

ST. LOUIS DE MONTFORT LETTERS TO FRIENDS OF THE CROSS

INTRODUCTION

St. Louis always stressed the cross as the only way to wisdom. “If anyone wishes to be my followers ... let him take up his cross every day and follow me” (Lk.9:24).

He also founded associations of people who were truly “Friends of the Cross” who took that saying to heart. He wrote this work for them at the end of a personal retreat. He then had it printed and circulated among them.

The divine cross keeps me in retirement and prevents me from speaking to you about your excellent Association in the Cross of Christ. However, on this last day of retreat I wrote a few words to pierce your generous hearts. I would like to use my own blood rather than ink but this would not be good enough. As the Spirit guides my hand, may the cross be my pen and your hearts the book.

Excellence of the Association

You are like crusaders united to fight the world. Be valiant warriors who refuse to yield an inch.

Join together in a close union for you are stronger than great armies against the world and hell itself. Because evil spirits will unite to destroy you, you must be united to crush them. The rich join together to amass wealth. You must unite for eternal riches. The pleasure seekers unite to enjoy themselves. You must unite to suffer.

Greatness of Your Title

“Friends of the Cross” is a glorious title, greater than all the titles given to kings and emperors. It is the glorious title of Jesus Christ and of every Christian. The splendor of the title captivates me but its responsibility frightens me for it imposes difficult obligations. You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people set apart” (1Pet.2:9).

Your Dignity

You are chosen from thousands who live only by their senses to live in the light of pure faith and love for the Cross. You are a powerful king who triumphs over the devil by your humiliations over the world by your poverty and over your own fleshly desires (by a love for suffering).

A friend of the cross is set apart from the visible, transient and perishable things. You pass through this world as a visitor and pilgrim, knowing that heaven is your homeland.

You are a glorious trophy of the crucified Christ and His mother. You are a Benjamin, a child of sorrow, concerned and born from the pierced heart of Jesus (Jn.19:34). Your life embraces the cross and you live here below hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:3). You are a true Christ bearer and Christ lives in you (Gal.2:20).

Important Questions

There are some serious questions. Do you live according to your title? Do you at least have a sincere determination to do so? Are you taking the means needed to walk the narrow way of the Cross? Or, do you walk the wide road, the highway which seems straight and safe but which leads to eternal death?

Do you distinguish God's voice from the world's voice? Do you hear God say "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth" (Rev.8:13)? Do you hear his appeal to come out from those who have rejected the gospel? Because the Father said, "Listen to him" (Mt.17:5) You must listen to Jesus who says "Come, follow me" (Mt.4:19). Whoever follows Him "will not walk in the dark" (Jn.8:12).

The Two Companies

Two companies appear before you each day, those of Christ and those of the followers of the world. On the right, our barefoot and bloodied Christ leads a valiant group up a narrow road. Only a handful follow him. Sometimes his quiet voice is not heard and sometimes people lack the courage to accept his poverty and crosses. On the left is the company of the world or of the devil. The crowd is much more numerous and includes many fashionable people. The road is wide and gets wider. It is filled with attractions and amusements.

Encouraging One Another

The little group following Jesus speaks about prayer and penance. They encourage one another to live humbly and to mortify themselves for the sake of others who do not belong to Christ. They say, "We must be true images of Christ (Rom.8:29) or be eternally lost.

They say to one another, "If God is on our side ... who can be against us?" (Rom.8:31). "He who is within us is stronger than the one in the world" (1Jn.4:4). They say that the number to be saved is not as great as imagined (Mt.20: 16). Only those who live by the gospel will be crowned, not those who lived by the world. "Let us run the race to win the crown" (1Cor.9:24,25). With these words, the Friends inspire each other.

Those in the world encourage each other to sin. "Let us make merry and enjoy ourselves" (Mt.24:37-39). God will not damn us. "No, you will not die" (Gen.3:4).

Jesus' Appeal

Right now, our loving Savior has his eyes on you and says "See how almost everyone slanders me on the royal road of the Cross. Even my own children who have received my Holy Spirit have turned their backs on me. Will you also go away?" (Jn.6:68) Will you also follow the world (Rom.12:2) to look for wealth and enjoyment? Many profess to be my friends but they hate me. Many are my friends at the table. Few are my friends at the cross."

