a good indication of where Montfort wants to lead them.

2. Theological profile The unfolding of Montfort's reflections is, in fact, much more complex than the divisions he himself indicates. Certainly, the major division into two parts is beyond doubt: in chapters 1-14, he describes for us what Wisdom is, and in chapters 15-17, he gives us the means to acquire Wisdom. In addition, this last part is itself very clearly divided by Montfort into four precisely identified means. That leaves us with the first part, which is by far the more complex. On the one hand, it is not clear what Montfort means by the expression "after the Incarnation."

Does this mean after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as the plan proposed by OC would seem to indicate? Or does it mean after the Ascension, as Montfort himself seems to indicate (LEW 14: "And then we shall see him glorious and triumphant in heaven")? On the other hand, the biblical quotations, because of their length, seem to impose their own logic, which in many cases seems even to take over from the plan announced by Montfort. It is therefore wise to be somewhat flexible in any attempt to make a synthesis of LEW.

LEW 1-7 form a whole and serve as a prelude or prologue. This prelude is made up of three elements: a prayer addressed to Wisdom, in which Montfort, in the style of the prophets of the OT and the NT, expresses his conviction that he is inspired to speak while remaining very conscious of his limitations (LEW 1-2); a quotation of Wis 6, which is an exhortation to seek wisdom with all one's strength (LEW 3-4); and finally a word to his readers (LEW 4-7), inviting them to join him in contemplating and seeking Wisdom.

The first chapter is also to be seen apart from the following ones. Here we have an introduction to the discourse, punctuated by questions, which tries to capture the attention and interest of the reader: "Can we love someone we do not even know? . . . Why is Jesus, the adorable, eternal and incarnate Wisdom loved so little[?] . . . What good will it do us to know all the other branches of knowledge necessary for salvation if we do not learn the only essential one, the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ?" (LEW 8:12). The whole chapter culminates in the expression of one of Montfort's major convictions: "To know Jesus Christ incarnate Wisdom, is to know all we need. To presume to know everything and not know him is to know nothing at all" (LEW 11). Notice in this first chapter the importance of the vocabulary of knowledge, with such words as "to know," "knowledge," "branch of knowledge," etc. Such a way of proceeding is very different from a devotion that might base itself on a fundamentalist, sentimental, or pietistic reading of Scripture. In order to love, Montfort says, it is important "to know" well, and before one can make the Word of God relevant to today, it is important to understand it well and take a global

view of the history of salvation. It is precisely this global view that the next thirteen chapters present, in two major sections: chapters 2-8 are centered essentially on the OT, while chapters 9-14 are dedicated to the mystery of the Incarnation.

Chapters 2-5 pick up, though in a different order, the three central themes of the eulogy of Wisdom pronounced by Solomon in Wis 6-9: the beauty and greatness of Wisdom in his origin, in his nature, and in his works. In chapter 2, Montfort first of all sets forth the Christological foundation of his reflection by immediately applying to Christ the texts of the OT that speak of the mystery of Wisdom. And, having examined his origin in God, he moves on to the opposite pole of Wisdom, "the effects of his activity in souls" (LEW 20), with his commentary applying Sir 24.

Chapters 3 and 4 complement each other admirably, in that they give us a synthesis of the two great theological themes of the OT, namely Creation and salvation. On the one hand, chapter 3 places us at the heart of the theology of the Wisdom writers, which is a theology of Creation, seeing the beauty of the world as a fruit of Divine Wisdom. The foremost revelation of Wisdom, its masterpiece, is to be found in Creation: "If the power and gentleness of eternal Wisdom were so luminously evident in the creation, the beauty and order of the universe, they shone forth far more brilliantly in the creation of man" (LEW 35).

This brilliant vision, however, is seriously marred by the appearance of sin (LEW 39-40). The contrast is striking and filled with pathos. But of course this is not the last word, and Montfort continues his reflection with a remarkable summary of the history of salvation, which he sees, just like the author of Wis (Wis 10), as stamped with the presence and the interventions of Wisdom. Clearly we are dealing here with a summary, both for the biblical author and for Montfort. As does his predecessor, Montfort accords very great importance to the events surrounding the Exodus. The second paragraph of LEW 41 ascribes to Wisdom a reaction analogous to that of YHWH confronted with the distress of the Israelites in Egypt (Ex 2:24-25; Deut 26:6-8), and in his conclusion (LEW 50), Montfort returns explicitly to the Exodus.

Montfort's intention, then, is not to be exhaustive in his treatment but to go to the very heart of the OT and present Wisdom as at work especially in the salvation event. Having spoken of the origins and the activity of Wisdom, Montfort returns to the eulogy, strictly so called, of Wisdom, whose "beauty, . . . excellence and . . . treasures" he is about to reveal to us in his commentary on Wis 7 and 8 (LEW 63). The eulogy unfolds in chapter 6, where Montfort describes the efforts of Wisdom to make himself known to humanity and to establish bonds of love with mankind. The signs of Wisdom's love are many, but Montfort recalls, most of all, the very fact that an inspired book is explicitly devoted to Wisdom, and he underlines the passionate tone of the discourse of Wisdom personified in Prov 8.

The eulogy is then completed and the conclusion is obvious: "Above all else let us seek and long for divine Wisdom" (LEW 73). But being a realistic man and knowing well his own times, Montfort knows very well that there is a choice to be made: "But we must beware of choosing a wrong wisdom, because there is more than one kind" (LEW 73). The conclusion should therefore be placed later, after one has been made aware of the illusion ("hypocrisy and malice") of false forms of wisdom as proposed by the world.

In some ways, chapter 7 seems to differ from the rest of LEW and even from the Wisdom language. Yet Montfort continues to take up his stand within the Wisdom theme. On the one hand, he echoes here the very severe criticism leveled by Jas at "earthly" wisdom, while on the

other hand it has to be remembered that biblical Wisdom is hardly gentle in regard to whatever is contrary to the Wisdom of God—this is seen quite simply as folly, vanity, and destruction.

Biblical Wisdom is certainly not without its prophetic character. Having denounced the illusion of false forms of wisdom, then, Montfort repeats his invitation—"So let us remain with Jesus, the eternal and incarnate Wisdom. Apart from him, there is nothing but aimless wandering, untruth and death" (LEW 89) —and completes his eulogy by describing the wonderful "effects" of Wisdom "in souls" (chap. 8).

Chapters 9-14 form the keystone of LEW, the mystery of the Incarnation. Montfort begins with the facts (chap. 9), giving us "a summary" of the life of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and Incarnate Wisdom, from the Annunciation to Mary to the Ascension "on Mount Olivet" (LEW 109-116). This gives him the opportunity to emphasize the unique role of Mary, in whom "eternal Wisdom built himself a house worthy to be his dwelling-place" (LEW 105). From this biographical summary, Montfort passes on to the theological interpretation with his reflections on the gentleness of Incarnate Wisdom (chap. 10-11). He bases himself primarily on the Christological title of Lamb of God and the meaning of the name "Jesus" (LEW 119-120). But he also goes through the Gospels, emphasizing the humility of Jesus and his love for the poor and for sinners, to whom he brings the good news of salvation through the medium of his looks, his words, and his actions.

