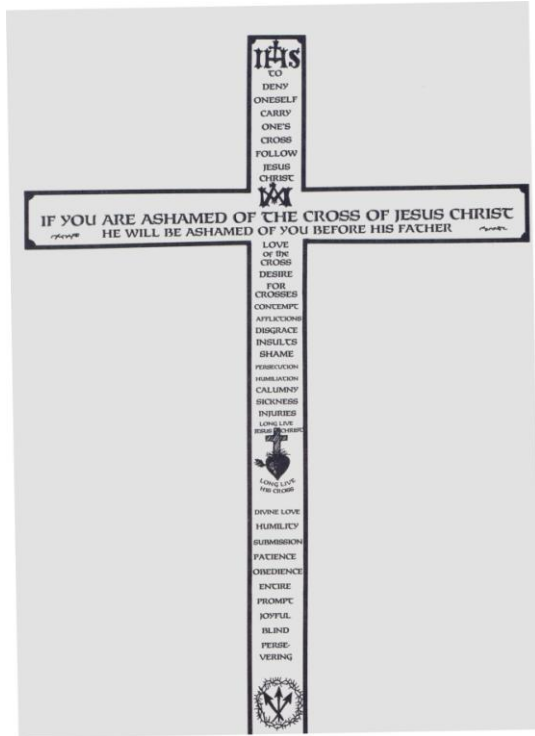


Montfort and crosses

Spirituality of crosses crisscrosses and indeed permeates Montfort's life and writings. Fr. Barmondier's sudden death, poor conditions in Fr. Boucher's hostel, the sickness during the winter of 1694-95, cruel treatment under Frs. Brenierband Leschassier, the pranks played upon him by his classmates, the inactivity in St. Clement's community at Nantes, the problems faced by his dear sister Guyonne-Jeanne, etc., were crosses he had to face. Montfort was very much influenced by the 17 c. authors and the French School of Spirituality. 1647, Chardon published his book "The Cross of Jesus" and in 1647, Fr. Boudon his book, "The Holy Ways of the Cross" and Fr. Blain tells us that Montfort was very much fond of Boudon's book. Sulpician training had taught him blind submission to God's will. Further it taught him to have a dualistic attitude towards world and man, and so he fought against the world and the flesh. This understanding of his is made clear when we look at the writings on the Cross of Poitiers, which he presented to the earliest group of the Daughters of Wisdom. To be one with Jesus Christ, Wisdom Incarnate and Crucified under the guidance of Mary is the programme placed before them. This programme was inscribed on a Cross 185 cms x 135 cms.



Deny oneself
Carry one's cross
to follow Jesus Christ
If you are ashamed of the cross of
Jesus Christ, He will be ashamed
of you
before His Father
Love the cross
Desire: crosses, contempt, pain,
abuse, insults, disgrace,
persecution, humiliations,
calumnies, illness, injuries
May Jesus prevail. May His cross
prevail.
Divine love, humility, patience,
Obedience: complete, prompt,
joyful, blind, persevering.

Not only did Montfort ask Miss Marie Louise to yearn for crosses for herself but he also asked her to pray for crosses for himself. "Keep on praying, and pray even more for me, ask for extreme poverty, the weightiest cross, abjection and humiliations." (L. 15) This letter he wrote when he was forced to leave the hospital of Poitiers and was at Salpetriere. Soon after that he was asked to leave from Salpetriere also. His former teachers in Paris and friends did not help him. He was in utter dereliction and took shelter in a tiny room under a staircase in Pot-de-Fer street. Even in this condition he wrote to Marie Louise, "I feel that you are continuing to pray for me, sinner that I am, and to ask for Divine Wisdom, by crosses, humiliations, and poverty... I am infinitely indebted to you, and I feel; the effect of your prayers, for I am more impoverished, crucified and humiliated than ever." (L, 16) We have to interpret the above

quotations in the context of the then mentality. The masochistic tendencies of the above sentences were not those of Montfort exclusively, but they belonged to his time, and even before it. It may be possible that Montfort over-stressed this aspect because of his difficulties of relationship with the society of 1693-1703. It should be noted that these ideas correspond to those of St. Sulpice which formed him.

The methods used by Fr. Brenier to rectify the singularities of Montfort would be today considered as sadistic. The usual reaction of Montfort who, “after the humiliations came to his holy persecutor cheerfully as if he wanted to thank him and spoke to him as naturally as if he had just congratulated him.” (Blain, p. 131) The masochistic aspect of his attraction for sufferings can be understood only if we know the then Christian concept of sufferings particularly in France.

While staying at the Pot-de-Fer street Montfort spent much time in meditating on the Bible. He wrote his first book, “The Love of Eternal Wisdom” and in it we read, “Among all the motives which urge us to love Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom, the strongest is, in my opinion, the sorrows which he endured to show His love ... What excess of love are we shown in this mystery, and what ought to be our admiration and our gratitude.” (LEW 154, 155) Montfort in same book goes on to show how Jesus suffered for us. “The Cross is to my belief, the greatest secret of the King, the greatest mystery of Eternal Wisdom.” (LEW 167) “Never the Cross without Jesus; nor Jesus without the Cross.” (LEW 171) “All those to whom Eternal Wisdom communicated Himself were desirous of the cross. They sought after it. They embraced it.” (175) “The Cross is good and precious for many reasons.” (LEW 176) “Friends of Jesus Christ, drink His bitter cup and your friendship with Him will increase... True wisdom is not found in the things of this world, nor in the souls of those who live in comfort. He has fixed his abode in the Cross so firmly that you will not find him anywhere in this world save in the Cross. He has so truly incorporated and united himself with the Cross that all truth we can say: Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross in Wisdom.” (LEW 180)