This is Jesus' loving appeal. Let us not be seduced as Eve was, but keep our eyes on Jesus crucified who brings us to perfection (Heb.12:2). Let us stay away from the world and love Jesus through all our crosses. Let us "take up our cross and follow Him" (Mt.16:24).

THE PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Christian holiness consists of four acts based on Jesus' words:

1. Determination: "If anyone wishes to follow me ...
2. Self denial: "Let him renounce himself
3. Suffering: "Take up his cross
4. Taking action: "and follow me" (Mk.8:34)

If Anyone Wants to Follow Me

"If anyone" shows how few are willing to conform themselves to Christ crucified. There is scarcely one in 10,000 as revealed to some saints like Basil, Ephrem and others. Their number is so small God would gather them "one by one" (Is.27:12), one from this country and one from that region.

The word wants shows a genuine desire. This is not prompted by self-interest but by the Spirit's all-conquering grace which is not given to all. Not all "know the mystery" (Mt.13:11). Few know how to live out the cross. To be nailed to the cross with Christ demands that a man be heroic, close to God, indifferent to the world, to the devil and to his own desires. He is determined to undertake and to suffer all things.

Anyone among you who lacks this determination is walking only with one foot and is unworthy to be called a Friend of the Cross. One such half-hearted member can ruin the whole group. If such a member has entered your association through the world's door, then drive him out as if he were a wolf among the flock.

Jesus came into the world to embrace the cross. He loved it from his youth and carried it joyfully in preference to all heavenly and earthly delights (Heb.12:2). He was content to die in the embrace of the cross.

Let Him Renounce Himself

Jesus' followers must glory in the poverty and suffering of the cross. You must exclude from your company all the worldly-wise, the intellectuals, the endless talkers (who really produce nothing), the so-called devout Catholics who have Lucifer's pride in their self-sufficiency. These make excuses when blamed and exalt themselves when humbled.

Do not admit delicate people who are afraid and complain of the least pain. They know nothing of a hairshirt or instruments of penance and do not include mortifications with their devotions.

Let Him Take Up His Cross

"His" means the cross meant for each person. This person is rare, "far beyond the pearl of pearls" (Prov.31:10). He carries courageously the cross designed specifically for him in God's wisdom. Jesus carries all four dimensions in exactness which He bestows from his own cross. This is Jesus' greatest gift which He bestows on His chosen ones.

The four dimensions are:

1. Its thickness consisting of loss of possessions, illnesses and spiritual trials that come daily.
2. Its length consisting of periods of time of enduring slander, on a sick bed or immersed in interior trials.
3. Its breadth consisting of harshness from friends and relatives.
4. Its depths are the hidden trials which cannot be comforted by other people who don't understand.

“Take up” means not to drag it or make it lighter. You must lift the cross high without complaint, without hesitation and without shame. Let each say with St. Paul, “I can only boast of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal.6:14). Let him carry it on his shoulders as a source of victory and set it in his heart where it can burn as God's burning bush did to Moses.

The cross has three aspects. Nothing is so necessary, so useful and so glorious. We will discuss these three aspects of the cross.

The Cross is Necessary

We all deserve hell (I more than anyone). Our sins will be punished either in this world or in the next world. If we accept punishment for sins now, they will be punished by God's mercy and not by His justice. This punishment will be light and temporary and will bring us earthly and heavenly rewards.

If punishment is put off until the next world then God's justice will inflict an indescribably harder punishment. “Who understands the power of your anger?” (Ps.89:11) Judgment without mercy is without relief, limit or end. The avenging God will have no pity on your cries and tears.

Do we think of this while suffering trials in this world? Do we think that we can exchange a never-ending punishment for a temporary and rewarding one just by carrying our cross with patience? How many sins, although forgiven by confession with heartfelt contrition, must be atoned for in purgatory because we contented ourselves with a few slight penances?

Let us settle our debts now by carrying our cross. If we could snatch from the devil the book of our sins and punishments, how delighted we would be to atone for our sins on earth rather than in the world to come.