Chapter 12 claims to be "the summary of the great and important truths which eternal Wisdom came on earth to teach us" (LEW 153), and it is made up entirely of quotations from the Gospel (together with a quotation from Acts 20:35). Here Jesus is presented as a teacher of Wisdom, and the Gospel as Wisdom for life. At the end of this first part (chap. 13-14), Montfort leads us to reflect on "the Cross . . . the greatest secret of the King—the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom" (LEW 167). He sees in this the supreme manifestation not only of the Wisdom of God, considered folly in the eyes of men, but also of his love for humanity: "Among all the motives impelling us to love Jesus Christ, the Wisdom incarnate, the strongest, in my opinion, is the sufferings he chose to endure to prove his love for us" (LEW 154).

The second part, which is much shorter (chap. 15-17) is dedicated to the means to acquire divine Wisdom. First of all, "like Solomon and Daniel we must be men of desire if we are to acquire this great treasure which is wisdom" (LEW 183). Then Montfort lingers over the second means, giving us a veritable little treatise on prayer (LEW 184-193), which ends with the very beautiful prayer of Solomon asking for Wisdom (Wis 9).

It is not surprising that Montfort devotes a whole chapter to the third means, "mortification . . . that is total, continuous, courageous and prudent" (LEW 196): this is precisely how Montfort understands the demands of the paschal mystery, and he will have occasion to return to this theme later and at more length in FC.

Then Montfort unveils for us "the greatest means of all, and the most wonderful of all secrets for obtaining and preserving divine Wisdom . . . a loving and genuine devotion to the Blessed Virgin" (LEW 203). In his final chapter of LEW, he recalls the unique closeness of Mary to Jesus Christ, Wisdom Incarnate, since she "became the mother, mistress and throne of divine Wisdom" (LEW 203). "She became," that is to say, by grace and in virtue of her free response. Here also, Montfort is already mapping out the main themes of a later work, TD, for he tells us "in a few words" what "genuine devotion to her involve[s]" (LEW 215).

And finally, let us recall that LEW ends with a prayer. The exercise proposed by Montfort was not therefore something academic but, rather, existential. He does not even take care to issue any warnings to the reader, except at the very end (LEW 227): "Qui potest capere capiat. Quis sapiens et intelliget haec?" (Hos 14:10). LEW is, in some sense, like the prophetic books of Hosea and Jonah, an open book that calls for the response and the involvement of the reader.

V. LEW AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

1. The silence of the biographers If TD was indeed enclosed "in the darkness and silence of a chest," in accord with the prediction made by its author (TD 114), one could say that LEW hardly enjoyed better fortune for the first two centuries following its composition. The manuscript was not published until 1856, and until the beginning of the twentieth century, the biographers and commentators on Montfort spirituality maintained a general silence about LEW. We find no direct reference to the writing of LEW in the first biographers, and even after the renewal set in motion by the definitive edition of 1929, such writers as De Luca, Le Crom, Papàsogli, and Laurentin devote only a short paragraph to it. Even more surprising is the silence of A. Lhoumeau, who, in his remarkable treatise *The Spiritual Life at the School of Blessed Louis Marie de Montfort*, restricts himself to TD, even though his aim was "to set forth the dogmatic foundations of this devotion (i.e. the perfect devotion to the Blessed Virgin)" (preface of 1901) and even though the most important practice of this devotion is expressed in a formula of Consecration that belongs properly to LEW.

2. The definitive edition (1929) and the renewal of Montfort studies We had therefore to wait until 1929 for LEW to come back on the scene in Montfort spirituality. Father H. Huré must be credited with recognizing its capital importance, and his long introduction to the definitive edition puts things in perspective. Father Huré places Montfort primarily in the line of Pauline and Augustinian Wisdom. It was left to later interpreters to follow up the research and to emphasize how much Montfort owed, first of all, to the biblical theme of Wisdom.

The years following the appearance of the definitive edition of LEW and surrounding the canonization of Montfort saw Father Huré's intuition confirmed, and since that time it has not been possible to speak of Montfort spirituality without relying on this capital work, LEW.J. Bombardier, a Canadian Montfort, begins his introduction to Montfort spirituality (four volumes) with a fascicle devoted entirely to a discussion of the Wisdom theme, which provides a sufficiently complete introduction to the questions about the writing of LEW as well as a synthesized presentation of almost all the chapters in Montfort's book.

In his discussion of the sources from which Montfort drew in his composition of LEW, we find an interesting nomenclature and a heavily biased judgment. Since his work came before the start and the maturing of biblical renewal, we can well understand Bombardier's astonishment at the Christological use Montfort makes of OT Wisdom. Notice also that he links Montfort Wisdom very closely with Augustinian Wisdom, to the point of seeing in them "not only a resemblance, but even identity" of view and content.

About a year later, Father Dayet published what can still lay claim to one of the best introductions to LEW.¹⁸ His little book of eighty-four pages, first of all, gives a balanced judgment on the sources (both biblical and non-biblical) of the work, and on the meaning of the word "Wisdom." The first part of his commentary is an excellent synthesis of LEW, while the second part is more concerned with showing what the totality of Montfort's spiritual experience gained from his contemplation of Eternal Wisdom. Fr. Dayet did not miss the opportunity to insert a long commentary on LEW in his presentation¹⁹ of the sixth day of the third week of the

exercises proposed by Montfort for preparing those who will make the Consecration. It was concerned precisely with gaining a better knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In his celebrated *The Poem of the Perfect Consecration to Mary*, Father Poupon, contrary to what the title might indicate, does not fail to emphasize the basically Christological slant of such a Consecration. And since his commentary traces the unfolding of the prayer of Consecration, he gives a prime place to the theme of Wisdom, notably in the first chapter of the first part, which is entitled *The mystery of light*.²⁰

3. Recent interpretations Since the end of the 1960s, L. Perouas has been making a systematic reexamination of the life and writings of Montfort. His efforts have profoundly influenced the renewal of Montfort studies. His first work, *Grignion de Montfort, les pauvres et les missions* (1966), which was to give the impetus for a new way of approaching Montfort's texts, did not intend, as was supposed, to examine all Montfort's work. Thus, there is not a word about LEW.