The cross is the portion as well as the rewards of all those who seek after, or who already possess Eternal Wisdom. He makes these crosses as delightful that they are done with joy..” (LEW 103) In the Love of Eternal Wisdom lyrically did Montfort sing the espousals of the Cross and Wisdom. In chapters 13 and 14 of LEW he lays the foundation for an apostolic life on the Cross. Often he concluded his letters with the words “Glory to Jesus Christ, Glory to His Cross”. Montfort was back at Poitiers Poorhouse for a second time and on Aug. 28, 1704, he wrote to his mother, “I am espoused to Wisdom and the Cross.” (L. 20)

Montfort spoke and wrote much about the cross. He does not speak much about the Resurrection though it is implied when he speaks about the triumph through the Cross. According to the Gospels Jesus himself took the road to Jerusalem and assumed actively the sufferings which awaited him. It was not mere resignation and submission but an active fulfillment of the salvific plan. Suffering for the sake of suffering is beyond the mind of modern man. Blind conformity and passive submission need not always need not be right attitude and even Montfort learned this as he grew in years. There is an active element to be understood in our relationship with crosses and we shall speak about it little later.

Montfort resigned from the Poorhouse of Poitiers and started preaching to the poor of Poitiers. It was a great success until the day on which Fr. De Villeroi, the Vicar General, scolded him

publicly and the Bishop asked him to leave the diocese. The great trials faced by him during the years 1706-1708, made him lose the track: the bear the cross, yes, but which cross and along which way? He was rather lost and did not know where to go. In 1706, he thought of consulting the Pope. In 1708, when he was asked to leave Fr. Leuduger's he did not know what to do and he simply came to his native place, may be to restart slowly.

Montfort restarted his preaching missions with the help of Msgr. Barrin in the diocese of Nantes. He did wonderfully well during the years 1708-1710. He was the leader and the organizer. He did arouse a whole population and built a huge Calvary at Pontchateau. The steward of Pontchateau was unhappy with his removing the Duke's crest from the wall of the church in Campbon. The steward complained to the Governor of Brittany. Montfort did not bother about the Commissioner who came for enquiry. A very negative report was prepared and the Governor passed it on to the King. Finally, the King ordered the Calvary to be destroyed. The blessing was fixed Sept. 14, 1710. On the previous evening, when people had gathered for the blessing, Montfort received a letter from the Bishop asking him not to bless the Calvary. This time Montfort did not simply resign himself. He undertook a journey to Nantes, met the Bishop and asked him to repeal the order, the latter expressed his inability to do so. When his attempt failed, Montfort accepted the cross serenely and calmly. He came back and informed the people and asked to go away calmly. Then he went and made a retreat at the Jesuit's house and Fr. De Prefontaine who welcomed him with kindness said, "I received him without noticing that he had the least emotion, in his words or on his face". When the Calvary was ordered to be destroyed he wept. He gave expression to his feelings; but he did not collapse from his deep trust in Jesus and Mary.

When Montfort was asked not to exercise his ministry in the diocese of Nantes, he withdrew to Cour Cathuy. There he organized a home for incurables. There he spent the whole winter of 1710-1711. This provided him time to evaluate himself and to learn lessons. He grew in his understanding about the cross and we notice greater sense of realism in the years to follow, i.e., 1711-1716. He made constant efforts to come closer to others. He matured and during his work in the dioceses of La Rochelle and Luçon he was very successful and he was very appreciated.

The mystery of the Cross had great impact on Montfort and his life-experience led him to say, "No Cross, what a Cross?" Fr. Besnard in his biography of Montfort writes, "He went on planting crosses and building calvaries. Cross was a mystery and in it Montfort found true wisdom. He started an association called "The Friends of the Cross". Fr. Bernard writes, "During a retreat, while meditating on the sufferings of Jesus Christ and as if lost in the mystery of his crucified Lord, he wrote a circular letter to the Friends of the Cross." (Besnard, p. 154) In it he gives expression to his deep mystical experience of the cross. He goes on to explain Christ's words, "If any one wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, let him take up his cross and let him follow me." (ref. LFC 11-20) Montfort explains the need of the cross for sinners (21-23), for God's friends (24), for God's children (25), for disciples of Christ (27) and for the temple of the Holy Spirit (28, 29). He then asks us to accept crosses as saints did (30-33). According to him nothing is so useful, as agreeable as a cross. It is a source of light, love, strength, delight and joy. Nothing is as glorious as a cross (34-41). Montfort then enumerates 14 rules concerning our relationship with crosses (42-61) and ends up the Letter asking the Friends of the Cross to love little crosses. In his Hymns too Montfort spoke about the Cross. In Hymn No. 19, he says that cross is a mystery and to understand it one needs a sense of the spiritual. The

way of the cross the way of life. According to him cross is a great gift. Christ desired to be baptized by it and so must we. It is protection and hope.

Montfort, towards the end of his life, though still remaining a lover of the cross, became realistic and his Rules for the Company of Mary wrote, “No bodily penance is to be prescribed. That is left to their fervour directed by obedience.” (RM. 36) We here notice a growth in Montfort’s attitude towards mortifications and crosses. He learned to adapt himself much better to the Bishop’s pastoral requirements and he proved to be a great success. Still for him Cross always remained a mystery of love. “The knowledge of the Cross is a great gift.” (LEW 175) “This cross is to my belief, the greatest secret of the King, the greatest mystery of the Eternal Wisdom.” (LEW 167) “The cross is the surest proof that we love God.” (LEW 176) “Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is Wisdom.” (LEW 180)

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