If you are resolved to become friends of God, resolve to drink the cup that Jesus drank (Mt.20:22). Benjamin, but not his brothers, was given the cup. The beloved disciple went to Calvary and drank the cup. To desire and pray for God's glory is foolish without a resolve to suffer. We must experience many hardships before entering the kingdom (Acts 14:22).

If you glory in being God's children, you must also glory when the Father corrects you. “Those whom I love, I reprove and chastise” (Rev.3:19). If you are not among those whom he loves, you are among the lost. (St. Augustine) “The one who does not mourn in this world like a stranger will not rejoice in heaven like a citizen” (St. Augustine).

If God does not send you crosses, it is because He no longer cares about you. He is treating you like an outsider, not as a family member.

The mystery of the cross is unknown to the pagans and rejected by bad Catholics. You must learn from Christ how to practice this great mystery. No philosopher ever taught this. Your senses and your reason cannot give light. Only Jesus can teach it and help you appreciate the cross.

Become proficient in this science of the cross. The cross is our philosophy (natural and supernatural) and our theology (divine and mystical). By patience, the cross transforms pains into delights, poverty into riches, and humiliations into glory. The one who knows best how to carry the cross is the most learned of all.

After St. Paul returned from the third heaven, he only wanted to know “Christ and him crucified” (1Cor.2:2). Rejoice, O Christian with no schooling, if you know the cross you are wiser than a doctor of theology who does not know how to suffer.

As members of Christ, you must expect suffering. If the Head is crowned with thorns, do you expect a crown of roses? If the Head has no pillow (Mt.8:20) do you expect one?

Do not deceive yourselves. Christians who are full of their importance and dignity are not real members of Christ crucified. To think otherwise is to insult the gospel. Many Christians imagine they are members. While they make the sign of the cross with their hands, they are enemies of the cross in their hearts.

If you live in Jesus’ Spirit, you must expect thorns and nails. St. Catherine of Sienna was shown a crown of thorns and a crown of roses. Without hesitation she chose the thorns and placed the crown on her head.

You are living temples of the Spirit (1Cor.6:19)

Because you are living stones to be set into the heavenly Jerusalem (1Pet.2:5) you must expect to be shaped and chiseled by the Cross. Otherwise you are useless and will be set aside. Respect both the chisel and the hand which forms you. You have an important place in his eternal building. Let him do as He pleases for He is experienced and knows what He is doing. His strokes are skillful and loving and will not miscarry if you are patient.

The cross is like a winnowing fan. It separates the grain from the chaff (Mt.3:12). Let yourself be shaken and tossed because soon the Father will put you in his grain bin. The cross is a fire that removes rust from iron (1Pet.1:7). Our God is a consuming fire (Heb.12:29). He purifies our souls but does not consume us. He did not consume the burning bush.

The cross is a crucible in which the metal is purified by fire (Prov.17:3). In this crucible of tribulation and temptation, friends of the cross are purified by their constancy. Enemies of the cross are swept away by their impatience.

See before you a great cloud of witnesses (Heb12:1). Consider Abel (who was killed), Abraham (who became a stranger on earth), Lot (driven from his country), Jacob (persecuted by his brother) and Job (covered with sores).

Consider the martyrs covered with blood. Consider the virgins and confessors who were persecuted. They tell us to “Look upon Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb.12:2). Jesus could enter into glory only through His cross (Lk.24:26).

Mary was never stained by any sin. Yet, her heart was pierced at the cross. If I had time, I could show that our sufferings are as nothing compared to Jesus and Mary.

Who should be exempt from the cross? No one. So, let us hasten to where the cross awaits us. Say with St. Ignatius of Antioch “Come wild beasts so I may delight in the possession of Christ”

If you choose not to carry your cross patiently you will carry it with complaints (like those on the road to damnation). You will be like the two complaining oxen who drew the Ark of the Covenant. You will be like the impenitent thief who plunged from his cross into the abyss.

This earth cannot make us happy. There is no perfect calm in this stormy sea. We cannot escape the cross. We will carry it willingly or unwillingly. If you refuse to suffer patiently (like the good thief) then you will suffer like the unrepentant thief. You will drink the cup without Christ’s consolation. You will even carry the weight added by the devil and you will share his misery in eternity.