But Perouas was to return to this on other occasions. In writing *A Way to Wisdom* (1973), he notes the originality of the theology presented in LEW, but does not accept that there is here a synthesis of Montfort spirituality: "It would be a mistake to view this work today as a synthesis of Montfort spirituality. This book brings together, undoubtedly, Montfort's favorite themes, but done at a moment of personal evolution."²¹ He sees it therefore as a writing from a particular moment, written in the middle of a period of crisis and appearing, in Montfort, "at the same time as a transformation of his psyche, as progress in his faith and as an intellectual breakthrough."²²

We find the same position taken in the article *Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort* that he wrote for *DSAM*²³ and in his book *Grignion de Montfort ou l'aventurier de l'Évangile*.²⁴ The point of interest in the position taken by Perouas is that he stresses the great importance of the life context (the *Sitz im Leben* beloved of exegetes) that gave birth to LEW and that he emphasizes the contrast between this work and Montfort's other writings. He also has some very interesting things to say about "the language of lovers,"²⁵ although one must not give too psychological a slant to the reexamination of the text nor stress too much the finding of "the feminine side": these are considerations that throw light on a problematic area in our own day but need not necessarily be applied to a reading of Montfort's texts.

M. Gilbert, the exegete and respected specialist on Wis, for his part made a detailed study of "the spiritual exegesis employed by Montfort," which led him to acclaim the uniqueness of LEW among spiritual writings, principally due to the deep understanding Montfort had acquired of Wis: "It is truly surprising to see the impact of the Book of Wisdom on Montfort's treatise. I know of no other spiritual writing that has based its doctrine, as Montfort does, on this little Greek book of the Old Testament. . . . Montfort's standing as a spiritual exegete of the Book of Wisdom is quite exceptional."²⁶

Finally, it seems that interest in LEW can only increase with the appearance in several languages of the complete works (Spanish, 1954; with a new edition in 1984; French, 1966, reprinted in 1982; Italian, 1977, with a new edition in 1990; English, 1988, reprinted in 1991), in which all the introductions emphasize the fundamental importance of LEW for the understanding of Montfort spirituality and its application for today.

VI. RELEVANCE OF THE BOOK TODAY

Far from being a marginal work, LEW opens up fundamental perspectives that, moreover, fit perfectly with the contemporary preoccupations and directions of Christian theology and spirituality.

1. Christocentrism. LEW has, first of all, the merit of being an eminently Christocentric work. This means that we are dealing with a spirituality and a theology that go to the very heart of the Christian mystery and bring us back to the essential question asked by the Gospels: "And you: who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29). Moreover, at a time when biblical studies are throwing fresh light on the diversity and richness of NT forms of Christology, LEW can help us to see an element of this diversity and what might be called an alternative Christology, one authentically of the NT because it is clearly evident in Jn's Prologue and in Col 1:15-20. The vision of a Christ Wisdom admirably puts the finishing touch to the reflection on the mystery of Christ attested to in the traditional titles of Messiah, Lord, and Son of God. In this way LEW helps towards a better understanding of the mystery of Christ.

2. Theology of Creation LEW has also much to offer in that it is rooted in the biblical theme of Wisdom, the theology of which is first and foremost a theology of Creation. Even if it is important not to create an opposition between a theology of salvation and a theology of Creation, nevertheless the latter is very much more evident in the biblical Wisdom literature. The same could be said of LEW. Here more than anywhere else, Montfort gives us his theology of Creation and shows us, in line with the biblical theme of Wisdom, a vision of Creation that is basically optimistic. The widespread change in thinking brought about by Vatican II's GS shows the importance for today of a theology of Creation and of earthly realities, and the search for Wisdom proposed by LEW can easily be seen as a part of this new way of thinking.

3. Theology of the Redemption Finally, the important renewal currently taking place in the theology of the Redemption²⁷ itself invites us to a deeper reexamination of what Montfort says on this theme in LEW. We know the importance he attaches to the Cross, and what he writes on this subject achieves great heights. LEW offers us a vision in which the theology of the Redemption is far from being an exaltation of suffering but is firmly anchored in the love God has for the world. Chapter 13, in fact, says clearly that it was not suffering that saved the world but the love Jesus Christ has shown for us in his sufferings. Montfort invites us to contemplate "the sufferings he chose to endure to prove his love for us" (LEW 154). LEW 154-166 often return to this theme of love. In addition, this thirteenth chapter would benefit by being reread and reinterpreted in the light of what modern theologians call "the suffering of God."²⁸ Such a rereading has already been attempted, in a very promising way, by J. Morinay in his book *Mary and the Weakness of God*.²⁹

It is certainly true that LEW is not all that Montfort has to say. And this work could not, anymore than could the Wisdom theme that finds its final achievement in the NT, exhaust all the dimensions of a Christian spirituality. We must seek elsewhere, in Montfort as in the Bible, for the prophetic dimension of challenge and commitment to the poor. This dimension, while not being absent in the Wisdom writings, is not as clear there as in the prophets of the Bible and in the Gospels. In this sense, we can only be glad that such writings as the PM and FC and certain of the hymns are there to complement LEW. But LEW remains a privileged witness to the theology of Montfort and to his own spiritual experience. It is also a guide of the highest value for Christians in search of "true wisdom, eternal Wisdom, Wisdom uncreated and incarnate" (LEW 14), Jesus Christ.

J. P. Prévost

Notes:

(1) H. Huré, preface to the definitive edition of *L'Amour de la Sagesse éternelle*, Librairie mariale, Pontchâteau 1929, 1-2.