The Cross is Useful

If you suffer willingly, the cross will be “a light and easy yoke” (Mt.11:30). It will give you wings and lift you to heaven (St. Augustine). It will be your ship’s mast bringing you to safe harbor.

Carried patiently, the cross will give you wisdom because the person who has never suffered is ignorant (Sir.34:9). Carried cheerfully, the cross will fill you with the pure love of Christ. The cross is the wood which feeds the fire of your love for God. “Only by suffering patiently, will you make progress”. (Imitation of Christ)

Expect nothing from people who reject the cross and do not seek it. They are untilled soil. They produce only thorns because they are not touched by the skilled farmer. They are stagnant water unfit for washing or drinking.

By carrying your cross cheerfully you will overcome your enemies and find the true earthly paradise. All the saints will tell you that they have never tasted a more delicious banquet. “Let all the torments come upon me”. (St. Ignatius the Martyr) “Let me suffer or die”. (St. Teresa of Avila) “May I suffer and be despised for your sake”. (St. John of the Cross)

The Spirit teaches us that joy comes from the cross (Jas.1:2). The cross is a greater gift than a poor man getting a fortune, a peasant who becomes a king or a prisoner released from his chains. Imagine the greatest earthly joys and realize that the joys of carrying the cross surpass them all.

The Cross is Glorious

Therefore rejoice when God favors you with his choicest crosses because the cross is the greatest gift of heaven. If you realized this you would make your novenas and your pilgrimages to obtain your cross from heaven.

The world calls this madness and lack of common sense, but the world is blind and sees the cross in a distorted way. For us, the cross is the source of glory. Whenever the world insults us, they are giving us jewels and setting us on a throne. “All the wealth of kings cannot compare with the splendor of the cross”. (St. John Chrysostom)

“If I had a choice I would even leave heaven to suffer for God. I prefer prisons to heaven’s throne. I value suffering more than the gift of miracles or even raising the dead to life. Paul is more glorious in suffering than in going to the third heaven. Peter is more glorious in death than receiving the keys of the kingdom” (St. John Chrysostom).

The cross gave to Jesus “the name which is above all other names. At this name all should bend the knee (Phil.2:9-10). All heaven gazes with joy on the glory of one who knows how to suffer. All the saints would gladly return to earth to carry the cross.

Who can describe that eternal weight of heavenly glory (2Cor.4:17) which a single moment of carrying our cross obtains for us? Who can understand the glory of a year or a whole lifetime of carrying the cross?

Know that something wonderful awaits you because the Spirit has united you to the cross which everyone else carefully avoids. If you are faithful to your call God will make as many saints as there are Friends of the Cross.

Let Him Follow Me

Even the devils have their martyrs who carry the devil’s cross. So, just to carry the cross is not enough. We must follow in Jesus’ footsteps. “Let him follow me” (Mt.16:24).

Here are the rules to follow:

1. Do not deliberately contrive to gain crosses. We shouldn’t do things badly to bring ridicule. It was said of Jesus “He did all things well” (Mk.7:37). He did not act from vanity but to please God and to win men for the kingdom. Fulfill your duties and you will find criticism and persecution without your wanting it.
2. If you do something which is neither good nor bad and your neighbor takes scandal, then refrain out of charity. Avoid scandalizing the weak (1Cor.8:13). This charity will be of greater worth.
3. However, if you do something necessary or beneficial to your neighbor and he takes scandal without reason, bring the matter to your director. If he approves, then continue to act as long as they do not stop you. You can use Jesus’ words about the Pharisees “Leave them alone. They are blind guides” (Mt.15:14).
4. We can admire some holy men who have brought upon themselves scorn and ridicule but let us not imitate them. Do not try to reach their sublime heights. They are swift eagles and we are timid sheep.
5. You should pray for the wisdom of the cross which deepens our knowledge of hidden mysteries. You will obtain this only by much labor and fervent prayer.