- (2) J.-M. Dayet, *La Sagesse chez le Bienheureux Louis-Marie de Montfort* (The Place of Wisdom in Blessed Louis-Marie de Montfort), Bureau des Prêtres de Marie, Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre 1944, 77.
- (3) M. Quéméneur, *Entreprendre de grandes choses* (Undertaking Great Things), in *Cahiers Marials*, 52 (1966), 87.
- (4) OC, 88; see also H.-M. Guindon, *L'Amour de la Sagesse Eternelle* (Love of Eternal Wisdom), in *Dossiers Montfortains*, 16 (1958), 65-68.
- (5) H. Frehen, *Etudes sur les Cantiques du Père de Montfort* (Studies of the Hymns of Father de Montfort) (a compendium of articles gathered together by the author).
- (6) Cf. D. M. Huot, *I manoscritti delle opere di S. Luigi-Maria da Montfort* (Manuscript of the Works of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort), in *QM* 4 (1986), 16-127.
- (7) *Besnard* I, 280.
- (8) Picot de Clorivière, *La vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort* (The Life of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort), Delalain, Paris 1785, 321-322.
- (9) H. Frehen, *Etudes*, 68-70.
- (10) A. Balmforth, *Pour qui le livre de "L'Amour de la Sagesse Eternelle" a-t-il été écrit?* (Why did he write Love of Eternal Wisdom?), in *Dossiers Montfortains*, 41 (1967), 1.
- (11) *Ibid.*
- (12) See the parallels established by A. Guéry, *Etudes comparatives*. I. *Prière à la Sagesse Eternelle* (P. de St-Jure/Montfort); II. *Consécration de soi-même à Jésus-Christ, la Sagesse Incarnée, par les mains de Marie* (Comparative Studies. I. Prayer to Eternal Wisdom (Fr. de St. Jure/Montfort) II. Consecration of oneself to Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom at the Hands of Mary) (P. Nepveu/Montfort), in *Dossiers Montfortains* (Montfortian Papers) 32 (1963), 17-27; and by A. F. Balmforth, "Oracles" de la Sagesse Incarnée: Montfort/Bonnefons, in *Dossiers Montfortains*, (Montfortian Papers) 36 (1964), 129-135.
- (13) *Itinerario*, 221, n. 1.
- (14) M. Gilbert, *L'exégèse spirituelle de Montfort* (Spiritual Exegesis of Montfort), in *NRT* 104 (1982), 678-691.
- (15) J.-P. Prévost, *Montfort et le courant de sagesse biblique*, Dossier Montfortain 2, Rome 1986, 1-19.
- (16) M. Gilbert, *L'exégèse*, 684.
- (17) The same observation is made, in a mystical perspective, in P. Humblet, *The Mystical Process of Transformation in Grignon de Montfort's "The Love of Eternal Wisdom,"* Titus Brandsma Institute, *Daughters of Wisdom*, Nijmegen, 1993, 6-9
- (18) J.-M. Dayet, *La sagesse chez le Bienheureux Louis-Marie de Montfort*, Bureaux des Prêtres de Marie, Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre 1944.
- (19) J.-M. Dayet, *Les exercices préparatoires à la consécration de Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort* (Exercises of Preparation for the Consecration of Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort), Les Traditions françaises, Tourcoing, 1957.

- (20) M.-Th Poupon, *Le poème de la parfaite consécration à Marie suivant saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort et les spirituels de son temps. Sources et doctrine* (The poem of Perfect Consecration to Mary of Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort and the Spiritual Teachers of his Times), Librairie du Sacré-Coeur, Lyon 1947.
- (21) Perouas
- (22) Ibid.
- (23) DSAM 9 (1976), 1075.
- (24) Ed. Ouvrières, Paris 1990, 70-74, 87-88.
- (25) Perouas, 52.
- (26) M. Gilbert, *L'exégèse*, 684.
- (27) On this topic, see B. Rey, *Nous prêchons un Messie crucifié*, Cerf, Paris 1989; F. Varone, *Ce Dieu censé aimer la souffrance* (This God who is Deemed to Love Suffering), Cerf, Paris 1984.
- (28) In the terminology popularised by F. Varillon, *L'humilité de Dieu* (The Humility of God), Centurion, Paris 1974, and *La souffrance de Dieu* (The Suffering of God), Centurion, Paris 1975, but owing much to the work of M. Zundel, from whom Varillon took much of his inspiration (cf. R. M. De Pison, *Le Dieu qui est "victime."* Le problème du mal dans la pensée de M. Zundel (The God Who is Victim. The Problem of Evil in the thought of Zundel), in *Science et Esprit*, 52 (1991) 55-68.
- (29) J. Morinay, *Marie et la faiblesse de Dieu. Essai de présentation du message spirituel de saint Louis-Marie de Montfort* (Mary and the Weakness of God. Essay presenting the Spiritual Message of St. Louis de Montfort), Nouvelle Cité, Paris 1988.

WISDOM SPIRITUALITY ACCORDING TO ST. MONTFORT

Bro. Lawrence Joseph, s.g

Chapter 1

Montfort's own personal experience

When Montfort joined St. Sulpice Seminary, Paris, he discontinued his theological studies in Sorbonne University. Thus “he had more time to devote to God and could give full play to his dominant inclination for solitude and prayer.” (Blain p.70) Further he was more interested in the science of the saints than in theological studies. “He was brilliantly intelligent, and if he had continued his studies at la Sorbonne he would have been an excellent student; however, he was keener on the science of the saints than on theological studies.” (Blain, p. 56) While in the seminary he read the Bible and a number of spiritual books. He surely read “The Letters of Fr. Surin”, “The holy ways of the Cross and the Sorrows of the World” by Fr. Boudon, “The Maximums” by Fr. Bonnefons and the writings of Fr. Jean Baptiste Saint-Juré. Of course, his main book of meditation was the Bible, especially the Book of Wisdom and the Gospels.

During the period 1702-04, his Letters 13, 15, and 16 tell us that Montfort had a great desire to be united to Jesus Christ, the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom. “In the beloved cross is true wisdom and that is what I am looking for night and day more eagerly than ever.” (L. 13) “What wealth, what glory, what happiness would be mine if from all this (cross) I obtained divine Wisdom, which I long for day and night!” (L. 15) On October 24, 1703, he wrote to Sr. Marie Louise Trichet, “When shall I possess this loveable and mysterious Wisdom? When will Wisdom come and live in me? When shall I be sufficiently equipped to serve as place of rest for Wisdom in a world where he is rejected and without a home? Who will give me this bread of understanding with which Wisdom nourishes great souls? Who will give me to drink of the chalice from which Wisdom quenches the thirst of those who serve him? When shall I be crucified and lost to the world? ... So pray, entreat God, plead for me to obtain divine Wisdom. You will obtain it completely for me; of this I am quite convinced,” (L. 16)

“One image is particularly suited for this interior journey of Montfort: the search for Wisdom. Father Surin is, perhaps, the initiator of this theme for Montfort, having with unique originality embodied it in his creation of a society which served as a living parable for it. Be that as it may, from 1703 onward, this theme completely dominates Louis' horizon, for up till this time a different vocabulary has come from his pen: poverty, cross, Providence, powerful definitions of the Fatherhood of God.” (Benedetta Papàdogli, Montfort, A Prophet for our times, p. 228)

Montfort's great desire to possess Wisdom can be seen in Hymn No. 124, which he perhaps wrote in 1703.

1. “Come, O Wisdom, come! Hear this, a beggar's plea
By Mary's womb, by every gush
Of Blood her Jesus shed for me,
Confound me not, nor bid me hush.
2. Why do you so prolong my painful martyrdom?
For you I languish night and day;
My heart keeps calling to you, “Come!”
My soul grows faint which you away.” (Hymn 124, 1&2)

Certain expressions here resemble The Dark Night of the Senses described by St. John of the Cross. Again in the same hymn we have:

4. Perhaps you do not want me in your retinue.
At least allow me in that case
The privilege of seeking you
Though finding not your hiding place.

6. Wisdom I am beset by fears and dangers still;
Much cowardice enfeebles me.
I need a bolder faith and will,
A will to love you boundlessly.” (Hymn 124, 4&6)

The following lines resemble the words found in *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

“Where do you stop or stay,
O Wisdom, tell me now.
There I’ll fly without delay.
The love will teach me how.” (Hymn 126, 3)

“And if, O gracious Queen,
You wound my heart tonight,
That piercing pain, however keen,
Will be my soul’s delight.” (Hymn 126, 4)

Montfort’s goal is to get united to Jesus Christ. “All perfection consists in our being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus.” (TD 120) In his hymn 103, he has used expressions of a mystic.

“Oh Wisdom, God made man,
Oh come into me.
I know you, I call you,
Oh come into me.
With you and your cross,
I am more delighted than kings.

“Oh my mighty Princess!
Oh come into me.
Oh my charming Mistress,
Oh come into me.
With you I have more pleasure
Than what our heart can desire.”

Oh my immortal Spouse!
Oh come into me.
Oh my all beautiful, my faithful one,
Oh come into me.
With you one is more powerful
Than hell and death.” (Hymn 103, 5,6,7)

The language used is the language of a mystic, it is a quasi experience of God. Even in his hymn on the triumph of Cross, we notice the same language:

“Dear Cross, here in this hour,
I bow to thee in awe.
Abide with me in power
And teach me all thy law.
My princess, let me glow
With ardour in thine arms;
Grant me to chastely know
The secret of thy charms.” (Hymn, 19, v. 27)

“The ease with which Louis transforms the whole meaning of his dark night reminds us of similar sentiments voiced by St. John of Cross in the description of the ascent of the mountain of love... The fourth and fifth degrees of love, according to the description of St. John, suffering and unitive love, become intertwined in Louis’ writings that date from this period. The power of expressiveness contained in them is proportionate to what he is suffering... What is most remarkable in Montfortian expression as compared with the language of the mystics, is the equation of Wisdom with the object of his burning desire and divine spouse in an evolution towards mystical marriage. ” (Montfort, A prophet for our times, p. 230, 231)

While Montfort was staying in utter poverty and misery at the Pot de Fer Street, Paris during 1703-04, he meditated a lot on the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and also on the mysteries of Christ. Further, at the invitation of his friend Fr. Claude Poullart des Places, he gave conferences at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit on Wisdom. Collecting together the themes developed during the conferences, he wrote for himself and for the whole Church the book, “The Love of Eternal Wisdom”.

Chapter 2

Know the Eternal Wisdom by contemplating him in his actions in salvation history

Meditation and contemplation are essential parts of Wisdom spirituality. Montfortian spirituality consists in getting united to Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom. To get united to Wisdom, one should know him intimately and love him passionately. The best way to know Eternal Wisdom is to contemplate Him. “If we wish to have roots of immortality deeply embedded in our heart, we must have in our mind knowledge of Eternal Wisdom. To know Jesus Christ incarnate Wisdom, is to know all we need. To presume to know everything and not know him is to know nothing at all.” (LEW 11) Montfort invites to contemplate Wisdom as Solomon did. “Following the example of this great man Solomon, I am going, in my simple way, to portray Eternal Wisdom before, during and after his Incarnation.” (LEW 9. hereafter only the number will be given) “Starting with his very origin, we shall consider Wisdom in eternity, dwelling in his Father’s bosom and object of his Father’s love. Next we shall see him in time, shining forth in the creation of the universe. Then we shall consider him in the deep abasement of his Incarnation and his mortal life; and then we shall see him glorious and triumphant in heaven. Finally we shall propose the means to acquire and keep him.” (14)

To contemplate Eternal Wisdom and his actions before Incarnation, Montfort has presented us with a number tableaux mainly taken from the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. He has quoted a lot from the Book of Wisdom.

1st Tableau, Wisdom in Eternity: Contemplate Wisdom in his origin and excellence. He is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father.” To define Eternal Wisdom, Montfort has quoted **Wis. 7:25,26**. “Eternal Wisdom is a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. Hence nothing

defiled gains entrance into him. He is the reflection of eternal light, the spotless mirror of God's majesty, the image of his goodness." (16) Again he wants us to contemplate upon the **Prologue to the Gospel according to St. John**. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." "God the Father was well pleased with the sovereign beauty of Eternal Wisdom, his Son, throughout time and eternity, as he himself explicitly testified on the day of his Son's baptism and his transfiguration. 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased'." (19) Quieting our thoughts we could sit and admire in faith and love the presence of the Word in the world and within us. Let me realize that Word is active within me.

2nd Tableau, Wisdom's activity in souls: Montfort invites to meditate on the activities of Eternal Wisdom in souls by quoting 23 verses from **chapter 24 of the Book of Sirach**. This chapter 24 is the high point of the book. It stands out by the beauty of its form and the depth of its doctrine. Wisdom sings his own praises and describes his divine origin and his action in the world, his residence in Israel, his growth and his fruits and finally makes his appeal, "Come to me, all you who yearn for me, and be filled with my fruits." (27) Montfort finally tells us, "Divine Wisdom shows himself to be the mother and source of all good and he exhorts all men to give up everything and desire him alone." (30)

3rd Tableau, Wisdom's action during creation: Montfort invites to contemplate the beauty of creation and to look at God's love for man as shown by this wonderful creation. Further he tells us that "after creating all things, Eternal Wisdom abides in them to contain, maintain and renew them. It was this supremely perfect beauty who, after creating the universe, established the magnificent order we find there." (32) Then Montfort quotes **Proverbs 8:30-31**. "I was with God and I disposed everything with such perfect precision and such pleasing variety that it was like playing a game to entertain my Father and myself." We must contemplate nature and come to admire and love the Creator. We need to spend time to admire the beautiful scenery and perfect order in nature. They reveal God and his love for us.

4th Tableau, Wisdom's action in the creation of man: Montfort invites us to contemplate the crown of creation, i.e., man. "If the power and gentleness of Eternal Wisdom were so luminously evident in the creation, the beauty and order of creation, they show forth far more brilliantly in the creation of man." (35) Montfort draws our attention to the first steps in Salvation History. He refers to the creation of the universe basing on **Prov. 8:27-31**, and to the creation of man by quoting **Wis 8:2**. Montfort has alluded to Adam's sin in Nos. 39&40.

5th Tableau, Wisdom's initiative concerning Incarnation: Montfort wants us to contemplate the Council of the Holy Trinity during which Incarnation is decided upon. "I seem to see this lovable Sovereign convoking and assembling the most holy Trinity, a second time, a second time, so to speak, for the purpose of rehabilitating man in the state he formerly created him." (42)

6th Tableau, the activities of Eternal Wisdom before the Incarnation: Montfort tells us, "During the whole time preceding his Incarnation, Eternal Wisdom proved in a thousand ways his friendship for men and his great desire to bestow his favours on them and to converse with them." (47) In quoting **the entire chapter 10 of the Book of Wisdom**, Montfort invites us to meditate upon the actions of Wisdom in the history of humankind. The sacred author shows us how God entered into communion with humankind starting with Adam. The meditation on the Genesis continues with Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and during Exodus. **Wis. 10:1-21** is an ode to praise the activity of Lady Wisdom throughout the Salvation History, showing how she blessed and saved believers who trusted in her.