You need the strengthening spirit (to carry your crosses), the consoling spirit (to delight even in bitter crosses) the upright spirit (to seek God alone). In short, you need this inexhaustible treasure used to win

God's friendship. To gain this treasure, pray for wisdom. If you pray continually, fervently, without wavering it will be yours. Then you will understand how it is possible to find joy in the cross.

1. If your own blunder brings a cross upon you, bow before God's almighty hand without delay. If you did something wrong, accept the humiliation as a punishment. Very frequently God allows even his saints (who are far along the path of perfection) to have humiliating faults. He thus saves them from pride so that "no one can boast in God's presence".
2. Through Adam's sin and our own sins everything in us has become debased, even the powers of our soul. Our corrupt minds will take self-complacency in God's gifts. His grace becomes tarnished and God no longer looks on us with favor. If our thoughts can spoil God's graces, how much more can man's self-will (which is even more corrupt) destroy God's plan?

God, therefore, hides his friends in his presence. This avoids defilement from others and from their self-awareness. What this jealous God brings about to keep his friends hidden! He allows humiliation, faults, temptations. He leaves them in darkness and perplexity. Oh, how wonderful is God in his saints as he leads them to humility.

3. Do not imagine that your crosses are heavy or proofs of God's exceptional love for you. This is deceptive spiritual pride. To counteract this, you must believe the following:
 - a. You magnify splinters into planks and molehills into mountains.
 - b. Crosses are given to you because of your sins not as marks of special favor.
 - c. Whatever crosses God sends you are exceedingly light when compared to your sins. To see this clearly, just consider your sins in light of God's holiness (which tolerates nothing defiled), in light of Jesus' death (which happened because of your sins) in light of everlasting hell (which you frequently deserved).
 - d. Your patience is tinged with human, natural motives. Look at your seeking for sympathy and your telling your friends. Look at your excuses and your complaints about those who injured you. You have the complacency of Lucifer by imagining you are somebody. Remember Simon the magician who "claimed to be great"
4. Take advantage of little sufferings because God considers how we suffer. To suffer great but badly is like the damned. To suffer for an evil cause is to be the devil's disciple. To suffer little or much for God is like a saint.

If you prefer certain crosses, let them be small and obscure, not great and spectacular. To seek or welcome dazzling crosses might be natural pride. To cheerfully carry small crosses comes only from special graces.

Be a shopkeeper. Turn everything to profit. Don't lose even the tiniest cross, like an insect sting, a little anxiety, a bodily weariness or a slight pain. Turn all to profit (penny by penny) and you will be rich before God. At the least annoyance say, "Thank you God. Your will be done."

5. We are told to love the cross. There are three types of love. There is emotional love (which resides in the body). Rational love (which resides in the mind) and supernatural love (which resides in the intellect enlightened by faith).

God doesn't ask you to love with the flesh (which is subject to sin and cannot be submissive to God's will). Even Our Lord spoke of his own human will in contrast to the Father's will. "Father, let your will be done, not mine" (Lk.22:42). If the lower part of Christ's holy human nature could not love the cross continuously then our tainted nature will certainly reject it.

Like the saints, we sometimes have sensible joy in sufferings. That joy comes from the Holy Spirit whose joy overwhelms the soul and overflows into the body.

Rational love is in the mind, the higher part of man. This love is spiritual. It is experienced by the soul and gives it perceptible joy. This love is excellent but not always needed to suffer joyfully.

There is a third kind of love which the spiritual masters place in the summit of the soul. Here we love our crosses by the light of pure faith. We delight in the cross even though our lower nature is disturbed, complaining and longing for relief. Here we say, "Father, your will be done" (Lk.22:42) or, with Mary "Let it be done unto me" (Lk.1:38). These two higher loves for the cross are important for spiritual progress.

6. Resolve to suffer any cross. Don't exclude any cross or choose any cross. Crosses can include poverty, injustice, illness, spiritual dryness, slander etc. Always say, "O God, my heart is ready" (Ps.56:8).

Be prepared to be forsaken by men and even by God himself. Be ready to be persecuted, envied, betrayed and abandoned by everyone. Allow yourself to suffer hunger, nakedness, poverty and all kinds of torture (even though you don't deserve it).