“The Book of Wisdom is essentially an appeal to believe in the God of revelation. This complicated and sophisticated rhetorical exhortation was composed to justify the activities of the God of Israel in the eyes of intelligent, cosmopolitan Jewish students, some whom were being tempted to abandon their revealed religion in favour of prevailing secular culture... He climaxes this approach by the final series of narratives about the seven decisive interventions of this saving God on behalf of his chosen people... The Sage casts his net wide to provide his readers with as many motives as possible for choosing to remain loyal to traditional Israelite faith. The Book of Wisdom proper – Part II (**Wis. 6:12-16 + 6:22-10:21**) is an aporia or philosophical inquiry to investigate the nature and features of Lady Wisdom, a personification... The Sage, however, has endowed this mythic figure with features not typical of her biblical role and accented her association with God in his work as creator and saviour. He shows that union with Lady Wisdom is the only way to ensure perfect communion with God.” (James M. Reese, o.s.f.s., The book of Wisdom, pp. 15,16,18,68)

7th Tableau, the excellence of Eternal Wisdom: Montfort wants us to meditate upon the excellence of Wisdom and for this purpose he has quoted **Wis. 8:1-18**, with a brief commentary borrowed on the whole from Le Maître de Sacy, Solomon fell in love with wisdom and set about obtaining her as his bride. He wanted her to be the guide for his life. The virtues which she teaches are knowledge, respect, immortality and skill in government, The Sage in Wisdom chapter 8 explains how Lady Wisdom became for him the model of an upright worshipper. Montfort has concluded the chapter by quoting fundamental texts on the nature of Wisdom, i.e., **Wis. 7:22-24**. “Wisdom is an infinite treasure for men. Those who have utilized this treasure have become God’s friends, and praiseworthy for their gifts of knowledge.” (Wis. 7:24, LEW 62)

8th Tableau, the earnest desire of Eternal Wisdom to give herself to humans: Montfort goes to explain the earnest desire of divine Wisdom to give herself to humankind. “The bond of friendship between Eternal Wisdom and man is so close as to be beyond our understanding. Wisdom is for man and man is for Wisdom.” (64) In N^os 66-68, Montfort has paraphrased **Prov. 8:1-36** to show the desire of Wisdom for humankind. “You children of men, it is you I have been calling so persistently... I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently find me.. He who finds me finds life and obtains salvation from the Lord.” (Prov.8:4,17,35) In this chapter 8 of the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom speaks about her grandeur and her promises. In N^o 69, Montfort has quoted **Wis. 6:12-15** to show the great desire of Wisdom to communicate herself to humankind.

To understand the signification of the figure of Wisdom in the O.T., “a careful study of some major texts is a must. This involves Prov. 8; Prov. 9:1-16; Sirach 24; Wis. 7-9... Who is Wisdom? In Prov. 8, it is not clearly mentioned, Of course, it identifies itself with intelligence, to that profound understanding of the reality, but this does not clarify much. It is presented also as a woman.. The Book of Wisdom essentially underlines the relationship which Wisdom likes to set up with her listeners.” (Maurice Gilbert, s.j.. Wisdom personified in the texts of the O.T.)

Montfort then passes on from the OT to the NT: “Finally, in order to draw closer to men and give them a more convincing proof of his love, Eternal Wisdom went so far as to become man, even to become a little child, to embrace poverty and to die upon a cross for them.” (70) After referring to a number of passages from the Gospels, Montfort has concluded by saying, “Above

all else let us seek and long for divine Wisdom. ‘All other things that are desired are not be compared with Wisdom’. (Prov. 3:15) And again, ‘Nothing that you desire can be compared with him.’ (Prov. 8:11)” (LEW 73)

9th Tableau, the marvellous effects of Wisdom: Montfort wants us to meditate upon the marvellous effects of Wisdom. He has mainly quoted from chapters 7 and 8 of the Book of Wisdom to explain the effects mentioned below. “Nothing gives Wisdom more pleasure than to communicate himself. That is why the Holy Spirit tells us that Wisdom is forever seeking throughout the world for souls worthy of him, (Ref. Gen. 25:27) and he fills these holy souls with his presents making them ‘friends of God and prophets’ (Wis. 7:27)... When divine Wisdom enters a soul, he brings all kinds of good things with him and bestows vast riches upon the soul.” (90)

1. “Eternal Wisdom communicates to man the great **science of holiness**. (Ref. Wis. 8:8, 10:10, 7:17, 7:21) (LEW 93)
2. “E.W. communicates his **Spirit of enlightenment** to the soul that possesses him. (Ref. Wis. 7:7, & 22-24; 8:11).” (92) “This enlightened understanding given by E.W. is not dry, barren and unspiritual, but radiating splendour, unction, vigour, and devotion. It moves and satisfies the heart at the same time enlightens the mind.” (94)
3. “Wisdom gives man not only light to know the truth, but also a remarkable **power to impart it to others**. (Ref. Wis. 1:7; 10:21; 7:15; Lk 21:15)” (95)
4. E.W. “is the source of **purest joy and consolation** for man who possesses him. He gives to man a relish for everything that comes from God and makes him lose his taste for things created. (Ref. Wis. 8:16, 8:18, 7:24)” (98)
5. “E.W. gives to the soul **all the gifts of the Holy Spirit** and **all the great virtues** to an eminent degree, theological virtues, cardinal virtues, moral virtues. (Ref. Wis. 8:7)” (99)
6. “E.W. **sets the souls on fire, inspiring them to undertake great things for the glory of God** and the salvation of souls. In order to discipline them and make them more worthy of himself, he **permits them to engage in strenuous conflicts** and in almost everything they undertake they encounter contradictions and disappointments... He has tried them like gold in a furnace and accepted them as sacrificial victims, when the time comes, he will look upon them with favour. (Wis. 3:4-6)” (100)
7. “**The cross** is the portion and reward of those who desire or already possess E.W.” (103)
Montfort has mentioned about the crosses and afflictions to be borne and according to him these are very salutary. “In short, Wisdom tests them thoroughly in the crucible of tribulations like gold in a furnace.” (100) By referring to Wis. 3:4-6 and Wis. 10:10-12, Montfort tells us that these crosses will ultimately lead us to victory.

Chapter 3

Know the Incarnate Wisdom by contemplating him in his actions and sufferings

10th Tableau, the mystery of Incarnation: The mystery of Incarnation provides us with a large number of tableaux for loving contemplation: the Annunciation, Mary’s consent, the Birth of Jesus, the Epiphany, the Presentation of Jesus, flight into Egypt, the return to Nazareth, lost in temple, life of a carpenter in Nazareth, Baptism of our Lord, different events during the public ministry, etc. The hours spent in contemplation of the Incarnate Wisdom will help us to understand his love for us and excite in us love for him.

11th Tableau, the gentleness of Jesus in his looks and words: Montfort in chapter 10 invites us to contemplate the gentleness of Jesus especially in his nature, in his looks and in his words.

12th Tableau, the gentleness of Jesus in his actions: Montfort in chapter 11 wants to contemplate the gentleness of Jesus in his actions. He tells us that Jesus was gentle in his dealings with the poor, the little children, the sinners, etc. One can choose a number of incidents in Jesus' life and meditate upon them in order to have an intimate knowledge of Jesus. Meditating upon Jesus in his actions and words is extremely important to understand his great love for us and for mankind. "Jesus loves me" is the theme of a number of hymns composed by Montfort. Montfort wants us to contemplate Jesus in heaven, where he continues to be gentle.

13th Tableau, Jesus as the teacher of wisdom: Montfort, in chapter 12, has collected sixty-two words of Jesus. "Montfort sees these words of Jesus as sapiential sentences. We know that present day exegesis stresses the sapiential character of many of the teachings of Jesus, who is the authentic master of wisdom. Montfort loved the Holy Scripture and especially fed himself spiritually with the words of Jesus, choosing radical ones as personal choice... It is indeed the radicality of Christianity that struck Montfort, and this partly due to the trials he had to undergo, especially if this treatise was written about 1703-1704." (Maurice Gilbert, s.j., *The Spiritual Exegesis of Montfort*) When Montfort presents us with sixty-two sayings of Jesus, he identifies Wisdom with Christ in his function of being a permanent revelation. "Since divine Wisdom is the Word of God throughout time and eternity, he has never ceased speaking and by his word everything was made and everything was restored." (LEW 95) He speaks to us through the Gospels and also through his Spirit, who inspires us.

14th Tableau, Contemplating Jesus in his passion and death: Montfort, in chapter 13, invites us to meditate upon the love of the Incarnate Wisdom as shown by his passion and death on the cross. "Among all the motives impelling us to love Jesus Christ, the Wisdom Incarnate, the strongest, in my opinion, is the suffering he chose to endure to prove his love for us." (154) He quotes Rom. 5:8 and says, "Jesus Christ proved how well he loved us because though we were sinners – and consequently his enemies – he died for us." (156) Montfort wants us contemplate even upon the sufferings Jesus had to undergo even before his passion. Then Montfort invites us to spend a long time meditating upon the passion and death of Christ, which he has graphically described. "He chose rather to endure the cross and sufferings in order to give to God his Father greater glory and to men a proof of greater love." (164) This contemplation on the sufferings and death of Christ is a must in order to understand the great love that the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom has for us.

15th Tableau, Contemplation on the Cross of Christ: Montfort, in chapter 14 entitled "The triumph of Eternal Wisdom in and by the Cross", gives us an inkling into his theology of the Cross, He was very much impressed by the wisdom of the Cross that St. Paul speaks of in the first two chapters of the First Letter to the Corinthians. Quotations from St. Paul are found in many places in the treatise. "The Cross is according to my belief the greatest secret of the King – the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom... He wishes to become incarnate in order to convince men of his friendship... He perceives something which is a source of scandal and horror to the Jews and object of foolishness to the pagans... but how inexpressible his love for that cross!" (167, 168) "The inspiration behind LEW 168 is 1 Cor. 1:23-24: 'but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentles, but... the wisdom of God', and then Montfort quotes Rom. 11:33: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.'

Now, according to Paul, the wisdom of the Cross is precisely this reversal of human values referred to in the 'oracles' mentioned above and Montfort will conclude these two chapters (13 and 14) dealing with the Passion and the Cross (before introducing the means of obtaining Wisdom): 'Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom' (LEW 180). So we see that the principal themes of 1 Cor. 1-2 run through the whole treatise." (Maurice Gilbert, s.j., *The Spiritual Exegesis of Montfort*)

Montfort after stating that "The Incarnate Wisdom pursued his way towards Calvary; if he spoke so frequently of his sufferings and death to his apostles and disciples and even to his prophets during his Transfiguration; if he so often exclaimed, 'I longed for it with an infinite desire' it was because all his journeying, all is eagerness, all his pursuits, all his desires were directed towards the cross and because to die on its embrace was for him the very height of glory and success." (170) and Montfort concludes, "Never the Cross without Jesus, or Jesus without the Cross." (172) For Montfort the cross is the path that leads to victory. "The Incarnate Wisdom will have his Cross borne in triumph by angels joyfully singing its praises. It will go before him, borne upon the most brilliant cloud that has ever been seen. And with his Cross and by it, he will judge the world." (172)

Benefits of the cross: Montfort in N^o 176 has enumerated six benefits of the cross and he then regrets about the fact that many do not value the cross, "The number of fools and unhappy people is infinite, says Wisdom, because infinite is the number of those who do not know the value of the Cross and carry it reluctantly." (179) As a practical conclusion Montfort has this to say, "Friends of Jesus Christ, drink of this bitter cup and your friendship with him will increase. Suffer with him and you will be glorified with him. Suffer patiently and your momentary suffering will be changed into an eternity of happiness. Make no mistake about, since Incarnate Wisdom had to enter heaven by the Cross, you also must enter by the same way. No matter which way you turn, says *The Imitation of Christ*, you will always find the Cross. Like the elect you may take it up rightly, with patience and cheerfulness out of love for God... He has fixed his abode in the Cross so firmly that you will not find him anywhere in the world save in the Cross. He has so truly incorporated and united himself with the Cross that in all truth we can say: Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom." 180)

The result of these contemplations: As we meditate on the love of Christ for us, especially shown through his passion and death, love for Christ is kindled in our hearts. Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom has loved us and is loving us and we feel the need to respond to this with our own love for him. Hence there arises a mutual love and a love relationship between Christ and us. The starting point of this relationship is Christ himself and ours is the response to that love. "The cross is in the first place a sign of God's love and nearness, a love and nearness which go so far that in the person of his Son, God gave himself for us, in this sense that we are loved at the deepest level even before we are capable of, or have arrived at, any responsive love or service, may persuade us that we are accepted as we are; that as such – as we are- we are loved and called. It is precisely this fact which can prompt our responsive love and furnish the strength to cope with the suffering that is inseparable from the course of our life and vocation." (Pierre Humblet, *The Mystical process of transformation in Grignon de Montfort's LEW*, p. 37)