Imagine you have been deprived of your possessions and turned out of your home (like St. Elizabeth of Hungary). Imagine you are covered with sores without any bandage. Imagine you have no bread to eat. Besides this, imagine that God abandons you to the devil's assaults with no consolation. Firmly believe that this is the highest heavenly glory. It is true happiness for a Friend of the Cross.

To suffer in the right spirit, reflect regularly on these four points:

1. God is like a king who observes you from a mountain. You are His soldier fighting for him in battle. God's attention is not attracted by kings on their thrones, or by armies with great victories, or by precious stones. He looks with pleasure (and even makes inquiries with angels and devils) upon the person who struggles with the world, the devil and with his own temptations for love of God. Did not God say to Satan "Have you seen my servant Job who is suffering for my sake?" (Job 2:3)
2. Consider God's hand. All natural evils come from his hand. This hand killed 100,000 men on the spot (Kg.19:35) and weighed heavily on Job (1:13-22). This hand makes day and night. This hand gently touches you with a light tribulation and permits even sinful actions which hurt you.

If anyone insults you (as Shimei treated King David) say "Let him carry on. I deserve every kind of insult. It is only right God should punish me. This man attacks me but he is God's representative. This is God's mercy. Let me not take vengeance. Let me not resist the loving strokes of God's lash lest I be delivered to God's justice in eternity."

While his other hand afflicts you God's other hand bears you up. He deals death while dispensing life. He humbles you to the dust while lifting you up in his power.

His kindness does not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. His power supports you throughout the affliction. He supports you on a precipice, guides you on uncertain roads, protects you in the biting cold, carries you in your weakness and is your refuge amid storms (Church's Prayer for a Journey).

3. Reflect on Christ's sufferings. "All you who pass by, look and see" (Lam.1:12). With the eye of contemplation see whether your poverty disgrace, sorrow, and desolation are like Christ's. You who are guilty, look upon the innocent one.

The Spirit tells us to contemplate the crucified Christ. "Since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same attitude (1Pet.4:1). When assailed by sorrow and temptation, arm yourselves with the shield and helmet of remembering Christ crucified. There you will find the solution to every problem and the means to conquer all enemies.

4. See the heavenly reward that awaits you for carrying the cross. This sustained the patriarchs and prophets in their torments. Moses chose to be ill-treated rather than be the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Heb.11:24).

The prophets suffered "persecution for their reward" (Ps.68:8). Paul wrote "We are as men sentenced to death". Yet he bore these sufferings "for the sake of the weight of eternal glory" (2Cor.4:17).

Look upward and see heaven. The angels tell us, "Do not forfeit your crown marked out by the cross which you have received. If you do, another will carry it well and take your crown. Fight bravely and you will receive an eternal kingdom". Jesus says "I give a reward only to the one who is victorious through patience" (Rev.2:7).

Looking downward and we see hell. We deserve this. We are like the bad thief and all who have not repented. This awaits us if we suffer with feelings of ill-will. "Lord, in this world treat me as you want for my sins, so long as you pardon them in eternity" (St. Augustine).

7. There are three types of complaints. The first is natural as when our body complains and laments. There is no fault in this as long as our heart is resigned. The second is a complaint of the mind which makes known our ills to gain relief (as to a doctor). This is no sin. The third type of complaint is

Welcome any cross. When God sends an important cross thank him in a special way. A woman who lost all her possessions in an unjust lawsuit used her remaining coins to have a Mass celebrated in thanksgiving.

8. To make yourself worthy of the best crosses (those not of your choosing), take up some crosses by your own accord (always under the guidance of a prudent director).

For example, if you like a piece of furniture, give it away saying "Why should I have things I do not need?" If you don't like a certain food or couldn't practice a certain virtue, eat that food and practice the virtue to conquer yourself.

If you are attracted to a person, then see less of the person. If you want to know all the news, or be in the limelight or go to popular places, limit these desires. Don't avoid someone that you have an aversion towards.

Love is ingenious. It will find hundreds of little crosses. There will not be the vainglory which is often associated with spectacular crosses. Be faithful in little things and the Lord will put you in charge of greater (Mt.25:21). He will give you greater graces, greater crosses and greater glory.