Chapter 4

Means to be taken to get united to the Eternal and Incarnate Wisdom

1st Means – An ardent desire: Montfort has mentioned ardent desire as the first means to acquire Wisdom. It is the starting point. We all know that we are called to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. We like to be holy; but holiness will not be forced on us and only the valiant will attain it. In our spiritual growth, our greatest enemy is our own laziness. Mr. Scott Peck has passed this remark: “In the struggle to help my patients grow, I found that my chief enemy was invariably their laziness. And I became aware in myself of a similar reluctance to extend myself to new areas of thought, responsibility and maturation. One thing I clearly had in common with all mankind was my laziness. It was at this point that the serpent-and-the apple story suddenly made sense.” (Road less traveled, p. 291)

Montfort quoting Sir. 6:37 invites the reader, “Son, if you rightly desire wisdom, observe justice and God will give it you. Reflect on what God requires of you and meditate continually on his commandments and he himself will give you insight and your desire for wisdom will be granted.” (182) Solomon, the model given us by the Holy Spirit in the acquiring of Wisdom, only received this gift after he had desired it, sought after it and prayed for it for a long time. ‘I desired wisdom and it was given to me. I called upon God and the spirit of wisdom came to me.’ (Wis. 7:7) ‘I loved and sought wisdom from my youth, and in order to have her as my companion and spouse I went about seeking her.’ (Wis. 8:2) Like Solomon and Daniel we must be men of desire if we are to acquire this great treasure which is wisdom.” (183) Often our desire for Wisdom does not come first among our priorities and if it doesn’t then we will not acquire Wisdom.

2nd Means – Continuous Prayer: To acquire wisdom Montfort tells us that we should continually pray for it and as an example for prayer presents us the prayer found in the Book of Wisdom chapter 9. We need to grow in contemplation and the highest form of prayer is the unitive way. Unless we are faithful to contemplation, it is foolhardy to think of getting united to Wisdom. Receiving of Wisdom occurs precisely in this mystical act of praying. “Prayer is the usual channel by which God conveys his gifts, especially his Wisdom... To vocal prayer we must add mental prayer, which enlightens the mind, inflames the heart and disposes the soul to listen to the voice of Wisdom, to savour his delights and possess his treasures. For myself, I know of no better way of establishing the Kingdom of God, Eternal Wisdom, than to unite vocal and mental prayer by saying the holy Rosary and meditating on its fifteen mysteries.” (184, 193)

3rd Means – Universal Mortification: Montfort did penance to obtain Wisdom and he is asking the readers to do the same. “The Holy Spirit tells us that wisdom is not found in the hearts of those who live in comfort... All those who belong to Christ, the Incarnate Wisdom, have crucified their flesh with all its passions and desires.” (194) The first mortification to be practiced is the giving up of preoccupation with self. Christ invites us to walk along the narrow path. We often tend to be comfort loving people and easy going in many respects. Union with Christ is not possible without practising self-discipline and hard work. Our absolute fidelity to our duties and the demands of our mission will provide us with enough opportunities for self denial and mortification. “If we would possess Wisdom, we must mortify the body, not only by enduring patiently our bodily ailments, the inconveniences of the weather and difficulties arising from other people’s actions, but also by deliberately undertaking some penances and mortifications.” (201)

Penance is clearly indicated in all the Gospels and it is a part of the primitive teaching of the Church. Repentance is a fundamental disposition of a Christian, an abiding disposition. Sin is something that we down play considerably nowadays; but it was something that Christ constantly warned us against. St. Paul tells us, “ I harden my body with blows and bring it under complete control, to keep myself being disqualified after having called others to the contest.” (1 Cor. 9:27)

Chapter 5

The Marian dimension of the Wisdom Spirituality

4th Means – A loving and genuine devotion to Mary: Montfort had great devotion towards Mary; but still he has presented it as a means, the best means, to get united to Wisdom. Hence Montfort’s Marian devotion is Christo-centric. “The greatest means of all, and the most wonderful of all secrets for obtaining and preserving divine Wisdom is a loving and genuine devotion to the Blessed Virgin.” (203) Sts. John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila and others attained union with God through infused contemplation. Through fidelity to God’s will at all times and through apostolic commitment to God, one can remain united to God. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” (Jn 15:10) “I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) Montfort has taught us a Marian mysticism, i.e., getting united to Christ through Mary, and this is the special feature of his perfect devotion to Mary. We entrust ourselves to her as her children and allow her to transform us into Christ.

Montfort has defined both the true devotion to Mary and the perfect devotion to Mary. “If I were asked by someone seeking to honour our Lady, ‘What does genuine devotion to her involve?’ I would answer briefly that it consists in a full appreciation of the privileges and dignity of our Lady; in expressing our gratitude for her goodness to us; in zealously promoting devotion to her; in constantly appealing for her help; in being completely dependent on her; and in placing firm reliance and loving confidence in her motherly goodness.” (215) “But the most perfect and most profitable of all devotions to the Blessed Virgin consists in consecrating ourselves entirely to her and to Jesus through her as slaves. It involves consecrating to her completely and for all eternity our body and soul, our possessions both spiritual and material, the atoning value and the merits of our good actions and our right to dispose of them. In short, it involves the offering of all we have acquired in the past, all we actually possess at the moment, and all we will acquire in the future.” (219)

Montfort wants us to make the above mentioned consecration in all seriousness and live in constant relationship with Mary. After making the consecration we should completely depend on Mary so that she may form Jesus in us. In self-consecration to Mary, the issue is the renunciation of self-will and the surrender of ourselves, which will lead us to our transformation into Christ. “It serves no other purpose than, by giving Mary ‘control’ over whole being, to afford her the opportunity to transform us in him, to give birth to Eternal Wisdom in us.” (Pierre Humblet, *The Mystical process of transformation in Grignon de Montfort’s LEW*, p. 62) Perfect devotion does not consist in merely renewing our consecration daily, but in our daily living through, with, in and for Mary. This is a Marian way of life and it is not meant for easy going people.

Chapter 6

The apostolic dimension of the Wisdom Spirituality

Montfort's goal in life was to catechize and to preach missions. Fr. Maurice Gilbert, s.j. tells us that Montfort wrote "The Love of Eternal Wisdom" not only for himself but also to help others, He wants "Those who read it to be filled with a fresh desire to love you (Wisdom) and possess you, on earth as well as in heaven," (LEW 2) and "finally seek to acquire the light and unction you need to inspire others with that love for Wisdom which will lead them to eternal life." (LEW 30) Montfort again tells us, "Blessed are those who understand these eternal truths. Still more blessed are those who believe them. Most blessed of all are those who believe them, put them into practice and teach them to others; for they will shine in heaven like stars for all eternity." (LEW 153) Montfort remained an apostle all throughout his life. His book as well as his spirituality has a missionary character. "Finally, as nothing is more active than Wisdom, Wisdom does not leave those who enjoy his friendship to languish in mediocrity and negligence. He sets them on fire inspiring them to undertake great things for the glory of God and the salvation of souls." (LEW 100) A spiritual person should love others and work for their welfare, hence apostolate is the natural outcome of his spirituality.

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